Project-Based Learning of Hindi:
Managing the Mixed-Abilities Classroom

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1. Introduction

The focus of this paper is on learning Hindi through project-based activities, which represent an efficient approach to managing the challenging mixed-abilities language classroom in New York University. The goal of the paper is to describe some particular projects and their stages along with the general objectives and outcomes. The projects are student-controlled, i.e. planned and directed by the students, in which technology and textbook materials have a supplementary function.

This type of project-based Hindi language instruction yields an effective language learning strategy training useful for learners with different learning background, needs and styles. Such methodology provides opportunities for contextualizing content and for integrating skills for real or quasi-real communicative purposes. Learners acquire language skills by taking charge of their own learning process in a classroom environment, which stimulates responsibility, independence and maturity. They study the language mainly through projects involving group and individual assignments, accompanied by work on personal agendas and language portfolios. Students are encouraged to self-evaluate and participate along with the instructor in the evaluation process. They entertain relative freedom in choosing the specific topic and format of the projects they will work on, and this creates an opportunity for the instructor to address them based on their individual aptitude, particular needs and interests through the so called *differentiated approach* (Tomlinson, 2001)*.*

The projects also endorse what is commonly referred to as the *communicative-experiential* approach (Canale, 1993). They emphasize communication and experience as a critical part of learning and as an extension to language training. Their focus is the purposeful use of the language in order to perform real-life or close to real-life tasks and to exchange information in meaningful ways. Prescribed learning outcomes in these projects are expressed in terms of topics to be learned in depth, not in terms of language items to be mastered. Therefore, assessment and evaluation of language acquisition do not focus on the mastery of grammar or vocabulary for their own sake (Swan, 1998), but rather focus on students' abilities to actively use what they know. In addition, emphasis is placed on the learners' skills needed to explore, negotiate, interpret, and express themselves comprehensibly and appropriately. The instructor assists the learners, on the one hand, to avoid minimizing and oversimplifying the amount of language they produce and, on the other, to prevent or restrict the process of fossilization of incorrect language forms (Selinker, 1992; Washburn, 1992; Skehan, 1998). Additionally, the projects create a low-risk environment, boosting student motivation and positive attitudes towards learning the Hindi language.

2. Curriculum

The curriculum is multidimensional and it takes into consideration two major facts specific for New York University. First, in such a big metropolitan center like New York City there is a large South Asian community, which allows the study of the Hindi language to merge into its natural environment, namely family, neighborhood, business, temples, etc. The second fact is related to the class demographics in our Hindi language classes, their particular needs, goals as well as

basic styles of learning.[1] On the one hand, there are students who have started from zero; they have a good command of the linguistic code but are deficient in the socio-cultural component for the lack of extensive exposure and have not only practical but also academic goals. On the other hand, more than 90% are heritage students, whose weaknesses and strengths are reversed. Generally, they display some communicative and socio-cultural competence, but also a lack of grammar accuracy, weak literacy skills and inadequate understanding of the formal register and stylistic differences in both oral and written Hindi.[2] This is due to the limited range of circumstances, topics, and native speakers with which they have interacted in the language. Based on the surveys conducted at the beginning of the year, the vast majority of the students in our classes have practical goals.[3] Usually, only a few students prepare to work in India after graduation. They instead want to be able to converse fluently with their friends from the community or with relatives in India and in the US, to watch Hindi movies without subtitles, or to write letters in Hindi to their grandparents, who don't know enough English.

Four subgroups are further identified according to the specifics of the language exposure and use they have had in the past: a) heritage students whose family speaks Hindi, b) heritage students whose family speaks another Indo-Aryan, i.e. cognate language such as Gujarati, Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi, etc. c) heritage students from a Dravidian language speaking family, and d) heritage students whose parents are from the South Asian diaspora.

