



## Lateral thinking strategies in nature-art environment to improve second language proficiency of Tertiary level learners

R. Nageswari<sup>1</sup> and J. Sundarsingh<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT University, Vellore, India.

<sup>2</sup>Department of English, Karunya University, Coimbatore – 641 114.

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### ABSTRACT

Lateral thinking is a special form of thinking which involves collecting the information and making the best use of it. Thinking decides the output of information and the part of lateral thinking enables the brain to get into different mindset. It is all about bringing things that are seemingly unrelated. Problem with most of the Indian learners are not using the acquired information and not attempting to acquire new information. Their mindset hinders their mind to intake, produce and presents the information for the required contexts. Educational system and the socio-psychological background of the learners are considered the reasons for their inability. Improving lateral thinking skills paves the way to keep an open mind to acquire new language habits and to change the mindset in accordance with situations. A conducive thinking environment is created through interactive and creative tasks such as group discussion and Situational speaking in the technology enabled classrooms. These activities make the learners think through the thoughts that nobody would have thought about and thereby provide both the outside and inside inputs to think in a lateral way. It leads the learner to construct something new out of every effort and imagination. The present study reveals that the environment created to induce the lateral thinking skills has helped the learners to improve not only communicative competence but also their comprehension ability.

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### Introduction

Communication will be effective when there is coordination between language and thought. As Vygotsky says, "Thought and language could not exist without each other. Articulating thoughts was an effective method to process connected thoughts in a conscious way to raise the awareness of mental activity and subsequently to create organized logic and meaning for oneself and others from these activities" (Mc Gregor, 2007, p.10). Learners find it easy to express their ideas and innovative thoughts in their mother tongue with appropriate words, stress and intonation whereas they find it difficult when they are asked to express their ideas in the second language. As Vygotsky said, learning and thinking are social in origin; communication in second language obviously lacks the innovativeness of mother tongue. The first language users make use of communicative situations as frequently as possible and get their thinking skills activated. Language and social interactions are recognized as important elements in developing thinking skills. The major reason for the interruption in communication process is the environment, which never allows thinking outside the box. This paper aims at recommending that the obstacle between thought and language can be removed through suitable tasks at suitable environment. Krashen's the second language acquisition technique and De Bono's lateral thinking supports the study.

#### Relationship between lateral Thinking skills and Second language proficiency:

Edward De Bono (1990) mentions the importance of thinking skills in the daily lives by imparting vertical and lateral thinking skills. He says about the need for both lateral and vertical thinking skills Lateral thinking enhances the

effectiveness of Vertical thinking and the vertical thinking develops the ideas generated by lateral thinking.

"Vertical thinker says: 'I know what I am looking for'. The lateral thinker says: 'I am looking but I won't know what I am looking for until I have found it'" (p.38). "Vertical thinking selects a pathway by excluding other pathways. Lateral thinking does not select but seeks to open up other path ways" (p.37). Therefore, he called lateral thinking as a part of logical thinking that everyone needs to learn. De Bono compares lateral thinking skills with the reverse gear, which everyone should learn to get out of the blind alley. Development of both the lateral and vertical thinking skills can be done indirectly in the natural/ informal environment. Formal learning curriculum, as Krashen (1981) says, may help the learner to correct conversational errors but will not lead the learners to think independently. *Mc Guinness* says, 'learning has to be taught explicitly and infuse across the curriculum' (Qtd. Mc Gregor 2007, p.21). Mc Gregor adds that "students should develop a thinking disposition and actively create their own knowledge through challenging activities that involve metacognitive reflection through dialogue" (Ibid, p.21). Learning the essential rules of grammar, memorizing the essays, asking, and answering in the class occasionally will never help the learner to increase their lateral thinking skills. Lateral thinking skills are very essential to survive successfully in the competitive world, which demands improvisation in every communication situation.

