Bringing Derrida's Deconstructionism into the Classroom: Implications for Pedagogy

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Abstract

Derrida's theory of deconstruction has drawn the attention of several scholars in the fields of academia including language. While deconstructionism has provided a new lens to viewing reality, the philosophical ideas associated with deconstructionism have tended to be complex to understand particularly to the beginners of language and literary studies. This paper intends to uncover the theoretical underpinnings of deconstruction theory and its enactment in language and pedagogy. The ideas for analysis have been taken from the existing literature through systematic review and have been considered from pedagogical points of view. The analysis shows deconstructionism as a powerful tool to liberate both learners and teachers from centralised and imported hegemonic pedagogical discourses and democratise education through practice of learner autonomy. The pedagogically, recognising the multiplicity of meaning and the use of critical pedagogy can liberate students by promoting critical thinking skills for knowledge construction.
Keywords*: deconstructionism, structuralism, centrality, subjectivity, pedagogy*

Introduction

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), one of the most influential twentieth-century philosophers, has been much discussed and debated in academia, especially for his deconstruction theory of language. Although Derrida has been severely criticised by many scholars (Abrams, 1999; Miller, 1977; Rorty, 1977) for bewildering the established theories of language and literary criticism, for having no clear stance on his postulations as well as for being intolerant to his contemporaries and competitors, some scholars ((Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006; McQuillan, 2007; Stocker, 2006; Tyson, 2014) have discussed Derrida's contribution in literary criticism, pedagogy and politics. Unlike other studies that have analysed Derrida from wider philosophical and critical perspectives, this paper briefly analyses Derrida's stance on language and its influence in the field of language and educational pedagogies with a reflection on deconstruction theory. This paper intends to analyse how Derrida deconstructed the "structurality of the structure" and "centrality of the centre" by indicating the dynamic, slippery, and contextual nature of language characterised by the play of words. Despite huge

controversial contribution of Derrida on philosophy and truth, his philosophical contributions in education have been under-discussed until recently (Haddad, 2014). Therefore, this paper systematically reviews literature to reveal how Derrida's ideologies can be logically connected to education to bring reform in pedagogical practices. In particular, it analyses how Derrida's stance on language has paved new ways for deriving meaning from the text that might liberate both learners and teachers with acceptance of plurality, multiplicity, and criticality in pedagogy although complete deconstruction of meaning leading to no meaning might be pedagogically risky.

This paper has been organised under different sections. In the beginning, I will briefly overview the connection between structuralists' views of language as a structure of systematically organised phonemes as they occur in speech and how Derrida critiqued "structurality of structure" figuring out the contextuality of language that makes it dynamic and flexible in terms of meaning revelation. Then, I will explore the way Derrida deconstructed language and truth as intertwined with each other through the establishment of the fallibility of language to express reality which is depicted in mainstream Western philosophies with a reflection on how Derrida has attacked "logocentric" and "centre seeking" tendency of Western philosophers. I will also reflect on the pedagogical implications of deconstruction theory followed by its criticisms. Finally, I will briefly summarise the findings of the study and suggest some pedagogical implications indicating

Methods and Procedures

As this is a review paper, I have used systematic review approach to make it more rigorous by avoiding unnecessary repetition of the available literature. In particular, I have tried to access the available literature on Derrida's conceptualisation of language and its implications to pedagogy, the current area of focus in this paper. The required information for analysis was collected from the secondary sources such as books and journal articles published online. I accessed the necessary data through google scholar, online libraries and websites. Out of several resources available, I selected only those materials which synchronised with my review area.

Results and Discussion

The information derived from different resources have been systematically presented under thematic headings including Derrida's conceptualisation of language and structuralism, Derrida's postulations of language and truth, Derrida's rejection of centrality of centre, Derrida in the classroom and Derrida criticised.

