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www.the-criterion.com

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Learning Context vis-a-vis Communicative Competence: A Bird's Eye View on the ELT of Odisha

Upama Behera

Asst. Professor of English,
Bhubaneswar College of Engineering,
Jankia, BBSR Khorda,
Odisha.

Abstract:

This paper presents a report on the English language learning context of Odisha to judge its impact on the development of communicative competence of the learners. Both the formal and informal learning context have been analyzed based on the following: the status and role of English language, the domains of English language use, teacher proficiency, and the quality and quantity of learning opportunity available to the learners. It has been argued here that because English language use is limited to the domains of higher education and administration, maximum learners find neither the need nor the scope to interact in English at the social level. This paper concludes that as the learning context of Odisha does not satisfy the requirements of developing CC in English, therefore the objective of ELT curricula should focus on the development of basic language skills in English, instead of focusing on CC.

Keyterms:

ELT : English Language Teaching

CC : Communicative Competence; the ability to use a language in a communicative situation.

ESL : English as Second language

EFL : English as foreign language

LC : Learning context; where the learners learn the language; Formal LC refers to schools, colleges, universities, Informal LC refers to home, society, state etc.

FL: Foreign language

BICS: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skill, the ability to talk, converse in simple English

CALP: Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency , the ability to understand texts

1.1 Introduction.

Originally, teaching a second language or a foreign language aimed at developing the basic linguistic competence of the learners. The purpose was to enable them to use this as an instrument to access the literature, philosophy as well as the abstract thought and knowledge of another language, society and culture. But owing to globalization, international and intercultural communication have become so imperative that language teaching; both SL and FL, has veered the focus from linguistic competence to communicative competence. In conjunction with this shift of emphasis, another trend i.e. a growing awareness about the significant role of the learners, their attitude, motivation and learning context, has developed. Teachers, researchers and linguists have researched on the impact of the learning context and

achievement of communicative competence (CC) in a SL or FL situation. The findings of some pointed out that the learning context; both formal and informal, plays a crucial role in forming the attitude and motivation of learners as well as in providing opportunity to use the language in real life situations where as others contradicted this theory.

Bernard Spolsky (1988) who undertook a comprehensive research on the conditions for SLL (Second Language Learning) asserted that context is a prominent factor in SLL. He stated:

Second language learning of any kind takes place in a social context which makes up the first cluster of conditions. The social context includes components such as the socio-linguistic situation, the general exposure of learners to other languages, the role of the target language in the society and the general perception of values of the target language in a particular learning context. It is expressed formally in language policies of various kinds at the state level; these may be laws for provision of language, education; at the home level these include decisions to speak a certain language or to encourage and discourage language learning. (1988;25-26).

Spolsky's view has been asserted by other theoreticians and researchers working on psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. Gardner and Lambert (1985), H.H. Stern (1988), John Schumann (1998), R. Ellis (1994), Littlewood (1992), Richards (1992), Holliday (1994) etc. have affirmed that the learning context; which consists of the formal context (school, college, university) and the informal context (home, city, state, nation etc.) is a significant variant in the achievement of communicative competence, both in SLA (Second Language Acquisition) and SLL (Second Language Learning).

1.2. Communicative Competence & its Components.

The term Communicative Competence (CC) was coined by the socio anthropologist Dell Hymes in 1972 as an alternative to Chomsky's term 'Linguistic Competence' (1965). His argument was that language being an 'instrument of communication and the carrier of culture and thought of a particular speech community' learning the rules of communication is more important than learning the rules of grammar and syntax. Therefore, he argued SLL or ESL should aim at developing the 'communicative competence' of the learners along with the knowledge of the structure and functions of the target language. After him many linguists tried to define the term CC and diagnose the various component of CC, which may be taught in a second language teaching context.

Savignon (1972) defined CC as 'the ability to function in a truly communicative setting'. The term 'truly communicative' put the theoreticians in a jig. What is a 'truly communicative' setting? Canale and Swain (1980) explained that a truly communicative setting is one where the user of a language needs to communicate for an authentic purpose; i.e.- either to send, receive or transit a message in a real life situation.