#### Role of Tasks in the development of Lateral thinking skills:

Producing thinking skills in the mind of learners is not at all possible for the teachers but it is easy for them to nurture it

through active inducers. It can be nurtured indirectly by providing 'nature-art environment' in the learning curriculum because metacognitive reflection of ideas, effortless recollection of memories and creative thoughts appear during the relaxed hours, for example, at the time of morning walk, evening shower, travelling or on vacation. De Bono (2004) says, "Creativity is a skill and a habit. You need to learn and practice the skill, which then becomes a habit" (p.49) Therefore instead of waiting for the opportunity to think, the teachers can create an environment where opportunities knock the minds of learners to pull their creative ideas. Challenging tasks in the created environment induce the learners to think cognitively which must match the needs requirements with thinking and learning outcomes. Tasks like situational speaking, group discussion and role-play in the language laboratory increases the level of confidence. It also gives independence to think innovatively. The exchange of dialogues between the students in the pair increases the interest in forming creative ideas with appropriate formation of dialogue in the conversation. It encourages pupils to use what they know already. As Vygotsky says, "Dialogic exchange in learning was essential because it can transform the way in which children learn, think and understand in social contexts" (p.20). It has its own entertaining value where learners play around with ideas.

#### **Language Tasks in Technology Integrated Laboratory:**

Situational speaking tasks (SST) help students to confront mental laziness, think through the barriers that lie between them and the simulated implementation of their ideas. It provides the opportunity to see the differences between concept and reality. The students realize their level. Some students, "when listening to another's comments about a point in the lab, blithely think to themselves, "I could have said that! And said it better! This is no big deal; I know this stuff!" Their conclusion is often naïve" (Clawson, Haskins, 2006, p.143). They quickly discover that finding the right words and style to persuade someone else is not easy. They begin to see that their mental plans and their behavior are not the same. SST strengthens students' ability to empathize with others' perceived reality.

Group discussion is one of the challenging problem solving tasks. Group work is potentially dynamic where learners share their ideas and information in a natural way. Each student has proportionally more chance to speak and to be involved in use of target language. It promotes a positive atmosphere/affective climate, motivates the mind and explores self-expression ability. Rather than the classroom, Laboratory allows for the establishment of cohesive and collaborative working atmosphere. The nature-art environment can be created by providing group discussion lab. Environment makes them to involve in the situation, induce them to provide an interesting discussion and plays a major role in increasing the involvement and interest of the learners. De Bono (2004) says "Being interesting is much more important than showing how clever you are. If you are interesting people will want to be with you. People will seek your company. People will enjoy talking with you" (p.40). It allows individuals to see and feel the consequences of poor actions taken.

#### **Research Methodology of the study:**

Experiments have been undertaken to assess and improve lateral thinking skills of the learners thereby teach learners to realize their skills and motivate them to use suggested methods to acquire their needs naturally. Implementation of suitable tasks can induce the lateral thinking skills of the learners. A group of fifty Indian students at tertiary level were chosen for the study. Though the learners had been exposed to English as

L<sub>2</sub> for twelve years, most of them never had the opportunity to use English language at the outside premises. However, few learners had some exposure to English in the form of rules in their schools. Nearly half of the subjects chosen for the study were the first generation learners. The rest of them were second generation learners but most of their parents were not exposed to English, hence the learners did not have practiced English at home.

Interactive types of tasks were chosen for the study because the target learners were undergraduate students of technology departments who need English in order to "read, communicate orally on own subject with English Speaking Specialists they may come into contact with during the undergraduate course or during their professional careers in their home countries or at international conferences..... and in order to carry out job efficiently(qtd.Wliga M.Rivers 1983.p.144)". Situational speaking tasks were selected that demanded learners to present conversation for the given situation. It can be either sharing the information regarding the situation they have experienced or enacting the experience. The construction of tasks were carefully designed by following the specific norms indicated by (Nunan(2004);Ellis(2003); Skehan(1998&2001);Brown et.al(1984),Prabhu (1987) were followed in the study as mentioned below,

- Introduction of unfamiliar task type was assisted by oral instructions (Prabhu1987)
- The tasks were graded based on code complexity and cognitive complexity
- Content of tasks were related to general situations that learners find at present or may find in future
- The tasks were reasonably challenging at each level.