Derrida's Conceptualisation of Language and Structuralism

Derrida seems to have been initially inspired by thinkers such as Husserl, Nietzsche, Heidegger, de Saussure, Levinas, and Freud (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006). Derrida introduced his deconstruction theory based on the critical analysis of Saussure's theory of structuralism in "Course on General Linguistics" paving the way to post-structuralism (Joubert, 2006) although Derrida did not talk of post-structuralism himself (Stocker, 2006). Saussure (1959) presented language as a set of structured systems analysable as a combination of its units having distinctive features. For example, a phoneme was considered distinctive not in terms of its phonemic characteristics but in terms of its distinct functional feature in the same language (Free, 1990). Derrida severely criticised the structuralist notion of language by Saussure advancing the concept of dynamism of language. While Saussure in his structuralist

theory of language argued that there is a one-to-one relation between signifier and signified claiming that a particular word conveys a particular meaning, Derrida through his theory of 'dynamism of language' argued that the relation between signifier and signified is dynamic and multiple as the meaning conveyed by a word is never complete; half of the meaning is delivered and half of it remains missing (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006). The function of language is generally regarded to communicate meaning generated from a linguistic structure. However, Derrida questions the way communication is defined. Derrida argues that if communication means to transmit meaning through structured words, actual meaning cannot be communicated because words do not have a univocal signification (Moati, 2014). This signifies that the signifier and signified are always in continuous interaction, leading to a new meaning.

Derrida criticised Saussure for the relationship he established between speech and writing. Derrida strongly opposed Saussure's idea of speech as a primary form of language over writing. Against the concept of 'logocentrism' of Saussure, which emphasized speech over writing, Derrida forwarded the counter concept of 'Grammatology' arguing that writing is more basic, unique, powerful, and permanent. Saussure's phonocentric approach to concentrating the study of language as speech has been criticised by Derrida because it excludes the study of writing as a fundamental language component and limits inherent creative features depictable in writing (Wood, 1979). Although Derrida did not reject the existence of meaning, he challenged structuralists' idea of speech as intrinsic to language and writing as extrinsic to it.

Derrida's Postulations of Language and Truth

Derrida expressed dissatisfaction about Saussure's claim of the primacy of speech over writing based on the concept of interiority and exteriority. For Derrida, speech is not necessarily interior and writing is not necessarily exterior (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006). The concept of interior and exterior is analogous to the concept of presence and absence. One's presence is counted in the absence of someone and vice versa. The concept of presence is important only when there is the concept of absence. Similarly, speech is interior because writing is exterior; and speech is exterior when writing is interior. So, the concept of interior and exterior cannot clearly describe speech or writing, rather the concept is equalized, and so erased. Moreover, Derrida linked consciousness with writing and writing with language because consciousness can be better defined through writing for its features of stability and reiteration (Stocker, 2006). However, Derrida questioned that writing can communicate the intent of the writer to the reader as it is constrained by time and context limitations.

Unlike the structuralist concept of one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified, Derrida held that a signifier signifies multi-layered meanings. Structuralists believing in Saussure's idea of 'difference' regarded that each sign is significant in language because of its inherent nature of signifying different entities (Wood, 1979). Saussure (1959) strongly argued that language comprises only differences in both signifier and signified and that the linguistic system creates conceptual as well as phonic differences. For example, 'cat', 'rat', and 'bat' are phonemically different and refer to different entities in the real world through language generated system. As such, for the structuralists, language is a system of meaning created through the play of difference between signifiers and signified. However, claiming for the non-existence of a signified concept, Derrida (1973), in his postulation of the notion

of 'differance' argues that a signifier does not always signify a particular sign, and multiple interpretations are always possible because a concept is generated through another concept and another through another. For example, when we try to define a particular word, we take reference of some other words, these words can still be defined taking reference of some other words. When "banana" is defined as "an elongated usually tapering tropical fruit with soft pulpy flesh enclosed in a soft usually yellow rind", it requires to define other words such as elongated, tapering, tropical, pulpy, yellow, rind making comprehension a more complicated process. This indicated that in the process of deriving meaning, we just play the game of words, being unable to come out the textual reference to indicate exact meaning in the real world that ends up the play of meaning itself. This happens because words are not purely distinctive in terms of meaning as semantic overlapping occurs among words.

