Full Length Research Paper

Educational implications of the deficit/deprivation hypothesis in L2 situations: A case of Zimbabwe

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The paper discussed Basil Bernstein’s language deprivation theory which presupposes that working class children have limited language competences as a result of their social and economic background. First, it established the anomaly in the use of some key terms in the theory such as deficit/deprivation, ‘elaborated’ and ‘restricted’ codes which are prejudicial and not truly reflective of what Bernstein actually meant. Then, it emerged that the education system, especially in the Zimbabwean ESL situation generally alienates children from financially challenged backgrounds. In the system, what came out as the most injurious are the examination system and the instructional methods used. Finally, the paper recommended a total overhaul of the whole system, starting from teachers’ training where more emphasis should be on cooperative and/or communicative language learning rather than ‘commandist’ linguistic instruction that is individualistic, resulting in the production of half-baked mimetic language graduates whose language codes remain ‘restricted’ even after ‘passing’ their L2 examinations.

Key words: Deficit theory, restricted codes, elaborated codes, language web, implicit.

INTRODUCTION

The deficit hypothesis, sometimes called the deprivation hypothesis, draws a distinction between middle class and working class children’s language. The critical background of the child is thought to overspill into the school to affect his or her acquisition of language, be it L1 or L2 situations. An example is one of typical rural African children whose competence in English is different from that of urban pupils. We are therefore presented with two groups of children, one non-disadvantaged group from a higher social stratum, with an elaborated language code, and the other disadvantaged lot, from the peasantry, with a restricted language code. By implication, this creates an acutely uneven linguistic playing field which the teacher has the daunting task to level. This paper is out to discuss and critique Basil Bernstein’s 1973 Deficit Hypothesis as applied in an L2 situation and how it influences the language class with specific reference to the Zimbabwean linguistic situation. But, first, we need to come up with working definitions of technical terms such as Deficit Hypothesis, Language Codes and so on.

Definition of terms

Broughton et al. (1978) define the Deprivation Hypothesis as “[t]he sociolinguistic view that some children are linguistically handicapped because they belong to social groups which have a poor linguistic repertoire.” Similarly, Bernstein (1977) takes the Deficit Theory to be “a set of propositions which attempt to account for educational
failure by locating its origins solely in surface features of the child’s family and local community.” The former definition is confined to linguistic deficiency whilst the latter ascribes educational failure in general to the background of the child. Bernstein’s simplistic assumption that if a child is linguistically underprivileged (s)he is automatically educationally incompetent, oblivious of many cognitive variables coming into play, cannot go unchallenged. Whilst it is axiomatic that language is the vehicle through which pupils learn all other subjects, there seems to be no explicit authentic research that gives a one-to-one correspondence between linguistic and cognitive handicaps. Therefore, the contention which arises as early as definitions and parameters of the theory throws spanners into the attempt to rely on the theory to level the linguistic playing field, especially in L2 situations.

On the other hand, Turner (in Bernstein, 1973) defines language codes in terms of syntax and semantics. Syntactically, “these codes will be defined in terms of the relative ease or difficulty of predicting the syntactic alternatives which speakers take up to organise meanings”. Furthermore, the particularistic meanings point to a restricted code while universalistic meanings point to the elaborated code. In line with these labels (codes), Manor (2008) rightly laments Bernstein’s unfortunate choice of the terms ‘restricted’ and ‘elaborated,’ which send wrong signals which have sparked unprecedented criticism among linguists and even outrage from other quarters. The term restricted connotes inferiority in as much as elaborated suggests superiority, yet the gist of the theory has more to do with condensed or implicit language on the part of working class children, and explicit use of language on the part of middle class children. Therefore, given these controversies, biases and inconsistencies, the attempt to level the linguistic playing field may not be easy if linguists do not agree on the parameters of the hypothesis. Howbeit, whether we call the disadvantaged child’s language restricted or condensed is neither here nor there, but the bottom line is that (s)he is disadvantaged all the same, hence the need to re-socialise him or her into the linguistic culture of education which requires an ‘elaborated’ code.

