

Learner Autonomy through Smartphone Applications Vis-À-Vis Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of The Oppressed



Education

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Dr. I. Ajit

Assistant Professor (English), School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT University – Chennai Campus, Chennai 600 127

ABSTRACT

Paulo Freire's classical book Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1968), written in Portuguese, calls for a pedagogy that would assume a new relationship between student, teacher and society. Freire christens traditional pedagogy a banking system, for it considers the student an empty shell waiting to be filled with knowledge, like a piggy bank. He argues strongly for education to treat the student a co-creator of knowledge. The younger generation need not meekly accept society's status quo and education should help them to deal with reality critically and creatively so that they can transform their worlds. This paper explores how a tech savvy student can learn a new language, based on the dictum of Freire, using smartphone apps such as Mango and Mosalingua. It explains how a gadget like smartphone can offer learner autonomy which guarantees vocabulary enrichment, pronunciation models, visualization, and comprehension of cultural complexities in respect of a new language.

Smartphones and Tablets have revolutionized our way of living. Initially, we were only aware of such applications as emails and search engines. But with the advent of new breeds of smartphones, thousands of new applications are being uploaded into the Android and the iOS markets. Only the crème de la crème of the population knows about the benefits and the usage of these applications. A majority of students are unaware of the existence of these applications, which can be used as part of customized learning pedagogy where the learner can learn at his/her own pace and convenience. In this context, the relationship between the power of smartphone applications and a theory of pedagogy meant for the support of the oppressed needs our keen attention.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed was written at the time of decolonization when former colonies like Africa, Asia, and Latin America became autonomous countries. Decolonization is an important subject of the book. This book is not about nation's transformation but about individual and collective human development. The discussion is about the internal colonization which is nothing but being oppressed even after the colonial forces and the military forces have left the state. The colonization discourses still remain. Still there are such questions around as, which culture, caste, or language is superior to other?

Freire's book is about healing the self. The important issue in it is how the pedagogy of the oppressed helps people to counter the internal oppression. It tells us about a pedagogy which can help people, especially students, from oppression. There are two propositions. The first one is to identify the subject discourses like the economic and social ties that keep people down. The second proposition is that transformation of the oppressed is possible when such people can liberate themselves from oppression.

Banking Concept of Education

Freire is fairly concerned about the oppression in education. He talks about a specific kind of education where "the teacher teaches, the students are taught." The teacher decides what should be learnt by the students. Learning environment of all schools and colleges has the notion that students are like an empty shell, a mold waiting to be filled by the teacher. It symbolizes the oppressive nature of education, which Freire christens the 'banking' system of education. Here, the students passively listen to the lecturer, without questioning, without interaction, without production of knowledge. Freire states: "Education is traditionally framed as an act of depositing in which the students are the bank accounts and the teacher is the depositor." This makes the students passive and uncritical.

Problem-Posing

Freire also discusses problem-posing which rejects the banking approach. The problem-posing embraces a view of education as

consisting acts of cognition that takes place through innovation. Students and teachers become critical co-investigators in dialogue with each other through innovation. According to Freire, with problem-posing education no one teaches another. People teach each other mediated by the world, by cognizable objects. Here, Freire introduces us to the new concept called Praxis where the transformation of teaching method is possible.

Praxis

An example of praxis is that one of the teachers in a city's public school asked a set of questions to his group of students in which all of them were slow learners to find out why there were so many students in this group who scored less than 50% marks. This led on to a discussion and issues like syllabus burden, lack of time and confusing concepts but finally they all led to one common conclusion that the reason was lack of interest. They had interests in different fields where they could excel. This discussion made them to opt for courses of their interest which then solved the problem. By identifying the problem, the teacher can create an environment for the students where they learn independently. To create that learner autonomy in the domain of language learning, recent studies suggest two Smartphone applications: Mango Intuitive Language Construction and Mosalingua. These applications enable the students to learn a new language without any stress and burden.

Mango Intuitive Language Learning

The Mango application offers intuitive language construction, as the way people learn when they are actually in the country where the language is primarily spoken. It includes all the four key conversational components: 1. Vocabulary, 2. Pronunciation, 3. Grammar, and 4. Culture.

Vocabulary

While dealing with vocabulary, Mango focuses on the words and phrases in real life situations for the language and culture being studied. Vocabulary items are given in the form of dialogues instead of just a list or flashcards where the learner will not know the contexts to use those items correctly. In this application, the students are provided with ample opportunities for incidental learning as they are exposed to authentic visual and listening materials which help them to encounter and learn from a wide range of contexts containing cultural, historical and social aspects.