Unlike the structuralists' idea of negation that the absence of one signifies the presence of the other, Derrida proposed differance to indicate non-negation limiting negativity itself as words or concepts are nondeterministic in terms of their meaning (Baugh, 1997). For example, defining a word such as 'dog', may require the minimum use of other words such as 'domestic', 'pet', 'barking', and 'animal', which are defined using some other words that lead to some other concepts, and the process becomes endless dismissing the possibility of deriving exact meaning. Similarly, the same animal 'dog' may be understood differently by different individuals in differing contexts. Saussure's idea of 'transcendental signified' indicates the meaning that goes beyond the meanings signified by all signifiers (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006),a kind of 'super' meaning, meaning beyond all meanings. However, Derrida deconstructed the concept of transcendental signified as the real meaning of signifiers cannot be achieved. According to Derrida (1970), there is no existence of transcendental signified with the possibility of limitless signification, and the search for ultimate meaning is an absurd game that does not yield actual meaning. Derrida denied the possibility of having access to transcendental meaning and called for the possibility of a multiplicity of textual interpretations (Lamont, 1987).

Derrida's deconstruction theory assumes language to be obscure, slippery, and misleading in terms of meaning (Tyson, 2014). Generally, there is a tradition to see language comprehension problems in people. However, deconstruction of language points out language comprehension problems within the language itself. For example, the sentence 'Flying plane is dangerous' is slippery as it has multiple meanings: (1) the action of flying airplane is dangerous, and (2) the airplane that is flying is dangerous. Similarly, a word like 'water' that is commonly assigned to the class of nouns may belong to the different word classes in a different context with the possibility of creating comprehension problems in the sentences such as 'Please water the plants' and 'Water colour suits on that painting'. Very simple and straightforward-looking sentences such as 'This road is narrow' might be semantically confusing because it has no explicit meaning as 'narrow' is a relative term because people are likely to understand it personally based on their context, concept, or experiences. Tyson (2014, p. 252) explains Derrida's notion of deconstruction of language when he says that "language is nonreferential because it refers neither to things in the world nor to our concepts of things but only to the play of signifiers of which language itself consists".

Derrida (1970) asserted that "language bears within itself the necessity of its critique" (p.282) which can be explained in terms of binary opposition and nature-culture distinction.

For example, the distinction between 'male' and 'female' traits is erased because one is understood concerning the other and rejects the possibility of superiority of one over the other. He rejected Levi-Strauss on nature-culture distinction giving an example of incest prohibition claiming it to possess the characteristics of both because incest prohibition is natural for its universal existence and it is cultural in the sense of being the social rule. Derrida accepted the existence of multiple truths and rejected absolute truth. He argued that human's attempt to search for truth has been limited by language because it restricts our reasoning shaped through language. Also, the search for truth becomes irrelevant because language traps us into the play of signifier limiting to itself.

Derrida's Rejection of Centrality of Centre

Derrida (1970) criticised Western metaphysics claiming that it always created centre of being and becoming. For example, structuralism created centrality of the structure that distinctive structures of human consciousness determine human language and experiences. Similarly, Descartes regarded rationality or ego as primary which is depicted in his famous remark "I think therefore I am", Kant tried to establish the centrality of "transcendental I" and Hegel to "absolute spirit". Western philosophers created different centres and so different worldviews making them dynamic and evolving. If different worldviews exist, their centrality gets erased because they are the products of human consciousness reflected in human language. Derrida questioned structuralists' concept of fundamental immobility of the centre because centrality encounters a series of substitutions of the centre for centre leading to the non-existence of the centre.

Derrida (1970) figured out the Western philosophers' inclination for the criticism of others based on their discourse problems and regarded it to be predictable because of the language limits that do not allow them to express beyond themselves. Furthermore, he regarded language as a means of expressing the worldviews of human beings, but language itself is ideological, ambiguous, slippery, and ever-changing and cannot express world reality. Derrida criticized Western philosophies for they confined themselves to the "phonocentrism" of language and "logocentrism" of metaphysics (Culler, 1985). Derrida falsified the centrality of Western philosophy engendered through language by establishing it as a means to express the mental framework created through language itself. As such, language is limited because it cannot express all the ideas that are generated in our minds and fail to express world reality confined by language.

