INFLUENCE OF BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE IN SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING

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Abstract: Social, political, and historical event continue to be a significant theme adopted by various writers throughout the world to reveal the situations that occurred in the past and continue till date. Contemporary Indian writers use these themes to reflect the impact of events and its effect on the ordinary people. They mainly focus on socio-political issues like war, violence, displaced communities, and marginalization. Rohinton Mistry is one among these writers whose works reflect the contemporary social and political life of the parsi community. Nostalgia, alienation, diaspora, politics and marginalization form the basic tenet of Rohinton Mistry's novels. *Such a Long Journey* is one of the important works by Mistry which explore the various aspects of India like culture, community, administration, society, life, and faith of the Parsi community. Mistry, re-portrays the historical backdrop of this group and nation as it has been in the post-independence period. This paper attempts to analyze the experience, anguish, and the nostalgic feeling of the Parsi community in India even after the independence.

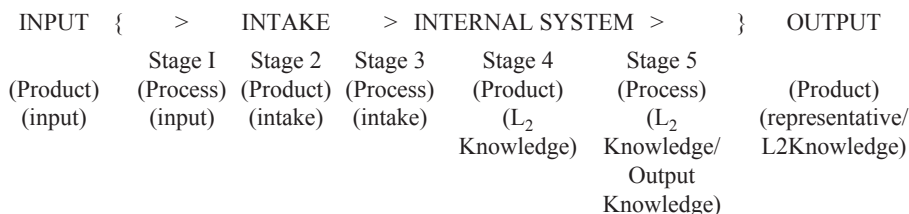*Keywords:* Nostalgia, diaspora, alienation and politics.

INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition finds its source through different means. For Second Language learners in an academic environment, classroom becomes a significant place for learning. In this the communication skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing are focused significantly for better acquisition of language. In schools especially, language acquisition is done mainly through reading. Students from their childhood days, till their completion of schooling learn second language through reading. Though teachers explain or teach on a topic, learning happens principally through reading. Listening to a teacher's class or listening audio scripts helps or enhances learning but regularly language acquisition takes place largely through reading. Family, society and other sources becomes a means to Second Language acquisition. However, these sources cannot be considered as reliable sources in knowledge creation on Second Language.

Background knowledge plays a vital role in Second Language Acquisition. The dictionary meaning states "Background knowledge as knowledge acquired through study or experience or instruction or information that is essential to understanding a situation or problem (mnemonic dictionary).

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The importance of background knowledge can be understood in terms of learning Second Language through different learning stages. Ronald puts forth learning into five stages. The

INPUT {	>	INTAKE	>	INTERNAL SYSTEM >		}	OUTPUT
	Stage I	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5		
(Product)	(Process)	(Product)	(Process)	(Product)	(Process)		(Product)
(input)	(input)	(intake)	(intake)	$(L_2$	$(L_2$		(representative/
				Knowledge)	Knowledge/		L2Knowledge)
					Output		
					Knowledge)		

Page 49: Ronald. P. Leow

Book Name: Edited Rebuschat, Patrick,Implicit and Explicit Learning of Languages, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amesterdam/Philadelphia, 2015.

A student-centred approach by Ronald P. Leon states that learning is identified through the input received and output produced. But the problems faced in the learning process depend on the capacity of the learner. Ronald focuses on three aspects namely "(i) there is competition for attentional resources to be paid to incoming information (ii) what is paid attention to may depend on the amount of mental effort required to process the incoming information (iii) the allocation of attentional resources to incoming information may come from a pool of cognitive resources" (P.12 Ronald). At every stage of learning, knowledge creation helps in Second Language Acquisition. If an input is received, it becomes an intake and thereafter reaches the cognitive system for production in L_2, but at every stage whether L_2 inter language system attains perfection in Second Language grammar or in other areas namely syntax, morph word order, vocabulary remain a question.

The factors influencing intake, namely paying attention to input received, the capacity of the brain in processing information in relation to memory namely short-term memory, long-term memory and the working memory, help in creation of background knowledge. In addition to these Leslie Caplanstates, "The education background knowledge influences students achievements and its creation and how educators can use this fact to help their students learn depends on teacher skill, the students interest, the content's complexity and the student's existing knowledge about the subject"p440.