Savignon identified four components of CC. These are: grammatical competence, socio-linguistic competence, strategic competence, discourse competence. While linguists like Roberts (1987), Nunan (1987), Brown (1988), Ellis (1994), Dornei and Thurrell (1994), Bhatia (1998) etc . tried to analyze the usefulness of these terms, Richards (2009) simplified these and narrowed down upon three components ; fluency, accuracy and appropriacy in language use.

But the question remains; is it possible to develop CC in a foreign language learning context where the learners are physically, psychologically and culturally far away from the land of the native speakers of the language?

This brings to focus the learning context where the target language is being learnt and its impact on the possibility of achievement of CC by learners.

Researchers around the world have tried to examine how a particular social, linguistic and cultural context influences the learners, teachers, institutions as well as the achievement in language learning in a SLL(Second Language Learning) or FLL(Foreign Language Learning) situation, both from socio- linguistic and psycho- linguistic point of view. The psycholinguists (Gardner & Lambert; Schumann, Burstall, Anderson, Au.Sy, Sullivan, Guiova, Eysenck, Naimann etc.) have created circles of theories around terms like attitude (positive and negative), motivation(integrative and instrumental), empathy(introversion and extra version), ethnocentrism(culture shock and group identity), whereas the sociolinguists(Woods, Cullen, Krasnsch, Milroy) have emphasized the context of learning (endogamous and exogamous), cultural identity(beliefs and assumptions) and other linguistic variables such as status, role and domain of use of the target language besides concepts like bilingualism, language shift, language revitalization, language planning etc.

On the backdrop of these multiplicity in theories relating to SLL, this paper proposes to focus on only one aspect of the problem i.e. the impact of the learning context on achievement of communicative competence in a second language. To serve a report from the ground zero, I have chosen Odisha, a small state in India (Asia) as the learning context and English language learning as the focus.

In Odisha English language is taught as the second language (L2) in the formal learning context; i.e. school, college and university but used as a foreign language (FL) at the social level by the majority. This paper will try to analyze;

1. The status and role of English language in the formal and informal learning contexts of the state
2. The domains of English language use, and the frequency of use
3. The quality of learning opportunity available to the learners
4. The impact of the above three factors on the achievement of English language competence of the learners.

1.3. Background of the Study .

Odisha, a poor agrarian state of India represents a baffling English language teaching-learning context. Despite a strong 'instrumental' motivation and 'positive' attitude to English language learning, the use of the language is confined mainly to the formal learning context. At the social level, English language has the status of a cow; highly venerated (as the language of privilege, prestige and opportunity) but perennially in a state of neglect (never used as a medium of social interaction or cultural communication). Odisha may be considered as the microcosm of India, the macrocosm.

Like all other states of India, Odisha has its own vernacular language that is Odia, a derivative of the classical Sanskrit. Though all Odias use their mother tongue Odia as L1 for all social interaction, there are the educated Odias who are either bilingual or multilingual. They also use their mother tongue as L1 and one more Indian vernacular language, such as Bengali, Telegu, Hindi, Marwadi, Punjabi, Urdu, as L2, as they are not comfortable in using English in their social surrounding for interaction with family, friends, relatives, guests etc. However English is the official second language in the school curriculum. It is also used as the choice language for higher education, employment, administration and court. Use of English in speech is confined to classrooms or scholarly gatherings such as seminars, symposium or international gatherings. As reported by British Council in its The English Impact Report (2009), in India, 92.07% schools up to Secondary level use the vernacular regional language as the medium of instruction. Only a few private, elite schools catering to the higher class clientele use English as the medium of instruction and offer a conducive English language learning context in varying degree. In Odisha, these schools, like any where else, also treat English language learning with priority and create an English language

learning environment where learners get exposure to standard English from the Nursery class onward and scope to use English in all co-curricular and extra curricular activities. They are inspired by the teachers who follow the school philosophy of allowing conversation only in English both with teachers and friends during the school hours. This helps the learners acquire communicative skill and confidence to speak, interact and inquire in English. On the other hand students of vernacular medium schools neither learn the BICS (Basic Interpersonal Conversational Skill) nor CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency). They get limited exposure to English only in the English classes where writing the alphabet and learning spelling of words take precedence over learning the pronunciation, intonation, rhythm and vocabulary of English. So they acquire part of the language skills, especially reading and writing but not even ordinary communication.

