TEACHER MEDIATION
IN LARGE HETEROGENEOUS CLASSES

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Abstract
This article introduces mediation theory, especially Feuerstein's theory of mediation, and some key features of this theory. Based on these features, this theory is of particular significance in ZPD concept. There exist large heterogeneous classes in many parts of our country and they raise many problems. This article is intended to provide some suggestions on how to apply the mediation theory to dealing with the problems to help learners move into and through their ZPD, which is the main aim of any education.

Key words
mediation, ZPD, large heterogeneous classes

I Introduction

With increasing emphasis being put on the importance of education in our country more and more schools expand the enrolment of students. And with educational budgets sometimes being paltry, there appears such a crisis that most language classes are surprisingly large. Ideally, language classes should have no more than a dozen people or so large enough to provide diversity and student interaction and small enough to give students plenty of opportunity to participate and to get individual attention. However, in reality, classes of 50 to 75 are not uncommon across this globe. The largest class I once taught consisted of 90 students. If classes are large, they are almost invariably heterogeneous, and heterogeneous classes are more problematical when they are also large. So the two features coincide more often than not. As far as I know, little attention has been paid to how to deal with large heterogeneous classes.

When we reflect on our own learning experiences in school, we will realize that teachers can affect learning in a range of ways that go far beyond the transmission of knowledge. Some of these ways would be likely to include teaching learners how to learn, boosting their confidence, motivating, displaying a personal interest, enhancing self-esteem and organizing an appropriate learning environment.

This article means to discuss what teachers can do to promote learning of large heterogeneous classes from the perspective of mediation theory.

II Mediation Theory

Mediation is a term used by psychologists of the social interactionist school to refer to the part played by other significant people in the learners' lives who enhance their learning by selecting and shaping the learning experiences presented to them. Basically, the secret of effective learning lies in the nature of the social interaction between two or more people with different levels of skill and knowledge. Williams & Burden 2000

II.1 Feuerstein's theory of mediation

Reuven Feuerstein, the Israeli psychologist, suggests that right from birth a child's learning is shaped by the intervention of significant adults. He refers to these important figures in the child's learning as mediators or mediating adults and the experiences that they provide as mediated learning.
experiences]. These adults select first parents but later teachers select and organize stimuli that they consider most appropriate for the child to shape and repeat them in the ways considered most suitable to promote learning. They also intervene in shaping the child’s early attempts at responding to stimuli directing and encouraging more appropriate responses whilst explaining why one response is more useful or appropriate than another. Feuerstein et al. (1980) Thus, in contrast to Piagetian theory where it is believed that children develop at their own pace through interaction with the environment, the way in which significant adults interact with children is considered to play a central part in the latter’s cognitive development. This enables the child to construct a view of the world and his or her place within it. Cognitive, social and emotional development are seen as inextricably linked and the establishment of an appropriate climate in the home or classroom within which this can be effectively fostered is as important as the content of what is conveyed. So Feuerstein considers the role of the mediator a key factor in effective learning.

2 Importance of mediation theory

Mediation theory is of particular significance for mediators to help learners move into and through their zone of proximal development. ZPD is Vygotsky’s most widely known concept which refers to the layer of skill or knowledge beyond which the learner is currently just capable of coping with. Working together with another person, either an adult or a more competent peer at a level that is just above a learner’s present capabilities is the best way for the learner to move into the next layer. ZPD has important implications for teachers with regard to what they can do to help children in their learning. It provides a particularly positive message about how to help learners when they are stuck at any stage in their learning. It suggests that the teacher should set tasks at a level beyond which the learners are currently just capable of functioning. Meanwhile, principles should be taught to enable them to make the next step unassisted. What mediation theory tells us is that it is the role of the teacher that helps learners to find ways of moving into their next level of understanding of the language.

3 Key features of mediation

To provide learning experiences which are truly educational, the teacher can mediate in a number of different ways. Feuerstein identifies twelve features of mediation. Teachers can encourage and develop the twelve aspects in their learners to enhance the significance and strength of learning experience. Of the twelve aspects I think the following eight are of much importance in helping large heterogeneous classes to perform better in language learning.

a. Individuality - a recognition of their own individuality and uniqueness.

b. A sense of competence - the feeling that they are capable of coping successfully with any particular task with which they are faced.

c. Challenge - an internal need to respond to challenges and search for new challenges in life.

d. Purpose beyond the here and now - awareness of the way in which the learning experience will have wider relevance to them beyond the immediate time and place.

e. Goal-setting - the ability to set realistic goals and to plan ways of achieving them.

f. Awareness of change - an understanding that human beings are constantly changing and the ability to recognize and assess change in themselves.

g. Sharing - cooperation among learners together with the recognition that some problems are better solved cooperatively.

h. A sense of belonging - a feeling of belonging to a community and a culture.

Application of Mediation Theory in Large Heterogeneous Classes

1 Problems in large heterogeneous classes

Since learners in large classes are different from one another in many different ways that may affect how they learn and need to be taught, they present special problems for both learners and the teacher. The following are a set of common teaching problems in large heterogeneous classes.