Derrida in the Classroom

As the educational implications of Derrida's philosophy of deconstructionism have been represented in literature from different lenses, their utility in the classroom can be highly valued. To express in the deconstructive sense, educational implications of deconstructionism can be found everywhere and nowhere. While reinterpretation of text is an unavoidable human activity, multiple interpretations of text can be equally misleading. Because education is the process of making meaning and constructing knowledge, deconstructionism can be helpful to derive meaning, and use different angles for the interpretation of the text. In particular, deconstructionism is pervasive in the fields of education, literary studies, writing pedagogy, critical pedagogy, multicultural education, and the fields of educational inquiry (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006).

About the implication of Derrida in the classroom, Tyson (2014) argues that deconstruction enhances the critical thinking ability of learners to overcome predetermined experiences and ideologies created through language as it restricts to expression of our vision of the world and perceived reality. Moreover, deconstruction liberates both educators and learners from confining themselves to the language-generated conceptions of what knowledge is and how it can be explored allowing them to go beyond language-created limits. Deconstruction theory of language can empower learners by shifting conventional beliefs of assigning learning errors from learners to language pointing out the slippery nature of language. This allows the learners to free themselves from learning anxiety to practise creativity in the classroom. Derrida's theory of deconstruction has and will have widespread implications in the classroom as McQuillan (2007, p. 7) put it, "The students of tomorrow will read Derrida because she will also have a future to reckon" referring to Derrida's optimism towards his philosophical thoughts.

Deconstructionism views that interpretations of meaning tend to be subjective, personal, transient, and shaky (Farahani, 2014) making it illogical to claim for accuracy and consistency in meaning conveyed by a text. This opens the ground for reinterpretation of textual meaning with the logical possibility of conveying new meaning going beyond the author's intent. Moreover, the possibility of multiple interpretations of meaning and authenticating the grassroots literacy values the local Indigenous knowledge and cultures, which otherwise remain dominated and marginalised. Derrida favours deconstructive reading of texts, which goes beyond the passive reflection of reading texts to the active transformation of meaning thereby regenerating meaning from the original (Jones, 2004). This allows for the interpretation of text critically from the perspectives of the suppressed, dominated, and subordinated social groups increasing the possibility of social transformation for human emancipation. It also questions the concept of superiority and centrality, liberating the learners and teachers in the periphery. It prioritizes critical pedagogy as a process of constructing meaning thereby allowing for meaning contradiction and multiple interpretations. Derrida's viewpoints about language might be helpful to develop subjectivity and different perspectives in the students to liberate themselves from any form of hegemony.

Derrida argues that students' intellectual development can be enhanced by incorporating philosophy in high school which can provide them with the base for university courses (Haddad, 2014). He argues that basic philosophical ideas can be provided by injecting them through other courses including language and literature, history, and even science. Derrida intends to emphasise teaching of philosophy treating it like any other basic discipline introducing it from school and leading towards specialization at university as a compulsory subject for all degree programmes. For Derrida, there should not be any age bar to study philosophy as it can be taught from school to university level students as per their intellectual capacity. Moreover, the language of the classroom need not be the standard national language because devaluing the local languages could diminish indigenous cultures and values from education. From this perspective, teaching philosophy in the local languages can be helpful for the intellectual growth of students from the local marginalised communities.

Derrida questions the tendency of defining concepts in curricular materials including textbooks. Instructional materials cannot picture reality as they are unreal and flawed, constructed through the interplay of words in a text (Farahani, 2014). As reality is shaped

through language and other semiotic systems, teachers and students should be engaged in the interpretation of multiple layers of meanings residing in the texts. Derrida prefers textual interpretation as a major pedagogical technique, which can be achieved through two approaches: deconstruction and double-reading. Deconstructive reading relies on reinterpretation of text to regenerate meaning conveyed by the text to fit new socio-cultural contexts. This process of constructing meaning can be more realistic, contextual, pragmatic, and indeed more emancipatory providing space for grassroots ideologies and values. However, deconstructive reading needs to be supported by multiple readings because single and superficial reading may not unveil the intricated meaning of the original writing. This requires going beyond the traditional model of the teacher-student relationship in the classroom where students are the passive receivers of meaning. Deconstruction equally values students' knowledge, values, ideas, and interpretations to construct new knowledge based on teacher-student collaboration and experience sharing. Moreover, the contemporary trend of imposing English-based monolingual pedagogy can be questioned as Derrida objected to any kind of encroachment to natural languages seeking to achieve a universal language (Bojesen, 2021) Contemporary tendency of practicing English medium pedagogy can be counteractive to preserving linguistic diversity in the multilingual contexts of Nepal. Deriving from Derrida's stance on multilingualism, translanguaging activities can be valued to aid learners' meaning-making process in classroom transactions (Bojesen, 2021). The anti-hegemonic and decolonial deconstructivist ideologies can contribute to legitimate and theorising local culturally-informed pedagogies promoting heterogeneity and indigeneity instead of imitating Western pedagogical practices.

