

ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

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Abstract

The digital revolution has and is still radically transforming the way learning and instruction is delivered. It sets it apart from the kind of traditional education that was prevalent in the 20th century. Technology is revolutionizing every single notion known about education: new methodologies have been created, novel learning styles emerged, and teacher/ learner roles have changed. Knowledge has been emancipated and it is no longer the property of a single authoritative party, students now have unlimited access to world information right from the comforts of their palms. Teachers are no longer teaching passive consumers of knowledge but rather active critical thinkers who contribute in their own learning. The rules of the game have changed and educators need to adapt their teaching strategies to this new situation. This paper explores active learning strategies in language teaching and learning and its implication for the 21st century.

Keywords: Active learning Strategies, The 21st Century, Language Pedagogy

As John Dewey once said "if we teach today as we taught yesterday, we rob our children of tomorrow." We are living in a digitally focused world; in a world where teenagers are those who use technology the most and any attempt to shun them away from using their digital tools will certainly come to a wall. Teachers seriously need to adapt their teaching strategies to the new vicissitudes created by technology. This is a necessity if they are to keep up with students' learning pace and improve their teaching practices to fit the 21st Century educational paradigm. This assertion becomes obvious in the light of the fact that teachers need to understand the nature and needs of their students to be able to tend their learning needs. Students today are the 21st Century learners, and as such, teachers ought to be the 21st Century teachers if they are to create any teaching learning impact on their students and be anything effective.

The first part of this paper would discuss active learning strategies, the nature and characteristics as well as some examples of active learning strategies. The second part will take a look at the concept of language pedagogy; to lay bare the what and the how of language pedagogy. Understanding the 21st Century and the 21st language teaching and learning/ education is what the third part analyses; the fourth part would take a look at what theoretical framework there may be to support the position of this paper. The paper would finally discuss the implications of active learning to language teaching and learning in this 21st Century.

Active Learning

Defining "active learning" is a bit problematic. The term means different things to different people, while for some, the very concept is redundant since it is impossible to learn anything passively. Be that as it may, active learning stands in contrast to modes of instruction in which

teachers do most of the talking and students are passive. Active learning is an approach to instruction in which students engage the material they study through reading, writing, talking, listening, and reflecting; these are the four basic elements through which all students learn. Incidentally, these elements are fundamental to language teaching and learning. Active learning goes beyond these to include engaging students in activities such as discussion, or problem solving that promote analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of class content. Cooperative learning, problem-based learning, and the use of case methods and simulations are some approaches that promote active learning. According to Meyers & Jones (1993), active learning involves providing opportunities for students to meaningfully talk and listen, write, read, and reflect on the content, ideas, issues, and concerns of an academic subject.

The traditional teaching model has positioned students as passive receptors (*tabula rasa*) into which teachers deposit concepts and information. The model has emphasized the delivery of course material and rewarded students adept at reflecting the course content on assessments. The spoils tended to go to students with good short-term memories and reading skills. Active learning in contrast, shifts the focus of instruction from what the teacher should teach or deliver to students to what students should be able to do with course materials. It is a process of discovery in which the student is the main agent, not the teacher. Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in class listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves (Chickering and Gamson, 1987). Research evidence overwhelmingly supports the claim that students learn best when they engage with course material and actively participate in their learning. Researches comparing lecture versus discussion techniques was summarized in McKeachie, Pintrich, Yi-Guang and Smith (1986). The results tend to show differences favouring discussion methods over lecturing. All genuine learning is active, not passive.

Some of the major characteristics associated with active learning strategies include:

- students are involved in more than passive listening
- students are engaged in activities (e.g., reading, discussing, writing, role-play)
- there is less emphasis placed on information transmission and greater emphasis placed on developing students' skills
- there is greater emphasis placed on the exploration of attitudes and values
- student motivation is increased (especially for adult learners)
- students can receive immediate feedback from their teachers
- students are involved in higher order thinking (analysis, synthesis, evaluation)

Some active learning activities include: ice breakers, shared brainstorming, visual webs, concept/semantic/mind mapping, flow charts, role play, peer tutoring, three-step interview, think-pair-share, pairs-check, jigsaw, case study, KWL, peer correction, etc. In summary, in the context of an active learning classroom; students must be involved in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing.

There are four broad categories of learning strategies that one might use in an active learning classroom:

- individual activities
- paired activities
- informal small groups

- cooperative student projects

A teacher's choice of these will depend on class size, physical space, instructional objectives, the amount of time devoted to the activity, and comfort level with the strategy.