A critique

However, some critiques dispute this need to reinitiate the child into the bourgeois linguistic culture of the school. Young (in Jenks, 1977), for instance, argues that: “... whereas teachers know that some children are ‘less able’, ‘not trying,’ ‘come from bad homes’ and so on, sociological accounts suggest that knowledge generates from ‘hierarchical notions of ability,’ ‘pathological views of working class life’ and an identification of minority class culture where such children are deprived.

The argument being advanced here is that if the working class children are in the majority, why does the minority have to impose their elaborate code on them? This is a futile argument, though, for we are aware that the politically and economically dominant class of any society dictates what has to be learnt at school. So, no matter how Marxist our ideas could be, as teachers we need to expose the disadvantaged child to a lot of practice of the language of the school. Extensive reading, for example, exposes the linguistically deficient child to “formal” or elaborated code of education rather than his “ghetto” code which some extremists call anti-language.

On the restricted code, Blank and Sohmon, quoted by Houston (in Savage, 1973) characterise the child’s language as comprising short utterance length, one word replies to questions, limited expressed effect as well as strange intonational and paralinguistic features. Such a set of characteristics is said to demonstrate either that language use somehow “does not come naturally to these children, who prefer to express themselves in other ways, or that their language remains fixed at an early stage and so becomes inappropriate to their environments as they become older” (Savage, 1973:81). It remains the teacher’s responsibility, nay, his mandate to “elaborate” the disadvantaged child’s language code. No wonder why we emphasise that children should construct full sentences when answering comprehension questions. For instance, to the question: “What mode of transport did Bill use to come to the field?” And the child is likely to answer: “Horse.” The teacher will urge him to construct a full sentence like: “Bill came on horseback.” A lot of practice will perfect the child’s linguistic code to a level akin to that of the middle class pupils.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

Furthermore, it can be argued that in the African context, especially before independence, the second language learner was usually the black child from the peasantry whose language code was by all means restricted. Nothing much has changed to date, so disadvantaged children with restricted codes are everywhere galore in the Zimbabwean schools. Therefore, the restricted code may be easily linked to oppression, where a culture of silence is cultivated among the maligned population. If this autocracy overspills into the classroom with the teacher dominating academic discourse, there is very little hope to ameliorate the disadvantaged child’s linguistic condition. Wilkinson (1971) demonstrates this unfortunate scenario when he correctly posits that an autocratic regime is not interested in hearing the views of its people. Likewise, “...the long tradition of authoritarian teaching in education has resulted in grave limitations on the oracy of the students. Authoritarian methods of teaching have been found to discourage talk and participation in discussion.” So, archaic methods such as the grammar translation method, which emphasises on
drills and rote learning, should be jettisoned in preference to more progressive child-involving approaches such as the communicative approach which enable the child to use the language creatively. By engaging the language in context, even the child with a restricted code has the opportunity to “expand” his linguistic capacity.

Again, Bereiter and Englemann’s 1966 study (in Savage, 1973) claims that “the disadvantaged child does not use words in the same way as the advantaged, that the former does not construct sentences from words at all, but rather from differently structured units, perhaps larger conceptual groupings”. In addition to that, it is often remarked that such children tend to omit certain words in their speech, especially articles and prepositions. The likely cause of such a ‘restricted’ code is again the commandist culture of his environment where he is expected to stand at attention, march in a single file, jump and so on. In such a situation, body language is dominant; no wonder why paralinguistic features overtake the word. Yet, the school system requires explicit expression in word, especially through the examination system. By engaging the child in debates, group conversations and a lot of written work, the child does not only elaborate his language code, but he also gains confidence in himself as the ‘commander’ of the language and not the ‘commanded’ victim of an oppressive system.