It is clear that knowledge creation should find a conducive environment for acquisition of language. But the reverse is also identified as, "The less students already know, the less they will probably learn." In other words, the knowledge-rich get knowledge richer and the knowledge-poor do not. "Our ability to process and store information influences the extent to which our experiences create background knowledge. The categorisation of 'high fluid intelligence" and "low fluid intelligence", which relates to the ability to store errorless information or

data in memory poses a challenge (P.440-445 Educational Foundations by Leslie Kaplan, William Owings). Hence with limited opportunities, knowledge on L2 may have forms or limited structures which reflect in productive communication skills namely speaking and writing but will it be erroneous or errorless will remain a challenge in Second Language Learners.

With these, family and economical background of learners, influence background knowledge. An environment, especially in families where L2 spoken mode is available, acquisition would be positive. But such environment if missing, L_2 learners need to find a source for L_2 learning in a natural setup. Economical background of L_2 learner, limit in L_2 background knowledge creation, for the reason that exposure becomes less at all levels, namely education in general and other sources for acquisition of language also.

Reading is a reliable source of L_2 learning and for creating background knowledge. It helps to get ideas or to create ideas, enhances vocabulary, familiarises various sentence structures in L2 and in total the quantum of knowledge acquired through reading is stored in memory for retrieval when required. This helps in many ways in enhancing background knowledge. A learner with good background knowledge infers meaning as quoted by Valerie Ellery:

> This front loading process allows readers to evoke relevant thoughts and memories relating to the text. When text is read in isolation from these relevant thoughts, information is dismissed and considered unimportant. For assimilation of information to occur readers must call on existing knowledge (Torani 2000)".

Also Pierson as quoted in Valerie, Blerystates, "Asking kids to read without using background knowledge is like asking people to breathe without using oxygen" (P235). The required skill to make connections is that a learner needs to use different strategies to access schema and to connect information or events to it. This also includes assumptions, predictions, questioning, inferring and drawing conclusion. Added to this is required scaffolding by the teacher where L_2 learners really require support for better comprehension of the text. The words of Feldmann (2000) as quoted by Sandea F. Rief et. al., (P.45) states, "without the appropriate schema (structure or guide for understanding ad making sense of new information) trying to understand a story, text book or classroom lesson is like finding way through a new town without a map".

While creating background knowledge is a challenging task in L_2 learning, further challenge lies in enhancing the background knowledge in L_2. If the existing knowledge already account to be erroneous, it becomes difficult to retrieve knowledge in L_2 without errors. As Linda Campbell states, "Attempts to make sense of the world, self and others begin in early childhood and such homespun theories

are not often correct. Subsequently, they can have consequences in K-12 education. Prior knowledge activation impedes new learning and pre-existing ideas can distort or interfere with new content (Strangman and Hall 2004) when students harbour mis perceptions. This results in faring poorly in tests and disregarding information that conflicts with theirs."(p11. Linda Campbell et. al.,) In this regard Krashen's $i + 1$ hypothesis on language acquisition poses a challenge for the reason that when new knowledge is enforced on existing knowledge, the enhancement of background knowledge remains a question. However, the possibilities for enhancement is clear with learning strategies, teacher support and other external factors acting conclusively for errorless learning and retrieval.

The rectification process for errorless writing is understood that it starts at the early stage of learning. When the learners make errors, they need to be rectified then and there for further learning of L_2. After twelve years of learning, the quantum of knowledge acquired in L_2, need to be errorless, otherwise learners would find difficult to write in L_2. It is also clear that learners when they make errors in writing, the correction need to be immediate, and assessing in different contexts would retell errors made by L_2 learners in different contexts. Rectification or correction of errors if delayed, the learners carry in their mind erroneous forms, and with these limited structures, they only retrieve erroneous writing forms. On the other hand, the positive side of L_2 learning with good knowledge is that the learners retrieve better structural and contextual knowledge over the given topic. Also it can be clearly stated that they retrieve the language components without errors or with the least number of errors.

Based on the above said points on the significance of background knowledge, and its influence on L_2 learning, a set of 60 students were tested.

METHODOLOGY

A set of 60 students of Mohamed Sathak A.J. College of Engineering pursuing various engineering streams was assigned a read-and-write programme to test their knowledge in L_2, to study and analyse structures with the influence of background knowledge in L_2 on a given topic and to analyse errors or the inter language system.