Derrida Criticised

Derrida has been criticised for his postulations on language and Western philosophies. Rorty (1977) questioned Derrida's stance on language and philosophy for lacking in clear stance on Derrida whether he intended to develop a new philosophy of language or simply criticise the philosophy based on language. For Rorty (1977), Derrida concentrated much on criticising Western philosophy for being "logocentric" rather than proposing a solution to the existing philosophical debates. However, Derrida seems to have been unaware that he used language itself borrowing much from the Western philosophies, ultimately dropping himself into the language pitfall. Similarly, Abrams (1999) contended that language has a purpose to express intent and language can determine meaning. Criticising Derrida, he argued that all the attempts at interpretation of meaning and textual criticism will have no meaning if they are supposed to lead to misinterpretation only. Abrams did see the relevance of both interpretation and criticism although multiple meanings might be revealed. Earlier, Miller (1977) questioned the relevance of deconstruction itself if the relevance of the language structure is dismantled.

Derrida deconstructed the specificity of the meaning of lexicon viewing contextuality as a defining characteristic of language (Stocker, 2006). However, language devoid of proper features like proper nouns to indicate specificity and uniqueness cannot serve the required communicative functions. Therefore, Derrida's claim that proper-looking words can be improper in different contexts cannot be acceptable as it denies the communicative proper of language. It is worth considering Derrida's argument that communication requires the translation of intent contained in the mind into language which is constrained by temporal

and contextual lapses between the sender and receiver in encoding and decoding messages with a resultant communication problem. Although Derrida has been criticised for being skeptical on this ground, he is pointing out the probable meaning contradiction in communication (Stocker, 2006), which need not be regarded as Derrida's weakness but as the weakness residing in the language itself.

Conclusion

Derrida established a close connection between language and philosophy Derrida believed that both philosophy and language cannot be defined in specific terms because language is contextualised and slippery, and philosophy is explained in terms of language. According to Derrida, words can be regarded as meaningful only if they can regenerate the exact meaning in their reoccurrence in a new context, and it is very unlikely for the language to lead to reality owing to its limitations. As language, truth, and knowledge are intertwined, the discovery of absolute truth through language is not possible. Derrida should not be understood to have dismantled all the established philosophies and language, but he should be read to be aware of the shortcomings existing in language and communication to improve and empower them further.

Although it is difficult to penetrate Derrida within a brief paper like this, Derrida's deconstruction theory has widespread implications in the fields of philosophy, linguistics, and pedagogy including many other fields. Derrida's deconstruction theory of language may have multifaceted implications which cannot be explored through comprehensive studies, but pedagogical implications are explicit as it has been a powerful tool to liberate both learners and teachers from centralised and superimposed hegemonic pedagogical discourses and democratise education through the practice of learner autonomy. In particular, deconstructive views of Derrida are indeed reconstructive because they provide a voice to the voiceless by accepting multiple interpretations of the original texts. Indeed, deconstructionism empowers the ideologies and identities of the marginalised and subordinated citizenries enabling them to create their voice, defend the dominant ideologies, and refine the existing social practices by rewriting the literature. I insist that the pedagogical practices in Nepal need to recognise the multiplicity of meaning to promote critical pedagogy against the hegemony of consent engendered by injecting foreign language, literature, culture, and ideologies, and liberating students to help them develop criticalities in knowledge construction. As such, I suggest that empirical research can be carried out to explore the relevance of Derrida's deconstruction theory and deconstruction worldviews in educational pedagogy and the pedagogy of language.

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