However, an interesting criticism of the deficit hypothesis is raised by Houston (in Savage, 1973). He carried out a study on Child Black English in Florida which revealed that children had two registers, namely the school and the non-school registers. The latter had the tendency to overspill into the former. Therefore, the cause of the restricted code among working class children is not, in fact, deficiency in language but a result of register mix-up. A sense of déjà vu can be detected in this scenario. In the Zimbabwean case, the Shona register may be out-rightly antithetic to the English register. A typical example is the unfamiliarity of office decorum to the ‘disadvantaged’ child. In his L1 culture, a youngster is expected to sit down, squat or kneel first thing when he or she arrives at an elders’ court as a sign of respect. Conversely, if (s)he gets into an office and immediately takes a seat, this deportment is interpreted as extreme rudeness. (S)he has to wait until (s)he is offered a seat. This disparity in register causes the child to use a lot of condensed language due to taken-for-granted information in his/her L1 register. The teacher needs to first identify the disparities in register between the mother culture and the target culture and then consciously teach the target register which will inform the language thereof. By so doing, the acutely uneven linguistic playing field will end up being level enough to allow the formerly disadvantaged child to achieve competence.

Another dimension to this theory is advanced by Henderson’s research (in Wardhaugh, 1986) which establishes that due to his elaborated code, the middle class child finds that “there is little discontinuity between the symbolic orders of the school and those of his family. He is less oriented towards the meta-language of control and innovation and the pattern of social relationships through which they are transmitted”. It has to be noted, though, that unlike Bernstein’s inaccurate argument that the working class child is as cognitively deprived as he is linguistically deficient, there seems to be no empirical evidence to prove this claim. The middle class child excels in school not because of a high IQ but because his language code coincides with the one used at school. The misfortune of the working class child, on the other hand, is that his code is not adequate in educational discourse. The latter child needs to undergo some linguistic initiation to enable him to catch-up with his counterpart. What causes much failure on the part of this troubled child (rural child, in the case of Zimbabwe) is the teacher’s naïve approach of trying to de-teach the child, leaving him feeling linguistically inferior, instead of building up on the existing language code. First of all, the teacher should show the pupil where his code might be useful, such as in casual talk with colleagues and, to some extent, in summary writing where condensed language is required. This serves as a confidence booster when the child realises that his code is not totally irrelevant but only that it is limited to fewer contexts in the school system. From there, the pupil can be ‘entangled’ into what Aitchison (1997) calls the language web which metaphorically means immersing the child into language, exposing him to a lot of literature, engaging him in debates, giving him a lot of creative writing exercises and so on.

Yet Bernstein’s pessimism with the fate of the linguistically deprived child is hyperbolic when he graphically portrays a hopeless juvenile thus:

…the different focussing of experience through a restricted code creates a major problem of educability only where the school produces discontinuity between its symbolic orders and those of the child. Our schools are not made for these children; why should the children respond? To ask the child to switch to an elaborated code which presupposes different role relationships and systems of meaning without a sensitive understanding of the required contexts must create for the child a bewildering and potentially damaging experience (Wardhaugh, 1986).

This is gross exaggeration misrepresenting the reality on the ground. The teacher’s approach either makes or breaks the disadvantaged child. A reflective teacher will create a context for the child; say through their literature set text. For instance, to ameliorate the problem of omitting prepositions, the lesson can focus on a chapter where the child teams up with others (preferably non-disadvantaged or particularly gifted children) to identify prepositions and how they have been used. Later on,
they attempt to use the same prepositions in their own contexts such as in describing a football match that was played over the weekend where prepositions such as at, around, into, along, amidst, behind, beyond, over and so on are in frequent use. This is a slow but sure way of levelling the linguistic playing field.