The gradation of the tasks was based on cognitive theories and the characteristics of tasks discussed in the previous chapters (chapter 1 & 2). The process of gradation of tasks adopted for the study was also based on proposed elements suggested by (Nunan(2004),Prabhu(1987),Skehan (1996,1998 & 2001). The following factors were considered in the gradation of tasks,

- a)Objective: The goal was to achieve an ability through practice
- b)Input: The medium of input was oral organized in both tight and loose structure
- c)Conditions: Information were presented in two-way interactant which required interaction at every stage
- d)Process: Cognitive complexity included in the method of responding to the input. The maximum amount of cognitive operations and a number of cognitive process were involved in responding to task (tasks included a degree of abstractness in images, pictures and situations which needed maximum amount of cognitive operation and process).
- e)Outcomes: The medium of outcome was oral and written which included an opened scope.

Different genres of contexts with diverse topics were given to the learners, so that the process of learning may expand the existing information/ideas, and facilitate new concepts. Instructions about the task, thinking skills and the topic for the particular task allow the learners to take decision in advance. It enabled them to challenge the situation naturally, attain specific language aspects, understand the condition, change the mindset for the present situation and functionally get prepared to carry out the given task.

#### **Preliminary Study:**

A preliminary assessment was conducted at the beginning of the study by using questionnaire and interview method revealed the attitude of learners that lead the researcher-teacher to choose suitable tasks to fulfill the needs of the learner. Self-

evaluation questionnaire, interview and the instructions of the teacher at the beginning of course directed the learner to attend the task. Self-realization questions like, 'What am I trying to accomplish?', 'What strategies am I using?', 'How well am I using them?', and 'What else could I do?' motivate the learner to achieve their target. Situational speaking task was implemented to assess and the thinking, creative and language skills of the learners. The same was chosen as method to improve learners' lateral thinking and communicative skills in the study.

It has been identified that only 8 % (4 learners) of the learners -used their maximum percent of their abilities to carry out the task whereas 92 % (46 learners) of the learners did not used their skills and refused to intake the information and the suggestions given by the researcher at the beginning of the study. Based on the interview and test results learners' level were identified as Level A and Level B learners but they were not separated for the experiment. Proficient users of language were graded as level A learners. Level A learners were capable of using their abilities and intake information whenever the situation demands. Level B learners were not as capable as Level A learners, had low proficiency in Second language, fail to use acquired skills and refuse to accept the suggestions/feedback given by the researcher. Therefore, the tasks given to the learners had focus on lateral thinking skills. Every task given to the learners enhanced major skills since they were inter-related. But the main focus was on lateral thinking skill and second language communication skill. Appendix 1 contains the situational speaking topics given to the learners during the study. Learners were graded based on their performance.

#### **Effectiveness of Tasks in improving second language proficiency with the help of lateral thinking ability:**

##### **Self Maximization**

Based on De Bono' theory of lateral thinking (1980), all the tasks was designed to increase learners' ability to acquire and use a divergent thinking ability. That was because the tasks were open ended and had scope for a number of solutions. So the learners had to use their divergent thinking to attain completion. Hence, every task given to learners demanded a new set of responses; learners were required to produce a number of responses for the novel nature of the task. Further, the nature of the tasks triggered learners' interest and involvement, led to broaden their approaches to the tasks. Here the responses of the learners were comparatively different from the usual approach to the problem.

##### **Restructuring**

Any response can be acceptable only when the learner could provide the information accurately for the situation. It would be effective when there is coherence in the information/messages. As suggested in the model for this study, 'restructuring patterns' was one of the sub skills of lateral thinking.

The attitude 'Never rejects anything'

The learners were trained to respond to the task appropriately. The task itself was like a problem presented to the learners. The learners had to respond appropriately to various types of tasks by using maximum number of information dumped in the mind. The types of tasks included series of problems, syllogisms and analogies. The stages of tasks and the procedures were introduced in the form of strategies to approach problems.