The curriculum for all levels of Hindi (Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced) is comprised of four main components: a performance-based communicative-experiential component, a cultural component, a general language component, and a specific language component. First, the performance-based communicative-experiential component is the focal point of the curriculum emphasizing students' performance, experience and communication. Second, themes are identified as the cultural context for the development of communicative tasks in a project framework that lead toward a final performance-oriented goal. For example, at the intermediate level, such topics are geography, travel, festivals, traditions, religion, society, and gender relations. Third, the content component features what knowledge and skills language learners learn to do in order to use Hindi effectively for communication. For example, at the intermediate level, within the thematic context outlined in the curriculum, the students learn to understand the main points of clear standard input, to produce simple connected text, to describe experiences and events, and to briefly express arguments. Learning how to learn is the guiding principle of the general language component. It zeros in on the development of second language learning procedures and tactics, which assist learners in improving their skills in Hindi. The instructor constantly makes them aware of a variety of specific strategies, namely cognitive strategies, such as identifying, retaining, storing, or retrieving of words, phrases, and other elements; meta-cognitive strategies, such as planning, organizing, and evaluating of the learning process; affective strategies for reduction of anxiety and for self-encouragement; social strategies, such as asking questions for clarification, compensating for language deficiency and cooperating with others (Oxford, 1990; Weaver & Cohen, 1994). The fourth component of the curriculum is the specific language component. It covers the nuts and bolts of the curriculum, which details the language functions, grammar, structures, and vocabulary to be learned in the performance-based communicative-experiential context.

The curriculum aims to provide opportunities for the learners to equally acquire and develop productive as well as receptive skills. Guiding the students to build relatively equal abilities in all the modalities, without neglecting or over-emphasizing one or another, prepares them to become independent learners who will continue learning Hindi productively after completion of formal instruction. Another goal is to engage learners in interactive in- and out-of-classroom activities that offer wide-ranging input. Variety of texts and native speakers provide extensive language exposure, which will enhance their ability to recognize, understand, and ultimately master correct grammar, appropriate registers, particularly, the academic and professional varieties of Hindi, and socio-cultural references. An additional objective is to create opportunities for the heritage

learners to share their language and their cultural experiences. The Hindi program allows students to work collaboratively with their families on personally relevant topics. In addition, instruction builds on what students already know and focuses on expanding students' cultural knowledge about their South Asian heritage in relation to their identity without making them feel deficient in the process or in their words, ABCDs (American Born Confused Deshi).

3. General Outline of the Projects

Initially, at the beginning level, the projects are small scale and very structured. They entail the design and creation of flyers, brochures, informational leaflets and commercials, closely based on examples provided in class by the instructor, related to particular themes, such as school regulations, health advice, house renovations, cooking directions, weight-loss infomercials, etc. Consequently, at the intermediate and advanced levels, the projects become more complicated, elaborate and flexible, involving fewer restrictions in the choice of format and activities and requiring tape-recording sessions, exploration among the community and research. Such projects are movie trailers, Reality TV shows (Shaadii, university meN zindagii, paarivaarik zindagii, etc.), TV Talk shows (bolo jii, kal, vichaar-vimarsh, etc.), puppet shows, etc. Generally, these projects have several stages and consist of several activities that place learners in situations requiring authentic use of language in order to communicate, such as learner-to-learner interviews, role plays, simulations, field trips, contact assignments outside of class, and process writing[4] involving the participation of adults from the Hindi speaking community. Many such activities provide a bridge between using Hindi in class and using Hindi outside of class (Fried-Booth, 1997). Peer reviews, teacher evaluations, self-reflection, and community feedback all play an important role in the evaluation process, which focuses on ongoing demonstrations of what students are learning and how well they can communicate it. When learners work in pairs or in teams, they need skills, such as collaboration, research, project management, and oral presentations important beyond the immediate language goals. Within the group work integral to projects, individuals' strengths related to their background, previous language experiences and preferred ways of learning strengthen the work of the team as a whole (Lawrence, 1997).

Certain projects focus on the objectives of one instructional unit, such as a unit on health, and some span over several units. The projects take place during a unit or are a culminating final event. The basic phases include selecting a particular subject, making plans, researching, developing products, sharing and evaluating results with peers, instructor, and community (Wrigley, 1998; Kelly, 1997). Students learn by systematically using language and performing learning activities at each stage. In this environment, the instructor supports the inquiry process as a facilitator with a variety of resources and scaffolding, which enables learners to extend their skills and knowledge to higher levels (Barron, 1998). The asynchronous facilities of the 'Web Blackboard' prove efficient in saving class time by posting reminders, guideline clarifications, deadline breakdowns, logistic suggestions, discussion threads, etc., conducted both in English and Hindi.[5] This structured method of communication promotes collaborative learning between peers as well as between instructor and students.