Furthermore, the severe want of confidence exhibited in the restricted code where the pupil seeks reassurance through question tags like ‘isn’t it?’, ‘haven’t you?’ and so on beckons for a conscientious teacher’s attention. Similarly, the use of the collective personal pronoun ‘we’ instead of the first person singular pronoun ‘I’, mirrors the child’s lack of confidence in his language. This group mentality, taking refuge in numbers, can be traced back to working class collectivism where groups, shifts and even gangs characterise their societies in the slums, mines, farms and factories. This contrasts sharply with the school culture, especially its examination system which is individualistic and hence ‘capitalist’ where the old adage ‘each man for himself and God for us all’ rules supreme. Individuals engage in cut-throat competition for academic excellence in the same way capitalists compete for profit. However, current trends in language teaching which encourage a child-centred approach, laying emphasis on cooperative learning, can provide good transition from the restricted to the elaborated code. The teacher’s role here is to instil confidence in the disadvantaged child within the group before he achieves individual competence in the examination.

Another useful approach is to identify children that are blighted by linguistic deficiency. Those who lack confidence overuse paralinguistic features to aid their speech, misspell many a word, omit articles and prepositions and so forth can be grouped together. Such children can be given extra language lessons for them to get more exposure to elaborated language. Some linguists have advocated the creation of special classes to handle extreme cases. Whilst research is still going on, the issue of this academic quarantine, one of the researchers has personally witnessed it suffering a still birth in the Chimanimani District of Manicaland Province, Zimbabwe. The pilot project of special classes for linguistically deprived children started in 2001, only to be discontinued in 2005 after realising that there was no significant improvement in the pupils’ language code due to various reasons. The main one conforms to the psychological theory of labelling where pupils lived up to their presumed levels of ‘dullness.’ Deviant behaviour became rampant, drop outs were everywhere galore and the language slipped further from restricted but intelligible language to out-right mumbo-jumbo in extreme cases. This kind of quarantine could only be helpful in situations involving mental deficiency rather than linguistic deficiency, the latter which requires the deprived children to interact with the gifted and non-disadvantaged children who would help in their counterparts’ code elaboration. So, remedial lessons and extra work could help level the linguistic playing field than the ‘special classes.’

Closely linked to this is the use of the children’s L1 in teaching L2. Instead of acting as a regiment commander who insists on the rules, that is the insistence on the use of English in the school premises, a reflective teacher could give room for code mixing and code-switching during oral discussions, for a start. This is likely to enhance the elaboration of language in general first before the target language code can be elaborated. In this case, we intermittently ignore the contrastive analysis assumption that errors which occur in the second language emanate from the mother tongue. Even if this were true, it would be easier to correct a child who has a flawed language than one who hardly has any language at all. Ipso facto, Robson (1974) lambasts the employment of traditional school and classroom approaches. He regrets “the rigid, authoritarian approach [through which] many schools inevitably confounds the sensitive [child] …until those responsible learn to distinguish between education and law-and-order.” Therefore, the employment of approaches such as cooperative learning, whole-language teaching and communicative language teaching, inter alia, will help open linguistic windows for the disadvantaged child to escape the linguistic gaol of the restricted code with the help of both the teacher and other children in his group.

In a way, the disadvantaged child’s plight is not made any better by his/her teachers’ methodology and general attitude. What seems difficult is to determine whether the problem in the classroom is one of a disadvantaged pupil or a disadvantaged teacher or both. This means that the struggle should start at teacher’s training colleges which should make sure that they train “teachers” who already have an elaborated code of language, equip them with relevant skills and methods to rectify the situation of the linguistically deprived child; otherwise, it turns out to be a tragedy of order where an ignorant second language teacher imparts his/her ignorance to innocent children, yielding hybrid ignorance.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this paper has argued that the Deficit Hypothesis correctly identifies language learning difficulties of children coming from working class families. However, it has also emerged that these deficiencies do not necessarily reflect a low IQ. The bottom line, however, is that a reflective teacher should help the disadvantaged child to elaborate his restricted code of language mainly through exposure during interaction with others. Academic quarantine has turned out to be counterproductive in many instances. Motivation, as the super-highway to learning, should be the major factor underlying the teacher’s methodology in his bid to level the linguistic playing field in the Zimbabwean schools.
REFERENCES