It is pertinent to mention here that though English language is accepted as the second language in the schools, it is still a foreign language in the informal learning context; i.e. the home, the society, the state and the nation. According to researchers, (Tickoo, Gokak, Sood, Kachru, Pattanayak, Khanna, Mehrotra, Mishra, Sarangi, Mahfooz) the people of Odisha have a strong positive attitude to the learning of English. It is viewed as an instrument for material prosperity and social climbing. This is reflected in the choice of schools for their children. Ironically even the poor who can not afford the basic amenities of life prefer to send their children to the local private schools, if the term 'English Medium' is attached to it, despite the availability of Govt. or Govt.-aided primary schools which offer free food, uniform, books and many other facilities. While these free schools have to hunt for students, the waiting list for admission to the local English medium schools grow longer each year. Despite this obvious demand for English language learning resulting in the mushrooming of English medium private schools in every nook and corner of the towns and cities, the English speaking population of Odisha is less than one percent. This is because English language is not used for any social purpose besides social networking by the young in the forms of SMS and E-mail. This is again confined to the educated sections of the society which constitute only a minority.

1.4. ESL or EFL?

There has been a lot of discussion and debate on the status of English language in India. Though officially it is declared as the Subsidiary Official Language by the Government of India, as per the notification no.2.8.60 dated 27th April 1960 of the Ministry of Home Affairs, only five states use it as their associate official language. Language, actually it is still viewed as a foreign language by the majority population. Odisha does not officially use English as an official language, though due to popular demand English is introduced in the school curriculum at Class II. The English teaching of Odisha is characterized by "the diversity of schools, classroom procedures and teaching of text books for the purpose of passing the examination."() So it can not be treated as the official second language despite the craze of the people to learn English to use it as a ladder for employment. At the social level, Odisha offers an EFL (English as Foreign Language) setting to the learners, where they use English mainly as EAP (English for Academic Purpose). Hindi, the national language has gradually replaced English as the *lingua franca* and as the favoured language of electronic media. Owing to plenty of exposure to Hindi through television channels and Bollywood, Odia learners are comfortable in using Hindi in domains where there is the need for communication in a second language. As a result English language use remains confined mainly to schools and colleges, examinations and interviews, that too mainly in the form of written communication. The report of National Knowledge Commission rightly presents this picture.

There is an irony in the ELT situation of India. English has been part of our educational system for more than a century, yet English is beyond the reach of most of our people. Even now more than one percent of our people use it as L2, let alone L1 (2007).

Similarly the observation of NCERT regarding the status of English language in India is quite appropriate.

English in India today is a symbol of the people's aspiration for quality in education and a further participation in national and international life. Its colonial origins now forgotten and irrelevant, its initial role in independent India tailored to high education, now it is felt to be insufficiently inclusive and linguistically divisive. (NCERT: 2006) This reflects that English has the status of a foreign language in Odisha, though English is taught as the L2 to the learners .

1.4. English Language Learning Context.

It has been already mentioned that exposure to the target language and opportunity to use are essential factors for development of CC. Needless to say the type and quality of English language learning opportunity available to the learners of Odisha, is certainly not inspiring. The two main features, Teacher Proficiency (TP) and English Environment (EE) (NCERT, 2005; Kurien, 2005) of a formal language learning context decide the amount and quality of exposure as well as opportunity to use the language. Odisha again presents a bleak picture on this regard because maximum learners study in schools run by the govt., the municipality or local private organizations, where both TP and EE are of the lowest degree. Besides a few English medium urban, elite schools, teachers have very low proficiency in speaking English, though they have graduate degrees and training in education. The schools teach English as a subject to pass the examination emphasizing only reading and writing. They fail to offer an English environment where students can interact in English or listen to good English. Research undertaken by Mishra (2004), Sarangi (2011), Mahfooz (2013) in Odisha regarding the CC of the learners of Secondary and Higher Secondary learners report almost similar results.