1. Effective learning for all

The teacher is not sure whether the students are all learning effectively, the tasks the teacher provides are either too difficult or too easy for
many of the students

2 Materials

The teacher can find suitable material the textbooks are “homogeneous” — rigidly aimed at one kind of learner with no flexibility or no options from which the learner can make selection of the material he/she is interested in

3 Interest

Students get bored the teacher can find topics and activities that keep them all interested

4 Participation

The teacher can activate all the students only a few students — the most proficient and confident ones — seem to respond actively to the teacher’s questions

2 Practical application of mediation theory to solving the problems

According to Vygotsky the concept of zone of proximal development every learner has a layer of skill or knowledge which is beyond their current state. Though students in large heterogeneous classes are different in their layers of skill or knowledge every student has his/her own layer even though he/she is a non-proficient or non-confident one. Though there exist various problems in large heterogeneous classes usually most of them can be combated with the help of teacher finding appropriate ways to mediate and thus students in such classes can be helped to get out of their current stage at which they are stuck and move into their next ZPD. In the following minfections some possible ways are suggested in which teachers can mediate and solve the problems in large heterogeneous classes stated in 1.1

Beside each numbered item I have written the letters of Feuerstein’s features of mediation in 3.2 which I think are relevant to solving the numbered problems in 4.1

1.1 Effective learning for all a) b) c) d)

Since the teacher is not sure whether the students are all learning effectively because the tasks are either too difficult or too easy for many of them he/she can mediate the recognition of students’ own individuality and uniqueness a sense of competence and an internal need to challenge. In individualized activities students learn at their own pace and sometimes choose their own tasks and materials. The teacher can use compulsory plus optional instructions. Ur 2000 to tell the class that everyone has to do a certain minimal part of the task and the rest is optional that is available to those who understand can do it. Have time wish to do more. The strategy of compulsory plus optional tasks allows learners to decide for themselves what quantity of content and level of challenge to aim for. For example in an exercise consisting of say open questions, learners may be told Do at least six do all ten if you can or have time. A similar instruction can also be given in tests. In this strategy the compulsory part makes students especially the non-proficient or non-confident ones feel that they are capable of coping successfully with the task and the optional part caters for the better students internal need to respond to challenges. All this helps to make procedures more flexible and enables the students to adapt to different materials and tasks in order to make them maximally effective and useful for each of them

2 Materials b) c) e)

Since most textbooks are homogeneous rigidly aimed at one kind of learner with no options or flexibility the teacher can try to mediate in the students a sense of competence awareness of the way in which the learning experience will have wider relevance to them beyond the immediate time and place purpose beyond the here and now and goal-setting to make the homogeneous textbooks flexible so that they can attract students’ interest and get more participation. A suitable case in point is that I once taught Unit 3 in College English Book 3 whose title is Why I Teach. Since this title may seem a little boring to most students first I didn’t go into the text directly instead I varied the topic and gave them such an optional question. “What profession do you like most? Why?” In this way most students were activated to feel that they are capable of coping with the task and thus they including the low level students could present their opinions. Of course some students said they liked teaching and also gave their reasons. At this moment I asked them to compare their reasons with those stated in this text and thus led them to the topic of this unit

By providing such a question I made the students understand that what was to be discussed would not only be limited within the present topic of teaching but also be extended to other professions they like to engage in after graduation
which would help to form their view of life and that they should set realistic goals for themselves in learning this text. Say how to write similar articles. Thus this homogeneous material became a more flexible tool which can be used as an encouragement for the lower students to cope with the present task as a purpose beyond now and as a guide of how to write similar composition. Thus the students got more interested in and participated more actively in this material.

3] Interest

Why do students get bored in class? One reason may be that they are not interested in the topic. Another may be that the activities in class are not attractive. The teacher can probably deal with the problem by developing and encouraging in the students individuality, a sense of competence, challenge, and awareness of change.

Sometimes the topic in a class can not reflect some students' uniqueness and they get bored. The teacher should limit the whole class within this topic and should provide more relative topics for the students to let them select the one that will reflect their individuality. For instance, in dealing with the topic Why I Teach some students may feel that this topic is not their favorite one which may lead to their sense of incapability. So the teacher should provide some other relative topics such as My Favorite Sports, My Ideal Career etc. to enlarge students' individual choice and thus enhance their sense of competence and lay foundation for their interest.

The teacher can also use the strategy of open-ended cues to mediate challenge in students to arouse their interest. In this strategy the teacher invites the class to respond to stimulus tasks or questions that have a range of possible acceptable answers rather than a single right solution.

Some non-proficient or non-confident students have no interest in class probably because they think that they are inferior to the better students and that they can not change to cope with the superiors and thus they give up any interest in class. Therefore the teacher should mediate the awareness of change in students to make them understand that human beings are constantly changing and they can change from the low to the high level. In this case the teacher can present models who succeed in this respect before the whole class to encourage the ones who lack such awareness to promote the interest in language learning.

4] Participation

All that can arouse interest in language learning can raise students' motivation to engage in language task provided by the teacher. In addition, the teacher can mediate sharing in students to promote their participation in language task by optimizing the use of pair work or group work to encourage collaboration which can make some problems better solved.

The teacher can also promote students' participation in learning by mediating a sense of belonging to make students feel a part of a learning community and are not just lost in the crowd. In a more concrete sense for example the teacher should not only ask high-level students questions while isolating the lower ones instead, should interact with them more often than not.

Conclusion

In conclusion, mediation theory has great significance in language teaching in that by relating the concept of teacher intervention to large classes teachers may make some attempts to personalize the curriculum and suit individual needs therefore contributing to helping language learners to move into their next ZPD, the main aim of any education. However, the theory is not perfect. In a sense, this mediation-oriented methodology overestimates teachers' authority in language teaching while overlooking learners' autonomy in language learning. Given this, it is suggested that we need to continue conducting research to make a reconciliation of authority of teachers with autonomy of learners which is of course beyond this paper.

References

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