It would be apt to quote Naseema Praveen and Premalatha Rajan (2012) here. They emphasize the importance of incidental learning of vocabulary thus: "In order to make the students learn vocabulary incidentally, the teacher can provide or create a situation by means of which learning becomes easier and enjoyable. For instance, showing video clips for 10 minutes on any movie, clippings from Animal Planet or Discovery Channel, NEWS Channel, etc. Later, the teacher can divide students in groups and can ask them to interpret what they have seen in their own style in varied presentations." They point out that the

learners' enrichment in vocabulary will supplement strengthening of the other aspects of appreciation like inferential learning and understanding of phrase, clause and syntax.

Pronunciation

Breaking of the language code is vital in the acquisition of the mother tongue or a second language. Children, in the case of the mother-tongue, and adolescents, in the case of a second language, attempt to break the code first by imitation. To begin with, they imitate words, then phrases, and at last, sentences uttered by those living in their surroundings who use the language. Later, they try to use the phrases and sentences meaningfully. Mango has a number of features. The user pronunciation is recorded by accent-free dialect software which gives the best possible baseline. Additional features include pronunciation tools where the user can see the phonetic spelling anytime by simply rolling over the word with the mouse cursor. The users are provided with two different audio speeds: fluent and slow-down, where the user can hear the voice over the native speaker. This application makes it much more interactive by having a feature which compares a learner's recorded pronunciation with that of the instructor's fluent and slowed down voice.

Grammar

The Mango application makes its user to learn sentence structure and grammar also. Varieties of grammar tools like semantic colour mapping, literal translations, grammar notes, and critical thinking exercises are included which help the users to hone their skills and apply them to similar conversations.

Culture

Most language learning software and methods concentrate only on vocabulary and grammar, but the Mango application integrates cultural notes and tips into every course. This ensures the learners to develop an understanding of the traditions and etiquette of the people with whom they want to communicate. The designers are aware of the cultural challenges that a learner will face for a specific language and they have carefully designed each learning experience to help its users to overcome those challenges.

Mosalingua's Spaced Repetition Programme

Mosalingua is another smartphone application which can be used for language learning. Unlike thousands of other applications, it uses a spaced repetition programme which will make the user remember the words and phrases when they are on the verge of forgetting those things. The Spaced Repetition Programme is modeled on the forgetting curve of Hermann Ebbinghaus. It took nearly a century of research by scientists like Wozniak to model the forgetting curve mathematically and create an effective algorithm to present information for revision at the right moment, while adapting to users' needs and the level of difficulty.

How does the Spaced Repetition Programme work in Mosalingua?

Mosalingua schedules the review system just before the learner is likely to forget the phrases and words he or she has learnt. It will have him/her learn the same word again after 8 hours and ask him/her to evaluate his/her memorization. Depending on the answer, the learner will be asked to review it again after 2 days later, then again 8 days later, and one month later until the information gets stored in his/her long term memory. This way the learner will remember loads of memory in a series amount of time because the system will ask only those words and phras-

es which tend to be forgotten. This will quickly make the learner to be competent in the language. The application triggers the elements of clinical reasoning like noticing, interpreting, responding and reflecting. With the help of audio-visual cues, the learner can comprehend and remember complicated sentence structures and difficult words.

Conclusion

Either of these smartphone applications enhances a user's language learning skills. Laura Hill (2010) talked about the potential role of technology in enhancing the skills of the students. She pointed out that the future of the world would be where technology would fully integrate into every aspect of our life and it is teacher's responsibility as educators to reach out and secure tomorrow's future for the students of today. To sum up, the following benefits can be attained through the use of these two smartphone applications:

1. An explicit instruction of unfamiliar words and phrases, through visual and other media, helps the students to learn them better and faster. The realm of their receptive vocabulary gets enriched.
2. These apps help the students to infer meanings and messages of the language and make connections to prior knowledge and visualizing.
3. The students can understand the forms, devices and techniques of the language with the help of Mango or Mosalingua where they can comprehend the messages with ease.
4. In situations affecting emotion, the presentation in the Mango application is such that it helps the learner to understand the complexities and ambiguities of alien culture. This will make the learner to speak with caution.

Now, it would be pertinent to recall what Freire, in his revolutionary text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, has staunchly mediated. He emphasized that education should always keep in mind the importance of awareness of the incompleteness of people in general. He advocated for an 'authentic approach' which should mould the learners to strive towards completing themselves. He points out the use of cooperation, cultural synthesis and organizational unity to peruse the objective of freedom. Which other gadget than a smartphone, and which other software than an application like Mango or Mosalingua can offer learner autonomy, in the case of learning a new language?

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