Language Pedagogy

Etymologically, 'pedagogy' is derived from the Greek paidag?ge? meaning literally, 'to lead the child' or 'tend the child'. In common usage it is often used to describe practice with children. However, pedagogy is the art of teaching (the responsive, creative, intuitive part); the craft of teaching (skills and practice); and the science of teaching (research-informed decision making and the theoretical underpinning)(Robin, 2008). It is the process of accompanying learners; caring for and about them; and bringing learning into life. The traditional view of pedagogy sees it in the form of 'banking', making deposits of knowledge. It can quickly descend into treating learners like objects, things to be acted upon rather than people to be related to; acting on learners rather than with them. This view of pedagogy has changed overtime such that pedagogy is viewed as such in which the teacher is a facilitator of learning, eliciting knowledge from learners and helping them construct meaning through varied activities in relation to content and materials.

Language pedagogy presupposes teaching and learning a second language. This entails formal learning (instructed learning) as against informal learning (naturalistic learning) of a second language. According to Anyadiegwu and Nzekwu (2012), "it is a conscious effort of an individual to imbibe the system of another language after acquiring the first language ... the emphasis is on the students to understand the structure and the rules of the language through the application of intellectual and deductive reasoning." Several methods have been advanced for the teaching and learning of language. These include: grammar translation method, direct method, audio-lingual method, cognitive-code learning method, suggestopedia, the Communicative method, etc. These methods have dovetailed into three broad approaches or views:

1. the structuralview which treats language as a system of structurally related elements to code meaning (e.g. grammar);
2. the functionalview which sees language as a vehicle to express or accomplish a certain function, such as requesting something; and,
3. theinteractive view which sees language as a vehicle for the creation and maintenance of social relations, focusing on patterns of moves, acts, negotiation and interaction found in conversational exchanges (Richards and Rogers, 2001).

According to academic research, linguists have demonstrated that there is **not one single best method or approach for everyone** in all contexts, and that none is inherently superior to others. Also, it is not always possible or appropriate to apply the same methodology to all learners, who have different objectives, environments and learning needs. In applying the most appropriate method for that learner's specific objectives, learning style and context, the teacher should always adopt the **principled eclecticism** approach, deciding on the most suitable techniques and applying the most appropriate methodology for that learner's specific objectives, learning style and context.

The 21st Century Teaching and Learning

The 21st Century is the current century of the Anno Domini era or the Common Era, in accordance with the Gregorian calendar. It began on January 1, 2001; and will end on December 31, 2100. It is the first century of the 3rd Millennium. It is distinct from the century known as the 2000s,

which began on January 1, 2000; and will end on December 31, 2099. (Royal Observatory Greenwich)

The 21st Century learning means hearkening to cornerstones of the past to help navigate the future. Embracing a 21st Century learning model requires consideration of those elements that could comprise such a shift: creating learners who take intellectual risks, fostering learning dispositions, and nurturing school communities where everyone is a learner; where students must develop strong critical thinking and interpersonal communication skills in order to be successful in an increasingly fluid, interconnected and complex world. Advancement in technology allows for round the clock access to information, constant social interaction, and easily created and shared digital content. In this setting, educators leverage technology to create an engaging and personalized environment to meet the emerging educational needs of students in this generation. No longer does learning have to be one-size-fits-all or be confined to the classroom. The opportunities afforded by technology is used, focusing on preparing students to be learners for life

The 21st Century learning is learner-driven, and this is because the Internet is releasing intellectual energy that comes from our latent desires as human beings to have a voice, to create, and to participate. Students in the 21st Century learn in a global classroom and not necessarily within the four walls of the school. They are more inclined to find information by accessing the Internet through cell phones and computers, or chatting with friends on a social networking site. Similarly, many teachers are monitoring and issuing assignments via virtual classrooms. The 21st Century education is idiosyncratic in nature, integrating what might be called the 21st Century skills. *The term "21st-Century skills" is generally used to refer to certain core competencies such as collaboration, digital literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving that advocates believe schools need to teach to help students thrive in today's world. (Walsh, 2013).* They are a set of abilities that students need to develop in order to succeed in the information age. Students need the 21st century skills since we live in times that are so revolutionary; times that demand new and different abilities. These skills according to Rotherham and Willingham (2009) are categorized under three types:

Learning skills

- Critical Thinking
- Creative Thinking
- Collaborating
- Communicating

Literacy skills

- Information Literacy
- Media Literacy
- Technology Literacy

Life skills

- Flexibility
- Initiative
- Social Skills
- Productivity
- Leadership

The summary of the nature and characteristics of the 21st century education as distinct from the 20th century education is captured in the table below:

