Integrating Jerome Bruner's Progressive Ideas for Developing ELT in Libya

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Abstract:

This paper presents a critical analysis of Jerome Bruner's (1915-) progressive ideas on reforming education and their possible implications for developing English language teaching (ELT) in Libya. Constructive learning, discovery learning, motivation to learn and spiral curriculum represent the main principles of Bruner's theoretical framework for reforming education. These ideas have significant implications for developing ELT as Bruner believes that any teaching method which utilizes these ideas often yields better results.

The effective integration of these ideas in Libyan language classrooms requires a radical change in the roles paled by teachers and learners. The role of the teacher would be facilitating students' independent learning and promoting their active involvement and participation in the learning process. The language learner is no longer seen as a passive recipient of knowledge but rather is seen as an active constructor and processor of it. However, teachers' different conceptions about the role of learner in the learning process which range from considering him/her as absolute passive to an active knowledgeable thinker have their impact on the successful integration of Bruner's ideas in the language classroom. Moreover, specific social and cultural aspects of the Libyan context also have their obvious impact on this process. Therefore, these factors should be carefully considered if Bruner's constructive ideas are to be successfully put into practice.

1. Introduction:

Jerome Bruner (1915-) is an American modern theorist whose theoretical ideas and framework focuses on learner's cognitive development in relation to conceptions of teaching and learning. He was interested in answering questions such as *"what shall we teach and to what end?"; "what shall be taught, when and how*?" and was concerned with describing how knowledge is represented and organized through different modes of representation (Bruner, 1960:1). His answers to these questions were based on his belief that "knowing is a process, not a product" (Bruner, 1966: 72).

A major theme in Bruner's theoretical framework which is labelled under the *'Constructivism'* paradigm is considering learning as an active process in which learners construct and develop new ideas and concepts through utilizing their past knowledge and experiences. This implies the fact that learning is not only limited to formal classrooms but it can also happen through social interactions with family members or with peers in streets. Language learners' development of high proficiency can not be realized through exposing them to formal teaching only but it requires their use of language in social contexts in their daily life.

Bruner's emphasis on learners' active participation during the learning process indicates his constructivist orientation of thinking. It embodies progressive ideas of ownership, spontaneity, excitement and joy during the learning. It seems that adapting these ideas results in decreasing teachers' authority and control over classrooms and empowers students. However, implementing these 'progressive' principles does not necessarily lead to giving up discipline and rules of relationship structure in classrooms. As learner-centred teaching is a model of constructivist approaches to teaching and learning was originally developed from the widespread and acceptance of the progressive ideas of John Dewey (1910), Carl Rogers (1969), Friere (1973) and Vygotsky (1978). All these scholars emphasized that implementing their ideas in schools does not mean unlimited freedom, lack of discipline and structure, absence of teacher's authority, loose forms of examinations or an absolute learner's autonomy. Bruner also stresses the importance of giving full attention to academic excellence through acquiring appropriate academic learning content

The following sections discuss Bruner's Progressive ideas which have significant implications for developing ELT in Libya such as constructive learning, discovery learning, teachers' perspectives about learners, motivation to learn, community of learner's approach and spiral curriculum.

2. Constructive Learning:

Constructivism is an epistemology of learning based on the belief that learners' reflection on their own past experiences while constructing and understanding new ones can lead to their formulation of a more concrete meaning of the subject matter. Bruner's 'constructivist theory' falls into the cognitive domain as he believes that the child is an "active intentional being" and that humans learn better when it is "participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them" (Bruner, 1996: 65/84). Therefore, the aim of education should focus on helping students for developing their full potential through promoting their intellectual development. Achieving this aim requires introducing challenging topics for students which enhance their thinking and reflection regardless of their age as Bruner claims "…any subject can be taught to any child at any age …" (Bruner, 1996: xii). Therefore, for designing ELT courses and syllabi in the Libyan context, it is useful to include those tasks and activities which represent a challenge for language learners. Involving language learners in finding solutions for these challenges, can consequently lead to developing their thinking and critical skills. This can also lead to enhancing their active participation and developing their language communication skills. A

problem-solving approach and task-based learning represent good examples of syllabus design and curriculum development.

Bruner (1996) believed that different ways of thinking (representation) are important at different ages and classified them as "enactive" mode, "iconic' mode and "symbolic" mode. These modes imply the way people represent knowledge. *"Enactive"* representation involves the use of motor skills to manipulate things. This mode is used within the first 18 months of life when thinking is entirely based on physical actions. It refers to the mode of learning 'by doing' rather than by internal representation (thinking). "Iconic" representation has to do with visual images. Information is stored as sensory images and thinking is based on the use of 'icons' (mental images) which may be based on sight, hearing, smelling or touching. 'Symbolic' representation implies the use of symbols to change knowledge into codes. The human being is able to store a lot of information in the form of symbols (verbal memory). Language is the tool for the representation of the world (Bruner, 1996: 155-156). Bruner (1971) claimed the success of a moderately approach for curriculum design based on the above three models of knowing -"by action, by image, and by symbol". This model begins with a sequence of learning with an "enactive representation", then moves to the "intuitive" and "image-laden" form and finally to the "increasingly abstract symbolic modes of a field of learning" (Bruner, 1971: 81-82). Accordingly, grading tasks and activities for Libyan language learners in the light of these different ways of representations may produce a good taxonomy of meaningful and graded topics for language courses.