Background

The above set of students from various engineering streams has

- Same educational background - 12 years of schooling in an English Medium School
- Learning of L_2 happened through classroom teaching and learning
- LSRW skills - Reading made effective in the teaching learning process both in classroom and individual reading

Result

1. In the above said methodology, a pre-test was conducted on grammar topics like tense, preposition, article, punctuation, spelling, vocabulary, etc. It was a test without options provided but a test where students need to retrieve from their memory a relevant answer to the given question. The samples chosen for study reflect that those who had good knowledge over L_2 scored higher in comparison with the learners who scored less and the least.

2. They were able to apply the rules of grammar to the context.

3. The tests reflected that learners with prior knowledge displayed fewer errors or no errors in memory while writing the answers.

4. The post test was conducted after giving 12 hours of reading sessions on the topic "Terrorism and its Impact". The test results proved that the students with good prior knowledge,
   - scored higher when compared to average or slow learners.
   - applied rules of grammar to the context.
   - had near perfect inferring and comprehension skill to write maximum points about the given topic from the reading material in their own words.

5. No inter-language system was identified in the essay writing.

6. Good command over structural knowledge was identified.

7. Prior knowledge did not impede the incoming source.

8. They could clearly analyse the reading material for writing better.

9. With the vocabulary available in the given text, they showed good command over words to be used in specific context in writing?

However, the opposite was identified with slow learners.

The pre-test results of objective test were that slow learners
- Scored less marks (got fifty percent of questions correct, while poor learners scored still less).
- Could not apply rules of grammar to the given question.
- Structural knowledge was not sufficient to score better.

Post-test results of essay writing
- After reading the material on 'Terrorism and its Impact', the content produced was very less.
- Structural knowledge was very less and hence the reading retrieval showed erroneous forms in spelling, grammar, sentence structure.
- Also there is impedance from the given source on the prior knowledge. The learners could not arrive at exact forms required for the context.

- Persistence of inter language system in writing.
- Skilful analysis of the text was not sufficient to write better.
- Vocabulary used in sentences reflects insufficient or erroneous knowledge and so the new words given in the reading material does not find a place in their writing, or if found, it is meagre or in the synonymous form.
- $i + 1$ level of acquisition has less rectification to enhance to next level.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, background knowledge plays a vital role in writing skill. Every time when a L_2 learner retrieves information in English, he/she has to retrieve the relevant structural form, correct sentence order and vocabulary. Only if the impedance is avoided, enhancement is possible. For this the given set of slow learners requires more reading practice on different context and thereafter writing retrievals to tap knowledge over various structures and also rectification of the erroneous forms. Though such method is time consuming, it is sure performance can be improved.

Excerpts of the Essay

Poor Learners

1. Terrorism is have exterim and transformed. Its has two casuses of terrorism. The new terrorism and old terrorism. The new terrorism is most dangers because it is hijacking the planes and bio war and so many ...

2. ... the same way one America Twin tower blassed by terroris in 2002 ... The plane was Pakistan gange he plane to attack the particular the "Twin Tower".

3. This micro organism are grown in loboratory rodents used to tanisimit there force micro organism. It is spreed through air condition, fibreads, temperature, water etc. Plase uesally...

Slow Learners

1. Terrorism is systematically used in politicles, religions. It threads the weaker part that faces strugle. US attacks by some natural defence that fear the people how to fece the attack.

2. ... they want their respect they do all the thing they have justicify the blast bomb where more people live they blast bomb because they popularity make people fear...

3. ... terrorism would being better system through vioolence the attack of the modern terrorism against exististing political order became more significant ... the guerrilla tacties arose due to ethnic nataonlism...

Good Learners

1. ... terrorism has its own causes and impacts. The disillusioned young Muslim people around the world joined Islamic organisation. Many Islamic people are holistic particularly to the west. This anger was fuelled by the spread of western culture.

2. ... one such method is Bio-terrorism. In this type of terrorism they use to spread diseases to the innocent people .... Such diseases are Small pox, food and mouth diseases [FMD] etc. These diseases are spread by some agents. Rodent is one such agent which spread disease ....

3. ... Terrorism may be simply defined as unlawful use of weapons violently in the society and harming the society. Many of the countries have defined about terrorism .... The famous terrorist group is Al Qaeda which was led by Osama bin Laden .... The twin towers located in USA was destroyed by this particular group ....

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