20th Century Education	21st Century Education
Time-based	Outcome-based
Focus: memorization of discrete facts	Focus: what students know, can do and are like after all the details are forgotten.
Lessons focus on the lower level of Bloom's Taxonomy – knowledge, comprehension and application.	Learning is designed on upper levels of Blooms' – synthesis, analysis and evaluation (and include lower levels as curriculum is designed down from the top.)
Textbook-driven	Research-driven
Passive learning	Active learning
Learners work in isolation – classroom within 4 walls	Learners work collaboratively with classmates and others around the world – the global classroom
Teacher-centered: teacher is the center of attention and the provider of information	Student-centered: teacher is the facilitator/coach
Little to no student freedom	Great deal of student freedom
"Discipline problems" – educators do not trust students and vice versa. No student motivation.	No "discipline problems" – students and teachers have mutually respectful relationship as co-learners; students are highly motivated.
Fragmented curriculum	Integrated and interdisciplinary curriculum
Grades averaged	Grades based on what was learned
Low expectations	High expectations – "If it isn't good it isn't done." We expect, and ensure, that all students succeed in learning at high levels. Some may go higher – we get out of their way to let them do that.
Teacher is the judge. No one else sees student work.	Self, peer and other assessments. Public audience, authentic assessments.

Curriculum/School is irrelevant and meaningless to the students.	Curriculum is connected to students' interests, experiences, talents and the real world.
Print is the primary vehicle of learning and assessment.	Performances, projects and multiple forms of media are used for learning and assessment
Diversity in students is ignored.	Curriculum and instruction address student diversity
Literacy is in the 3 R's – reading, writing and Maths	Multiple literacy of the 21st century – aligned to living and working in a globalized new millennium.
Factory model, based upon the needs of employers for the Industrial Age of the 19th century. Scientific management.	Global model, based upon the needs of a globalized, high-tech society.

<http://www.21stcenturyschools.com/index.html>

Theoretical Framework

This paper is hinged on the work of Lev Vygotsky and Social Learning Theories (1962). Social learning theories help us to understand how people learn from each other in social contexts and inform us on how teachers construct active learning communities. Lev Vygotsky, a Russian teacher and psychologist, first stated that we learn through our interactions and communications with others. He examined how our social environments influence the learning process; suggesting that learning takes place through the interactions students have with their peers, teachers, and other experts. Consequently, teachers can create a learning environment that maximizes the learner's ability to interact with each other through discussion, collaboration, and feedback. Moreover, Vygotsky argues that culture is the primary determining factor for knowledge construction. We learn through this cultural lens by interacting with others and following the rules, skills, and abilities shaped by our culture.

According to him, “language is the main tool that promotes thinking, develops reasoning, and supports cultural activities like reading and writing” (Vygotsky 1978). As a result, instructional strategies that promote literacy across the curriculum play a significant role in knowledge construction as well as the combination of whole class leadership, individual and group coaching, and independent learning. Moreover, teachers need to provide the opportunity to students for a managed discussion about their learning. Discussion-based classroom using **Socratic dialogue** where the teacher manages the discourse can lead each student to feel like their contributions are valued resulting in increased student motivation.

The teacher plays the important role of a facilitator, creating the environment where directed and guided interactions can occur. Many other educational theorists adopted Vygotsky's social process ideas and proposed strategies that foster deeper knowledge construction, facilitate Socratic student discussions, and build active learning communities through small group based instruction. In essence, Vygotsky recognizes that learning always occurs and cannot be separated from a social context.

Consequently, instructional strategies that promote the distribution of expert knowledge where students collaboratively work together to conduct research, share their results, and perform or produce a final project, help to create a collaborative community of learners. Knowledge construction occurs within Vygotsky's (1962) social context that involves student-student and expert-student collaboration on real world problems or tasks that build on each person's language, skills, and experience shaped by each individual's culture" (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's theories in sum advocate active learning, (interactivity within and outside the classroom), contextualized and integrated instruction through facilitation and guidance, and learner differentiation. This is the crux of this paper in its advocacy for active teaching and learning in the context of a globalised world and the 21st Century.