4. Literature-Based Projects

On the average, there are about 5 projects per semester, which has 14 weeks. The actual preparation, execution, and presentation of the projects I will describe in more detail here take a total of 5-6 sessions (of 75 minutes each). The average size of the class is 15-20 students. The groups are usually 4-5 and each team has 3-4 members.

4.1. Stage I. Preproduction

This stage is concerned with methods preparing learners prior to their performance. Detailed preparation or a good understanding of the new material and preliminary work with it leads to delayed production, which ultimately ensures positive and confident performance. Two sessions of 75 minutes are used for extensive and intensive familiarization[6] with the reading material. Specifically, the class is divided into groups of four students. The instruction includes teacher-generated and later on student-generated on-going summaries and commentaries, observations and analysis of an original authentic unedited piece of literature, such as the short-story "Kafan" by Premchand.

Several activities are conducted in order for the students to develop formal schemata. They are assigned simple preliminary research questions related to background knowledge about the genre of the Hindi short story, its origin, rhetorical features and organization. Gradually, content schemata become the target, i.e. knowledge about the socio-cultural, ethical and psychological issues that form the content of the piece. The sessions at this stage are conducted through routine for the foreign language classroom comprehension and guided questions, initially yielding short answers and retelling short parts of the story. Consequently, even though still closely based on the text, the teacher's attempts increasingly focus on eliciting simple comments and remarks. The weekly journal entries sent via e-mail to the instructor and the Blackboard discussions show that the less the class is organized on a teacher-centered basis and the more the students are actively involved focusing on their contributions, the more excitement and motivation they exhibit about the project. Thus, as the students attend to the topics at hand they become more aware of the need to expand their vocabulary. Also, at this point, the instructor makes the students aware that note-taking in Hindi is a key cognitive supporting strategy, necessary for this preparatory phase.

4.2. Stage II. Unplanned and Planned Reproduction

At this second stage, during one session the instructor's main efforts are to stimulate the development of new schemata by further manipulating the text. He/she uses true/ false statements, asks the students to match quotes with characters, to reformulate them and asks their personal opinion about several episodes. Gradually toward the end of the session, the discussion moves to more complex abstract topics which the story reveals, namely social stratification in India, *dalits'* situation, religious similarities and differences, life and death conceptualization, funeral ceremonies, etc. Students recap pertinent passages in the text and contribute to the discussion with the so-called *unplanned* reproductive discourse, where they apply automatic and unanalyzed knowledge. During this activity the attempt to express their thoughts is facilitated by the direct use of their notes and the reading material itself, actively assisted by the instructor who employs prompting techniques. The objective is to create such a setting, in which the learners would feel confident and interested to produce continuous speech as well as meaningful content.

However, there are always students who are more intuitive and extroverted than others and who take the floor for longer turns. In order to provide opportunity for equal amount of contribution, the instructor formulates a particular role-play task. Each student is assigned or chooses a particular role (such as Maadhav or Ghiisuu from "Kafan," the daughter-in-law, a neighbor-villager, a human-rights activist, a politician, etc.). He/she is expected to prepare an oral presentation of about two-three minutes as a homework assignment presenting a specific point of view on the topic, e.g. "What is my/their life like and how can it change?" The participants of each group bring their prepared presentations and a written version of the essay. During the next session, for about 10 minutes they plan, design and manage their performance. This segment of the project is very flexible, and the students decide on the format, namely if it will be structured and staged, or unstructured and interactive. Then they make coordinated

presentations of the characters involved and the positions they defend.

Next, each student is expected to write up a personal agenda including a description of the major difficulties and limitations they experienced during the writing of the essay and during the oral presentation, along with additional questions and problems they want to explore related to the topic. They also keep a learner's portfolio with all the notes they take and each draft and version of the essays, along with all the corrections and suggestions made by the instructor. The portfolio is considered essential for an environment, in which the students are encouraged to work independently and to take more control of their learning; they are guided to take advantage of the teacher's feedback and are advised to learn to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses.

