

CORRECTING INERT KNOWLEDGE PROBLEMS IN SECOND/FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

In language learning, a major challenge that hinders learners' ability to reach their learning goals and use the target language in real-world communication is the presence of the inert knowledge problem. This paper, therefore, explores the nature of the inert knowledge problem and proposes strategies to address and correct it in the context of language learning.

Keywords: Inert knowledge, second/foreign language, target language, context

In foreign language learning, it has been observed that inert knowledge is increasingly becoming a problem because most students after going through language education are still not able to use the language they studied in a particular context or in a new situation. When these students find themselves in the target language environment or in a new situation where their language skill is required, they have to rely on native speakers of the language, language applications and other language software to be able to communicate. The problem is sometimes due to their inability to use or apply the knowledge they have acquired in their language learning journey. This problem is referred to as the inert knowledge problem. A person who has inert knowledge knows the content of knowledge he has acquired but can use it in very limited ways. In practical terms, the person who has inert knowledge is unable to rely on this knowledge in diverse situations. Ozverir, Herrington and Osam (2016), refer to this problem in language learning as a lack of authentic use of the language. In many cases, learners are confined to activities conducted in classrooms without practice of the target language in genuine settings. Activities completed in class are generally decontextualized and lack real-world relevance. As a result, while learners may have extensive knowledge about the target language, it is quite uncommon to hear them use the language for communication in a context outside the classroom because their previous learning experiences did not expose them to circumstances within which their knowledge can be applied. According to Wink (2000), Freire calls this type of education the banking model of education. In the banking model of education, the teacher has the knowledge and deposits it in the empty heads of learners who then have to give it to her during testing. The banking system of learning does not stimulate the mental capabilities of learners. All learners are required to do is to listen, memorize and reproduce information.

We believe that the presence of inert knowledge is an obstacle that needs to be addressed to make language learning more effective in the classroom. It is therefore our aim in this article to discuss how inert knowledge manifests in language learning (causes) and propose possible solutions to the problem.

To begin with, we shall look at multiple facets of this problem that needs to be addressed. We shall first discuss how teaching methodologies used by teachers contribute to the creation of inert knowledge in learning. To better understand this problem, let us go back to history to trace the origins of some second and foreign languages taught in our schools. Romance languages such as Spanish, French, and Italian for example originate from Latin which is an ancient classical language of the Romans. In the early centuries when classical Latin and Greek became popular and important languages in Europe, many people studied it as a foreign language in schools, churches and through private lessons. Teachers who taught these languages used a traditional method that for many years was recognized as the most effective way to teach and learn a language. The traditional method was heavily dependent on translation between languages and it involved code switching, recitations and memorizations. Today, language teaching and learning has evolved with the development of new learning theories, methodologies of teaching as well as with the integration of technology into teaching to make it more effective and interesting to learn. However, some conservative teachers still hold on to tradition by using methodologies and strategies that have long been criticized through empirical research, observation and theories as redundant and ineffective. Typical examples of these learning strategies of teaching are rote learning, memorizations and repetitions. Teachers who continue to depend on methodologies considered outmoded and ineffective in the classroom contribute to piling-up learner's brain with content that sit idle in their minds without necessarily putting them to use. The reason this happens is that rote learning, memorizations and repetitions encourage students to work and think at lower cognitive levels. This can better be understood by having a look at Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive thinking. Bloom's framework consist of the categories: remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate and create. The most basic cognitive operations on the taxonomy are remember and understand. Students who work within these two cognitive levels are often made to recall facts and explain ideas and concepts. They do not engage in activities that make the create, build or synthesize pieces together. Recalling and memorization of concepts often happen in lessons such as grammar and sometimes in the conjugation of verbs. In conjugation of French verbs for instance, students are made to memorize how regular and irregular verbs are conjugated in all tenses without using this knowledge for any subsequent relevant activities. The general objective for doing this is to make learners understand how verbs can be conjugated. By this, I am not saying teaching students should not be taught to conjugate verbs but it must be done in a way that does not lead to unnecessary memorization of knowledge which does not aid in language production. In practical terms, a person can learn how to communicate in another language without knowing the conjugations of the target language. The effect is that students after learning the conjugations are unable to apply the knowledge to any real-life situation or scenario. All they can do with it is to recall it and explain the rules. We assume that teachers are aware of the presence of the inert knowledge problem but continue to use methods that demand lower cognitive thinking because most of them were taught this way and still consider it an effective way to teach and learn. Also, due to the increasing demand of workload on teachers, they find it easy to plan and teach lower-level cognitive activities since it basically involves less scaffolding and guidance.

Despite criticizing recitations and memorizations as a contributing factor to the creation inert knowledge, Thornbury (1999) highlights positive aspect of using recitations and memorizations in the classroom: "Recitation develops and reinforces a sense of community which is one of the main functions of language. It gives an illusion of being more proficient

with the language than we actually are. It is also an effective learning strategy. Far from imitation being 'mere', it is a highly complex skill, much more developed in humans than other animals and at the heart of our learning capacity. That is why children are so obsessed with and so proficient at imitating the words of others, even when they do not understand their sense. P.44” That being said, recitations and memorizations must be used in a manner that makes sense to the learner. Teachers can effectively use recitations to drill correct pronunciations and in language practice. Our major concern is not to over rely on the use of these strategies to pile up students’ brain with things they do not need.