3. Discovery Learning:

Discovery learning is another fundamental principle in Bruner's framework. Bruner (1960) pointed out the shift in conceptions of the learning process from an emphasis on the production of general understanding to an emphasis on the acquisition of special skills. As learning skills requires involving learners in practicing them, active discovery can be an effective teaching method for achieving this aim.

In the language classroom, the instructor should encourage students to discover principles by themselves through engaging them in active conversation (Bruner, 1960: 21). However, the teacher as a guide of the discovery process should present the challenging tasks which suit students' cognitive levels (graded materials) in order to encourage participation. Knowledge is constructed by the use of thinking processes when students cooperatively try to work out a solution for a problem. Knowledge must be relevant, accessible and explainable "compact, accessible and manipulable" (Bruner, 1996).

Reflecting on Bruner's ideas regarding learning through intellectual excitement, it is clear that he advocates a problem (task) based-learning approach. Acquired knowledge is most useful to learners especially if discovered through their cognitive effort. Therefore, it is useful to provide learners with problems that motivate them to think and reflect. Freier (1974:46-54)) believed that this approach is the best way for maintaining reflective and meaningful communication inside classrooms. Black et al (2006) described the notion of problem-solving as related to the constructivist view of learning.

Recently, there is a trend in the field of ELT to use problem-solving activities for enhancing cognitive processes of language learners (Waters, 2006). Problem-solving activities are now being widely introduced in many national textbooks of social sciences. The English language textbooks of Libyan Basic and secondary education include many task and problem-based activities (Philip et al, 2008). These tasks offer the opportunity for language learners to be actively involved in constructing new knowledge and new meanings from authentic experiences in challenging situations. This is an obvious feature of learner-centred classrooms (Cornelius-White & Hardbaugh, 2010: 135).

4. Motivation to Learn:

Motivation often has a significant impact on language learning. It is the desire that leads a learner to work harder in order to master a language. It promotes language learners to actively participate in learning activities, explore, achieve identity and self-esteem within a group, and learn new experiences (Rico, 2008). Bruner (1960) explained mixed motives for learning among students including pleasing parents and teachers, developing interests and exploring the new world. He believes that learners often possess "intrinsic motives" for learning which do not depend on external rewards. It inheres in the satisfaction results from successful completion of an activity or getting a solution for a problem in the language classroom or from feeling confident to communicate effectively in the target language. It is different from extrinsic motivation which can be gained through external rewards such as grades. Bruner (1966) believed that intrinsic motivation is more valuable than extrinsic motivation which could be added to support the intrinsic one.

Bruner (1960) stressed the importance of desire to learn and how it might be stimulated. A source of motivation comes from an interest in learning materials. There are several ways for arousing students' motivation such as increasing their inherent interest in learning materials, developing among them a sense of discovery and giving clear instructions. Kagan (1966) claimed that all students enter schools with desire to learn and suggested enhancing motivation through arranging the curriculum according to learners' needs, sequencing the subject matter properly, manipulating stimulus materials to enhance students' motivation. A supportive evidence for the significance of motivation in language learning was offered by Deepti Gupts and Getachew Woldemariam (2011:34). They reported through the findings of their study which was conducted on 680 EFL undergraduate students in Ethiopia that students with strong motivation "demonstrated high level of enjoyment, confidence, perceived ability and positive attitude towards effective teaching methods of writing and were found to have employed writing strategies more frequently". 'Curiosity' and 'reciprocity' are other sources of intrinsic motives for learning. Curiosity implies attracting students' attention to unclear, unfinished or uncertain tasks or ideas. The satisfaction learners get when they solve a problem or finish a task is a kind of self-rewarding. Reciprocity involves "a deep human need to respond to others and to operate jointly with them toward an objective" (Bruner, 1966: 125). Lambert and McCombs (1998) believe that positive emotions such as curiosity, self-confidence and self-esteem can enhance motivation and facilitate learning and performance. Interestingly, mild frustration and anger can also enhance learning performance when leading learners to

focus on a particular task and increasing their determination to demonstrate knowledge and competence.

In the context of foreign language (FL) classrooms, both intrinsic and extrinsic motives have an impact on enhancing students' learning. The interest in learning materials and the satisfaction achieved through progress in mastering the target language often leads to enjoying feelings of 'agency' and 'self-esteem'. Teachers and parents' praise and appreciation of such achievements may lead students to become more eager and enthusiastic for realizing more achievements in order to gain more encouragement and praise. Learning a FL is a useful source for satisfying students' curiosity through exploring new words, structures, meanings and different cultural aspects. It is also a good source for satisfying students' need for reciprocity as it enables them to communicate ideas, exchange opinions, share information with others. Implementing learner-centred approach of instruction is a good strategy for language teachers to motivate their students. Gardner (1993:74) believed that implementing individual-centred education should lead to a happy situation where students meet their potentials, feel better and become positive members of their community.