4.3. Stage III. Planning and Production

This stage is mostly based on a technique, called *fiction into fiction.* It plays the transposition of the main characters from the story in different contexts and fosters production of planned discourse where they use previous and new analyzed knowledge. Over the years, the projects, whose description is offered below, have proved particularly effective, appealing and inspirational:

a) TV Talk Show "Bolo jii." The fictional characters of the father and the son from the story are invited to have a conversation about their life with the imaginary head of the village and the host of the TV show. He is to introduce the guests, their background and involvement in the plot.

b) TV Talk Show "Kal." A traditionally minded grandparent, a teenager from a big city, a school teacher and a literary critic who is hosting the show in a round-table format discuss questions, such as: "What message do Maadhav and Ghiisu send us today?", "Is 'Kafan' relevant nowadays and why?", "Should it be included in school textbooks in India and why?", etc.

c) TV Talk Show "Vichaar-Vimarsh." A politician, a journalist, a *brahman* and a *dalit* rights leader conduct a roundtable discussion of the social status of the dalits in India in the past and today. This project is recommended for more experienced learners who need to conduct extensive research on the topic and independently read additional literary material, e.g. Premchand's "Thaakur kaa kuaaN."

During one session, based on self-assessment of their own skills and recognition of their own talents, students plan everyone's specific contribution to the project, redistribute the roles and assign the responsibilities and duties. Usually, the students with weaker interactive skills choose to retain the role of a literary character they portrayed earlier, and to elaborate and expand their previously assigned essay. The learners with better communication skills are encouraged to develop a new part, which is less defined by the text itself.

In addition, every participant in the project is required to build his or her own individual check list of vocabulary items considered necessary to use relevant to the subject matter, along with typical lexical and grammatical collocations, which they write on index cards. This has proved to be a more useful format than the copybook, because they change and rearrange their order. In particular, they organize the cards in semantic fields and further expand the body of words and phrases as well as the body of grammatical structures they target for use, e.g. passive voice, continuous, frequentative aspects, conditional, relative sentences, etc. This type of effort supports the development of language richness and accuracy.

For homework, at this stage, the students have to write up their turns and/or presentation and highlight the targeted vocabulary or grammar items in two different colors. The students incorporate passages from the role-play assignment by further expanding their language use and elaborating on the topic. During the next session, they visit a residential or small business area with great concentration of South Asian population, where they solicit opinions by conducting

and recording random interviews related to the main topic. Later they examine the collected data and innovatively incorporate their findings into the final project as a multi-mode presentation. This activity is especially encouraged and granted additional credit, because it allows the learners to receive input from the speakers of Hindi while producing limited output in a natural uncontrolled environment. Later on, based on that experience, they produce higher volume output in the controlled setting of the classroom.

During the next session students share their work, organize, assemble, arrange and rehearse the presentation of the project within their team. The teacher's role during this phase is as a referee, adviser, coach and facilitator. He/she addresses individually the students with different strengths and weaknesses, and assigns additional readings or provides web-links to newsletter articles for those who display readiness. This allows the learners to acquire language skills and socio-cultural competence at an individual pace and with different intensity. Also, the different roles, which they have adopted, help the teacher to raise their awareness for register, dialect and stylistic variety, and even further, to encourage and assist them to acquire and master a few, respective of the characters they work on.

The presentations of the projects take place during the third session. Some groups prefer to meet outside of class and record their performance independently; others choose to come and tape their shows in class, which usually takes 10-15 minutes per project. This planned speech stage allows them to focus on vocabulary and form, i.e. more complex lexis and syntactic structures in a contextualized and meaningful setting.

4.4. Stage IV. Reflection and Evaluation

The final stage is watching, analyzing and evaluating the performance. At this stage everything is captured on tape and the projects are watched in class. Every group prepares two handouts which they distribute among their peers: one with observations and conclusions; and a second one, in relation to the pre-planned list of items, providing illustrations of challenging key words, phrases, idioms, grammar structures that the native speakers produced or that students understood but did not use. Based on the handouts, they lead a discussion of these issues after their presentation. Next, the rest of the learners are required to offer oral reviews of each of the projects. In addition, every student needs to submit to the instructor a brief self-evaluation in the form of a journal entry via e-mail.