Another thing that is worth looking at in our quest to deal with inert knowledge problem is the language of instruction in the classroom. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) recommends that language educators and their students use the target language as exclusively as possible (90% plus) at all levels of instruction during instructional time and, when feasible, beyond the classroom. Unfortunately, this does not always happen in the foreign/second language class. Target language use is very low and those who try to use it sometimes blend it with other languages to facilitate easy comprehension of concepts. When this happens, learners end up learning about the language and not learning the actual language. This is because creating an immersive environment with the maximum target language use is where the learner gets the opportunity to synthesize the knowledge he acquires to learn how to use it in a contextualized manner. By contextualization, teaching and language practice is focused on concreting applications in a specific context that is of interest to the student. Through contextualization, the learning moves from lower to higher order cognitive thinking. Learners use strategies such as guessing meaning from context, generating meaning with cognates and creating sentences which activate their brain to and help them assimilate the language. However, there are also obstacles to using language in context. Language use in certain context can be a problem when learners are not used to the context situation. According to Hassan (2014), there are social and religious boundaries to finding an acceptable context for some English vocabulary. Learners may face difficulties finding suitable contexts for words and vocabulary that are alien to their culture. For a western student, the concept of ‘boyfriend’ and ‘girlfriend’ is quite familiar. However, in Middle Eastern countries such concepts are not common. Therefore, a teacher can explain such terms, but learners, especially those who are young, certainly will have difficulty grasping such concepts. The teacher then has a role of explaining difficult concepts to help the learners generate meaning from the lesson and also establish relationship between what they learnt and how it can be used in real life situations. Hence, it is important to contextualize language learning by considering situations familiar to learners.

Moreover, some textbooks being used in language classes contribute to the creation of inert knowledge. Since publishing houses focus on maximizing profit and making their books usable by a wide category of learners, they do not always publish their books based on a specific level of proficiency of learners. This may involve combination of several levels such as novice low, novice mid and novice high. Some American publishing houses also publish foreign language textbooks based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) which is different from ACTFL proficiency standards. These factors make the language in textbooks difficult to understand for some learners making it harder for them to make sense of what they learn. When textbooks become too difficult for learners to comprehend, the practicality of the language is lost. The language can then be understood through translations

and a lot of guidance from the teacher thereby shifting the focus from the learner to the teacher and thus reducing autonomy in learning. Some textbooks do not also include practical tasks and communicative activities at key points in the content. Most often, these books only require learners to reproduce what they learnt from the chapters they studied. They end up learning about the language and not the language itself.

Aside these factors mentioned above, government and public school district policies can be considered contributing factors to the creation of inert knowledge in language learning. Sometimes, the fault is not entirely due to teaching methodology or other relating factors but to the curriculum being used in schools. The curriculum objectives together with the school district standards puts the teacher in a very difficult situation. The curriculum is prepared by experts who spell out to teachers what they are supposed to teach and how they are supposed to teach it. Teachers are obliged to comply and work towards achieving objectives that are not their own. Langer (2004) adds that administrators decide what programs the students need and what professional development the teachers need. The teachers are expected to enact someone else's decisions about how to improve test performance. They are not involved in deciding what kinds of professional development activities will help those most. The problem with working toward curriculum objectives is teachers may be influenced and driven by ideologies of experts and policy makers who prepare the curriculum. The influence of some of these ideologies may lead teachers to teach in a manner that will lead to the creation of inert knowledge. To the scholar academic ideologists for instance, the purpose of education is to learn valuable knowledge from teachers who are considered mini scholars of the discipline. Therefore, their main job is to transmit knowledge to the students and induct them into the academic discipline as future scholars. Schiro (2013). In reality, the teacher's job goes beyond transmitting knowledge to students in language learning as it is perceived by the scholar academic. The idea of knowledge transmission in most cases is associated with meritocracy which has a purpose of tracking student progress and distinguishing high from low achievers. This is nevertheless the objective of language education in the classroom. When language is taught from the perspective of knowledge transmission, it does not only become problematic to the student but also to the teacher. Students will receive content which they can only reproduce the same way they receive it from the teacher. The language learning process, however, needs to be nurtured, monitored and practiced before the teacher and learners can have a useful outcome.

To correct the problem of inert knowledge, it is important to draw from the philosophical and psychological perspective of how we develop knowledge and how learning takes place. This will help us shape some classroom practices and understand how individual learners learn best.