##### **Stimulation of attention- a concept formation**

Freedom given to learners to make their own choice in choosing the concept for the open ended tasks lead to remember

old concepts formed by experience in life or the concepts learnt in academic setting which stimulated the mind to form new concept. Most of the topics given to learners were chosen from life; therefore they were familiar with the topics. Familiarization on the topic eased learners to excavate the hidden skills and expand the concept to reach the objective of the study. Expansion of concept formulate the process to complete the concept .

##### **Attitude of completion**

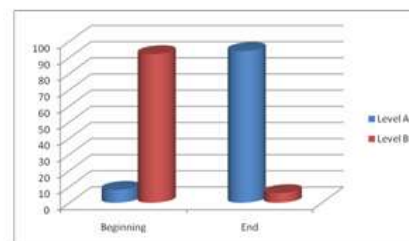
The tasks allowed the learners to use all the possible ways to complete the task. The attitude of completion and the attitude using various ways to reach success were focused. The open ended familiar topics of the tasks enabled learners to enhance their approach towards language proficiency.

##### **Results and Discussion:**

Content, innovative ideas and language proficiency were taken into account for the evaluation. Learners were assessed in each session; their gradual development was noted. Assessment of the last performance i.e assessment at the end of the study gave positive results.

Evaluation at the end of the course resulted that 94 % (47 learners) of learners were shown a good language proficiency. Their confidence level became higher, adopted the attitude of adaptability, and accepted the suggestions given by the researcher, used and produced ideas for the context to complete the task. Therefore, it can be assured that lateral thinking skills were improved that improved language proficiency of the learners. Therefore, it can be said that Level B learners were promoted to Level A at the end of the course. Quantity of Level A learners was increased at the end of the course and Level B decreased. 86% of Level B promoted their level. Improvement of skills at the end of the course is illustrated in Table 1 and Figure 1

**Figure 1. Progression of learners**



Suitable tasks induced the learner to use specific aspects of the language needed for the situation. After completing the task, learners were provided with opportunities to identify their mistakes through one to one feedback. It allowed the learners to use more skills to improve their language proficiency. From the mid of the course they started observing others' performance and postponed speaking to attain accuracy in the performance. Learners began to relate the known information with new information according to the physical actions. Learners used first language as a reference to initiate their performance in the second language. Meanwhile they constructed new meaningful sentences, innovative concepts with the help of their acquired linguistic knowledge during the practice. Demanding situations lead the learners to relate new information with the action to unite mother tongue with the second language through translation. These situations provided a conducive environment to the learners. Learners felt at home when they were brought to Language Laboratory because they found it special place for

their improvement. Repetition of suitable tasks provided the chance for the learner to use needed strategies automatically to mould the language in a better way. Situational speaking task induced the learners to explore their thinking skills.

#### Conclusion:

The study revealed that active participation in the tasks enabled acquiring lateral thinking skills. Learners not only learnt from their experiences but also found ways and means to learn from experiences. They learnt the method of linking experience with learning. The activities changed their behavior according to the situation and translated the process of experience into thoughts. This paper concluded by saying that the above-mentioned proven tasks gave sufficient opportunity for interactive nature-artistic environment in the classroom that improved lateral thinking ability and communication skills of the learners.

#### Appendix

##### Classroom activities

1. A Disgusting experience - because of continuous unnecessary phone calls at night.
2. Are we a free down loader for the teachers?-The expression of a student' regarding over workload in the college and internal examination.
3. You are spending money as a spend-thrift and getting suggestion from someone who is closer to you for money making during college days
4. Looking at a smart girl in the college who refused to look at you because of your over weight-Discussing your experience and getting suggestion
5. Advising a chain smoker regarding smoking and self-esteem
6. How do you enjoy the boring class?
7. Criticizing a movie in the coffee shop
8. Sharing experience of your love in infancy
9. Best coffee in a restaurant
10. Roommate talking over the phone round about the clock and disturbing your sleep your response and a little argument.

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**Table 1. Progression of learners**

Lateral thinkers& proficient users	Beginning %	End %
Level A	8	94
Level B	92	6