Implications of Active Learning Strategies in Language Pedagogy in the 21st Century

Educators in general and indeed, language educators must realize, and students must understand too, that we cannot move towards a vision of the future until we understand the socio-historical context of where we are now and what events led us to where we are; and how this can inform our development of a vision for the future and how to get there. A clear articulation of the purpose of education and in particular, language education for the 21st Century is the place to begin; and this has been addressed in the preceding paragraph. Many educators when introduced to the paradigm of education in the 21st Century automatically reject it remaining in their comfort and complacent zone; not daring to embrace change nor taking worthwhile risks. Language teachers must take language education truly into the 21st Century. It is not enough to say that we are already living there. Technically it is the 21st Century, but our language classrooms are not there, and the challenge now is to reinvent these classrooms for the 21st Century for the sake of our children, our students and the welfare of our world. Making such a paradigm shift is not easy; but we have to make the paradigm shift to 21st Century education

In order for our students to be prepared to navigate this 21st Century world, they must become literate in 21st Century literacies, including multicultural, media, information, emotional, ecological, financial and cyber literacies; as the 21st Century language education is integrative in nature. Collaborating with students from around the world in meaningful, real-life projects is a necessary tool for developing these literacies and language is fundamental in all these. Students can learn that through collaboration, not competition, they can work together to make the world a better place. Students must use technologies, including the Internet, and global collaboration to solve critical issues; and they must have full access to technology both at home and in school.

Language teachers today are working with students whose entire lives have been immersed in the 21st Century media culture. Today's students are digital learners; they literally take in the world via the filter of computing devices: the cellular phones, handheld gaming devices, and laptops they take everywhere, plus the computers, televisions, and game consoles at home. They mainline electronic media for more than six hours a day on the average. Many are multi-tasking: listening to music while surfing the Web or instant-messaging friends while playing a video game. These technological devices can be utilized by language teachers to help learners learn colours, numbers, letters, spelling, and the teaching and learning of language skills. Rather than teach listening, teachers should teach active listening. Active listening gives students a chance to practise restating in their own words what they have heard. As students form and restate concepts in their own words, they both gain a deeper understanding of the material and recognize where their grasp of the material is insufficient. Instead of teaching writing, teachers should teach active writing. Some commonly used short writing

assignments ask students to reiterate/summarise what the teacher has said in class or what an authoritative document such as a textbook or article has stated. Students should be given short writing assignments by asking them to think in writing about facts, concepts, and issues delivered by teachers, fellow learners or any other person. As students think in writing, they clarify the material for themselves and see what they understand and what they need help in making sense of.

Through writing, students order and organize the material so they can comprehend both the larger picture and the supporting details, building a ladder of abstraction that helps them see the relation among topics and sub-topics. Students can use writing to explore a topic or class material, using the pen as a flashlight that provides them the opportunity and the confidence to think beyond the statements and thoughts of others and to forge connections among isolated concepts.

In teaching speech skills, teachers must engage students actively with such activities as role-play, dramatization/simulation, debates, class discussion, oral presentation, etc. It is only when language teachers overhaul and incorporate active learning strategies in their classrooms can they be said to be relevant and effective; being responsive to the needs of the time and those of their students.

Conclusion/Recommendations

There is every need to reposition and re-structure language education to meet the needs of students in this 21st Century. This restructuring should reflect the totality of our school system vis-à-vis the school facilities, school curriculum, the teacher and the learner. Language classrooms in the 21st Century should be laced with a project-based curriculum for life aimed at engaging students in addressing real-world problems, issues important to humanity, and questions that matter. This is a dramatic departure from the factory-model language education of the past. It is abandonment, finally, of textbook-driven, teacher-centered, paper and pencil teaching and learning. It means a new way of understanding the concept of “knowledge”. A new way of designing and delivering the curriculum is also required. The following recommendations appropriate for the 21st Century are suggested:

1. language classrooms must go from ‘buildings’ to ‘nerve centers’, with walls that are porous and transparent, connecting teachers, students and the community to the wealth of knowledge that exists in the world. Internet facilities and electronic devices that facilitate such connections must be in place and must be functional. Classrooms must need to be wired in such a way that students can access their files, as well as the Internet, from anywhere in the school. Various language laboratories and learning centers should be set up around schools. Art, music, theatre, television, radio and film studios can be created with relatively small expenditure; as these are aids to language teaching/learning. This brings to mind the issue of power generation and supply and to need for alternative means of power generation for schools. This calls for synergy with other stakeholders.
2. the teacher’s primary role as a dispenser of information must be changed to that of an orchestrator of learning; one helping students turn information into knowledge, and knowledge into wisdom. This calls for a lot of training in this wise both for pre-service and in-service teachers. The curriculum of pre-service teachers needs to be overhauled and re-engineered to equip teachers for the 21st Century teaching. A lot of teacher development programmes must be in place for in-service teachers if they are to be at par with teaching innovations in this century.
3. in the past, a learner was a young person who went to school, spent a specified amount of time in certain courses, received passing grades and graduated. Today teachers must see learners in a new context. They must maintain students’ interest by helping them see how what they are learning prepares them for life in the real world; they must instill curiosity, which is fundamental to lifelong

learning in these students; they must be flexible in how they teach; and they must excite learners to become even more resourceful so that they will continue to learn outside the formal classroom.

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