In Whitehead's Rhythm of Education, he outlined three stages of mental development to explain his understanding of how teaching and learning should be done. His fundamental assumption is that children should be taught in a continual repetition of cycles. The first stage in the cycle is the stage of romance where the learner apprehends objects and recognizes their connections. The learner receives new content or information with unexplored wealth of the material. The second stage is the stage of precision. At this stage, learners are given the opportunity to analyze the content they received or materials they have explored. The third stage is the stage of generalization which is a return to the stage of romance. Here, the learner is given the opportunity to synthesize content or information received and analyzed it into

creating new ideas. The classroom implication of this ideology is that language teachers should not just provide learners with new content or information but should also create opportunity for them to work with the information they receive. When learners receive content through instruction, they should have the opportunity through activities and interaction to manipulate the information by analyzing and reflecting on the content to create something new from what they have been taught. Creativity in this sense becomes very relevant because it is what drives the learner to autonomy. Creativity is what helps the learner to use the target language without being dependent on the teacher. Making this process a routine in the classroom will activate learners' brain and avoid the creation of inert knowledge.

In Dewey's opinion about how learning takes place and how humans acquire knowledge, he described the process as an adaptive response to the environment. For him, the environment plays a critical role in how we learn and acquire knowledge. Therefore, it is important to consider teaching by integrating the relevant previous experiences of learners from their physical environment into the lesson. Making previous environmental experiences part of the lesson aides in making learning practical or instrumental by providing opportunities for reflection, inclusion and manipulation. It makes teaching and learning more democratic and sophisticated. Learners from diverse backgrounds gets the chance to learn from each other experiences. For example, instead of teaching students about the means of transportation in a culture different from their own, you can begin by having them talk about their own experiences with the different means of transportation in their immediate environment. By doing so, the attention shifts from the teacher who identifies himself as the main source of knowledge and authority in the class. The learner brings himself into the lesson through reflection on his experiences. Dewey states further that reflection is a continual construction of meaning and purpose, moving the learner from one experience to the next with deeper understanding of the connections between and among related experiences and ideas. This implies that reflection is possible only when learners can make meaning from what they learn and also establish the purpose of what they are learning. As Baldwin (2008) recounts, the purpose of education is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. Thus, if inert knowledge is to be removed from language learning, language teachers must integrate this broader purpose of education into their lessons to grant autonomy for learners to say things for themselves and make certain important language learning decisions that will make them succeed in their learning.

Moreover, it is also worth desisting from classroom teaching practices and strategies that encourage memorization of concepts and structures. Teachers should avoid wasting so much time on teaching explicit grammar and conjugations out of context. Knowledge of grammar and conjugations does not add up to a person's ability to speak or communicate in a language. Children for instance learn to speak a language perfectly without knowledge of its grammar. Many people have also successfully learned other languages and perfect these languages without necessarily knowing the rules of the language. What learners need is comprehensible input which is content that allow second and foreign language students to understand most of the information they receive in the target language from the teacher. Teachers make input comprehensible to learners by considering the level of the target language they use for instruction in the classroom. The use of the language should be appropriate to the level of the

learners. Learners should not find the language too difficult to comprehend. There should be strategies in place to facilitate comprehension. Some of these strategies include the use of cognates, gestures, using gist strategies, chunking etc. On the other hand, the language the teacher uses should also not be too easy or below the level of the learners. The language should be a bit above the current level of the learners to enable them grow and develop. According to Vygotsky, the most effective forms of teaching-learning processes occur within the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Since learning involves moving beyond current levels of competent, scaffolding should function to move learners into the nearest reaches of their incompetence and should help them become competent there. The role of the teacher here is to provide guidance to learners as they learn new things to move beyond their current level to help them reach their potential. Piaget refers to this process as assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is a matter of making a new object or experience fit into the old schema which describes knowledge and skills possessed by individuals. Accommodation involves making an old schema fit a new object. Both processes account for children's continual adaptation to the world around which is learning.

Most importantly, teachers need to have a philosophy of education that they can incorporate into their lessons as way of solving the inert knowledge problem in language education. As stated earlier on, some teachers are aware this problem exist but are unable to do more to eliminate it because of factors such as government and educational policies that oblige them to follow a particular curriculum or methodology. Having a philosophy of education involves incorporating their beliefs and ideas of teaching into the broader curriculum they use. Houser (2022) explains that having one's own philosophy of education serves as a much-needed compass or guide amidst the chaos that surrounds us. A philosophy of education can direct the course of instruction to achieve the desired outcome in the classroom. Teachers should however be careful not to replace the broader educational curriculum with their own beliefs and objectives.

In conclusion, many people have not succeeded in learning a language because what they were taught in schools only made them develop knowledge they cannot put into practical use. The focus of teaching and learning should not be on teaching learners to understand structures and reproducing these structures they have been taught. Though the advancement in modern technology such as translation apps, chatgpt etc makes us question the need to continue studying languages, but we should not forget the risk we pose to the survival of languages by relying on machine for our linguistic needs. Teachers and policy makers must be encouraged to rethink certain classroom procedures that makes language teaching and learning difficult and unfruitful. Teachers who come out from the colleges of education should be allowed to practice the new things they learned to sanitize the educational system of outmoded educational practices. Teachers on the other hand should not monopolize knowledge in the classroom. The learners' subjective selves which constitute their experiences on subject discussed must constitutes an important aspect of classroom instruction. These experiences can help them generate meaning from content and serve as a guide to creating new knowledge from what they have been taught. It is also important to stress on building the skill of creativity in learners because it is the skill they require to adjust to different linguistic context to be able to use language in situations outside of what they have previously been taught.

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