Those learners with limited background focus mostly on language accuracy and richness, whereas more fluent heritage students are directed to emphasize discourse adequacy. For additional credit, in order to overcome the problems with minimization, reduction and fossilization, the students are asked to scan the recorded material for such cases, that is, when short and syntactically sparse turns are produced. In order to do this, students go over the tape together with a native speaker and select instances where speech can be expanded. To expand and improve even further their individual contributions, they are encouraged to collaborate with Hindi speakers, if possible, and produce a series of approximations toward native-like norms through lexical or grammatical repair and reformulation. They come to class with suggestions for improvement and discuss them with their peers and the teacher. Finally, the personal agendas and the student portfolios including all the homework, essays, plans, checklists, self-evaluations, notes, etc. are submitted for final instructor's evaluation.[7]

Students can also conduct projects in this type of format when the medium of the central text is audio or video. Heritage learners are often especially interested in work related to Hindi movies. Every session contains a film-watching and a film-discussion segment. For example, during 4 sessions, 45 minutes are used to watch the movie and the rest of the time is used to manipulate the text, which involves clarification and raising the learners' awareness about certain lexical and grammatical items, eliciting retelling and commentaries, and analysis of the main themes and

characters, while encouraging note-taking. Consequently, the stages of the projects are the same with similar type of organization and management. Naturally, the emphasis is placed on the conversational features of the language, particularly, keeping in mind the variety of audiences involved.

5. Outcomes

Certain difficulties are worth mentioning. First, students actually work with unedited literary language. This poses stylistic and grammatical problems, such as use of regional and dialect expressions, elliptic conversational syntactic constructions, and a specialized lexis specific to very particular domains of social engagement, which are too challenging at times and might not have personal relevance for the learners. Second, students must overcome initial feelings of uncertainty about the direction of the project and later on camera shyness, which is especially problematic for the inhibited and introverted type of learners.

However, the positive outcomes outweigh these shortcomings. This type of project provides the students with opportunities for equal participation and for longer turns. It serves as a medium for pre-speaking planned work, or as a bridge moving the students from text to written composition onto interaction. By collaborating with their family and/or the community, they become even more cognizant of the richness and diversity of their background, which strengthens their self-confidence, boosts their motivation, and, ultimately, has a positive effect on the classroom environment as a whole.

Because students are familiar with the general context and topic of the interaction, in the process of development of the project, they gradually become aware of and concentrate on form without ignoring content through mechanical drilling. In addition, the tapes are used by the instructor to provide positive affective feedback and negative cognitive feedback. In this way students heighten their meta-cognitive awareness of their weaknesses and strengths, which in turn creates conditions for the destabilization of fossilized areas in a meaningful communicative setting. Thus, they successfully acquire more sophisticated communicative skills and expand further their socio-cultural schemata.

The e-mail journal entries and the Blackboard discussions yield some further observations. Usually, students' reactions to these types of projects are extremely positive and reflect high motivation and excitement. They evaluate their progress in these projects in a mature and self-reflexive manner. They reevaluate the project's target theme and its cultural importance, and also talk about the change in their own opinions and attitudes.[8] In addition, they become aware of their own learning and are able to monitor and evaluate their work, because assessment is done in collaboration and is congruent with instruction, i.e. it is performance-based. This methodology helps motivate students to bring their projects to a refined and fully completed end result. They are excited about working among informants. Their performance gives them a sense of achievement and a sense of ownership of the unique work they produce. The project-based approach to teaching effectively pushes heritage Hindi students to depart from their habitual mode of language use and develop their Hindi language in purposeful language-learning tasks without allowing for functionality to outweigh accuracy, as the projects have an aural and written mode of execution. It inspires them to learn for a particular purpose and allows them to communicate their understanding of the content materials while demonstrating their language skills in communicative situations.

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1 At the beginning of each year all students fill out a questionnaire with this information and take a foreign language learning style test.
2 Heritage language learners in other languages exhibit similar characteristics as described in Valdes, 1997 and Valdes, 2001.
3 Students fill out a survey, in which they identify their background, state personal and/or academic reasons why they want to learn Hindi and share their expectations of the outcomes of this course.
4 Process writing places emphasis not simply on the final product, but on the various stages, such as brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing and reviewing. For more see Tribble, 1996.
5 Students start learning to type in the Devanagari script at the Elementary level after the first week of instruction.
6 In broad terms, extensive reading entails a large quantity of text for a general understanding of the subject, where the emphasis is on building reading confidence and reading fluency. On the other hand, intensive reading is the close linguistic study of a short text in order to extract specific information in detail.
7 The evaluation of the portfolio is based on four equally important criteria: a) level of effort (whether it contains all items required), b) grammar and syntax accuracy, c) richness and complexity, and d) content.
8 Similar attitudes and reactions are reported from ethnographic courses for language learners in a study abroad setting (Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan and Street, 2001).