It is also important to account for the factors that can decreases students' motivation to learn such as moods and negative feelings such as anxiety, mild frustration and stress. Lambert and McCombs (1998:19) believed that intense negative emotions such as anxiety, panic, rage, insecurity and related thoughts (e.g. worrying about competence, ruminating about failure, fearing punishment, ridicule) usually detract from motivation, interfere with learning and contribute to low performance.

Therefore, it is necessary to enhance Libyan language teachers' awareness about the importance of promoting their students' motivation to learn and developing their knowledge and understanding about how they can realize this goal.

5. Spiral Curriculum:

A great deal of Bruner's work focuses on curriculum construction in terms of suitability and relevance to learner's growth. Bruner (1960) attributed the need for changing the curriculum to the change in environments and goals of schools and students, which results from the change in social, cultural and political conditions. Therefore, he formulated his basic principal for curriculum development emphasizing the importance of organizing curricula in a *'spiral'* manner in which each new concept is to be built on what was previously learnt.

Bruner (1960: 32-73) emphasized the significance of designing curriculum which responds to needs of communities in certain contexts. The proper teaching of relevant learning materials will result in motivating students and in enhancing their involvement in the learning process. Therefore, identifying learners' needs and relevant life issues and concern represents a first step for curriculum design A good curriculum design can be achieved through a negotiation approach involving "the ablest scholars and scientists" with experienced teachers and students. Involving all these parts in curriculum design offers the opportunity for accounting for the needs of individual learners as well for the general objectives of state education. However, reaching a compromise between responding to

individuals' needs which may sometimes conflict with the objectives of the state education represents a real challenge for this process.

Bruner (1996) criticised educational reforms that focus on "graduation requirements, student achievement, teacher preparation and testing and monitoring activities….but teachers have been largely uninvolved". He stresses the necessity for a deep commitment to make teachers partners in renewal at all levels. He believes that "no educational reform can get off the ground without an adult actively and honestly participating –a teacher willing and prepared to give and share aid, to comfort and to scaffold" Bringing teachers into the debate and into the shaping of change is an essential step for the success of any educational reform (Bruner, 1996: 84-85). Lack of teacher involvement may explain the reason behind the failure of most of the attempts for developing English language curriculum for Libyan schools (Orafi & Borg, 2009; Shihiba, 2011). However, Bruner did not highly emphasize involving students in the process of educational reforms or curriculum design. It is true that involving teachers in curriculum design can provide a clear picture about students' linguistic level, but it can not provide sufficient information for students' real needs, interests and objectives. Therefore, students should always be involved in this process.

Effective educational reforms require transforming schools into a learning culture with a parallel transformation in the role of teacher in that culture. Fulfilment of school function of education for life in a democratic community implies its contribution to social and emotional development of learners and to enhancing their willingness and ability for participating in the process of "communal living". This can be realized through their

teaching of the underlying values of society. School is not "culturally free standing" because what students learn in schools is often connected to their lives and culture ,therefore, the function of school is not only to prepare students for the culture, but also to be "an entry into the culture" (Bruner, 1996: 21/39).

Developing Libyan English language teachers' qualifications and professional skills through adapting Jerome Bruner progressive ideas seems to be a useful step in order to feed educational institutions with well-trained facilitators and instructors who can implement ELT innovations effectively. In this regard, it is important to consider the following measures suggested by Bruner (1960) for enhancing the performance and the quality of these teachers:

1- better recruitment and the possibility of better selection;

2- better substantive education in teacher training instructions;

3- on the job training of younger teachers by more experienced ones;

4- in-survice training and summer institutions;

5- closed=circuit television to continue the education of teachers;

6- improvement in teachers' salaries;

7- upgrading the prestige of teaching profession;

8- and teachers need support from the community (Bruner, 1960: 88/89).

6. Conclusion:

The progressive ideas of Jerome Bruner which have been discussed in the previous sections seem to be useful for integration for developing ELT in Libya. A thoughtful consideration of these ideas and their possible implications in course design and teacher education and training programmes can have a positive impact on English language learning in the Libyan context. Implementing the principles of constructive learning, discovery learning, motivation to learn and spiral curriculum may lead to changing language classrooms in Libya to become active and learner-centred. This change will result in promoting learners' active participation and motivation to learn and consequently leads to developing their communication skills.

The aforementioned ideas which Jerome Bruner suggested for improving the quality of education in America in 1960s seem to be applicable at the present time in the Libyan context. Therefore, using his theoretical framework as a model for developing ELT with reference to course design, teacher education and training, approaches of instruction and assessment and social relationship structures in language classrooms will yield better teaching and more learning. However, it is important to consider the contextual and cultural particularities of the Libyan context and to be patient and realistic in our expectations. A long-term plan for integrating these ideas seems to be an action worth thinking about.

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