It was found that maximum school learners have close affinity to their mother tongue Odia and prefer to use this in all domains of real life interaction. It was also found that the learners of vernacular medium schools were more ethnocentric, felt more alienated from the foreign culture and showed symptoms of culture stress in comparison to the learners of the English medium schools. (Mishra, 2007,98)

This finding is in congruence with the conclusion of Mahfooz who studied the ELT context of Odisha at a higher level. i.e the Higher Secondary level(CHSE).

The EFL setting of the state with regard to English use at the institutional level and social level restricts the use of English and exposure to English. This affects practice in communicative use of the language in real life context. (Mahfooz, 2013; 265)

A similar report by Sarangi who tested the CC of the learners of Engineering colleges of Odisha at the entry level suggests :

The English language competence of the learners is more significantly influenced by the learners early experience with the language at school and home. The majority of the learners under study confessed that they used English for academic purposes, which is again limited to reading and writing. They do not feel the need to use English for interaction in any real life situation, as they can use Hindi with non-Oriyas. (Sarangi, 2011, 93)

Research reports on the achievements of the CC of the learners of Odisha (Pattanayak, Das, Pramanik, Pani, Sarangi, Mahfooz etc.) are similar in spirit. Researchers unanimously point out that the two passive language skills, i.e. listening and reading are more developed than the two active skills, i.e. speaking and writing. According to Mahfooz's report:

The learners of +2 classes in Orissa in general have average to good English language competence in the reading and listening skills. In comparison they are poor to average in speaking and writings skills. (Mahfooz, 2013 ; 260)

But Mishra's report on the CC of the tribal learners of Western Odisha reveals another scene different from the others.

A more conclusive finding of the study is that the English language learning context of the tribal students is far from favorable. Their socio-economic linguistic background do not provide them enough opportunities to acquire or use the English language. Though theoretically their English language learning starts at class IV, still by the time they complete class X, they have not learnt the basic skills, as is evident from their performance in the CCT (Communicative Competence Test) (Mishra 2013, 77)

It was found that the English language learning context of Odisha; both institutional and social; vary according to geographical location, the medium of institution at the school level, the institutional philosophy regarding English language teaching, the proficiency of teachers, the socio-economic-linguistic background of the learners, the quality and quantity of exposure to the language and the scope to use the language both in speaking and writing. The better the learning context, the better the competence.

1.5. Domains of English Language Use.

English is used in Odisha in two important domains, i.e. education and administration. Though English has a long history and a toehold on the minds of the people of Odisha as well as India, its use is limited to offices, schools, court and to some extent journalism. Only the highly educated people use it either as L1 or L2, but the common folk have no use of the language. Nevertheless, owing to the proliferation of information communication technology and the use of internet, English language use has increased among the youth, who aspire to become global citizens as well as netizens. The popularity of call centers as employment hubs has made English language proficiency become a vital tool for success. No doubt English has come a long way from being treated as the link language or library language to claim the proud status of the national foreign language not by any official ruling or notification but by the choice of the people.

1.6. Conclusion.

In conclusion, I would like to mention that this study validates the positive relationship between the learning context and learners' communicative competence in a second/foreign language. It was found that the CC of the learners of the schools which provide proficient teachers and a conducive English language learning environment was always better than the schools which could not afford or provide these. Besides, it was also found that the English language learning context of Odisha presents a mixed picture from top to very low level in terms of learner achievement in communicative competence. It was also evident that majority of the learners of Odisha did not have the scope to use English at the social level. According to me, for a practical solution to this complex situation, development of linguistic competence in all the four basic language skills may be kept as the objective at the school level instead of communicative competence so that learners actually develop the reading and writing skills which they will need at all situations as English is the only foreign language known to them. Sometimes people change to fit the context and at other times contexts change to fit the people. But time has come for a change in both the learning context

and people; the teachers and learners; so that people's aspiration and learners' competence can match the global context and the need of the hour.

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