



LEARNER EMPOWERMENT AND THE MATERIALS: THE NEED TO BREAK THE BARRIERS

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ABSTRACT

Some teachers object to learner empowerment since they think that it means students taking charge and making learning decisions best left to teachers. They even feel that students don't deserve this amount of freedom. But learner empowerment refers to 'self-directed learning and only a shift of responsibility from teacher to learner.) Further, it is an extension of 'learner-centered ' learning.

Among the classroom trio, Man, Material and Methods, Material occupies the central role. Effective learning is the result of the proper handling of the materials. This paper focuses on the empowering materials. In engineering colleges, the Technical English curriculum offers materials, which limit the exposure of the students to one particular variety of English. It is not the English using which the learners interact among themselves and others. Some Applied linguists point out that the texts used in the classroom are not dynamic but 'frozen', namely they are not amenable to open-ended discussions.

The learners can improve their language skills when teachers use it as a useful instrument for provoking discussions Unlike the conventional classroom, which is characterized by monologue by teachers, the classroom of empowered materials will become a 'discourse arena'. The learners with their freedom to respond will come out with their own opinions and share or argue with others. Such interaction will energize a classroom

To make a material work successfully, the teachers and the learners have to change their attitude to the text. "At present, English teaching in India is carried on mechanically without any involvement on the part of teachers or learners; the entire exercise is examination-oriented and degree-driven" This kind of obsession with the exam result is the first barrier to be broken. The teachers have to look at the texts as a tool which will provide them the knowledge base that can mould students, give scope for arguments, counter arguments and discussions. The learner who actively participates in such discussions will become an empowered learner.

Key Words: empowering materials, dynamic texts, knowledge base, classroom, a discourse arena





A Glimpse of the roles of students in different approaches to ELT

The Grammar-Translation Method which was the earliest, obviously, paved way for Teacher-centered and teacher-dominated language teaching. The students were assigned a subordinate role and their needs were not taken care of. They were at the 'receiving end', just getting what the teachers gave them. The Direct Method broke a new path giving importance to text books and the needs. Gradually, the focus on students gained importance and the students were assigned a role of equal partners with the teachers in Communicative Language Teaching. The pendulum has swung to the extreme and now under 'learner empowerment', the learner dominates and the teacher is assigned a subordinate role. As Stephen R. Shrader points out, "Learner autonomy and learner empowerment are terms that often go together. Learner autonomy refers to self-directed learning or a shift of responsibility for learning from teacher to student. Empowerment often is seen either as a prerequisite for this to occur, or as a result of the process." (Shrader, iteslj.org 2003.)

Shortcomings

The main shortcoming of the learner-centered teaching was that the learners' needs were not decided by the learner. Very interestingly the materials were 'learner-centered' but the teaching of it was/is not learner-centered. The villain of the piece was/is the exam-focused class room teaching. Instead of focusing on the long-term objective of gaining knowledge and sharpening the communicative competence, the teachers work for the short-term objective of working for a 'pass' in the exam at the end of the Semester. As N.Krishnaswamy et al. (2000) rightly points out, "At present, English teaching in India is carried on mechanically without any involvement on the part of teachers or learners; the entire exercise is examination-oriented and degree-driven"(Krishnaswamy et.al, 2000 p. v.) This has resulted in a change in the attitude of the learners, who expect their teachers to be 'answer announcers' rather than teachers. This is not to put the blame entirely on the teachers and learners. . This presenter is aware of the enormous pressure built by institutions to produce better results. The teachers are pressurized by some Managements to produce the fixed percentage of results in the subject/s taught by them. In case, a teacher produces results below that benchmark set by the Managements, he/she faces dismissal or pay cut. Obviously, such an undue importance given to University Exam results and 'Learner Empowerment' cannot go together. The obsession with the results is the biggest hindrance and this is the first barrier to be broken.

Materials

Of the three 'M's of English Language Teaching, i.e., Man (teachers), Materials and Methods, Materials serve a pivotal role. But materials can't be expected to perform miracles. Materials are printed papers and it is the teacher and the learner who have to breathe life into them. A language text is a pretext for teaching communicative skills. It is a poor approach to learn the text *per se* ; looking at the text as a tool for taking the examination and getting a pass is poorer than the earlier one. If there is





no argument, counter argument, discussion, the text doesn't serve its purpose. A text should be motivating the learner and it should attract him/her to have an interaction. The interaction between the learners and the text book is a prerequisite for the success of the text. A learner has to be actively engaged and he/she has to get the pressure to communicate. Krishnaswamy, N. et.al expresses anguish over the quality of the materials: "English teaching in India still follows the Macaulayan plan of 1835 and, even after fifty years of political independence, we do not seem to think that our own achievements, problems, values and heritage are fit enough subject matter for teaching English in our country. As a result, there is neither emotional involvement nor critical or creative thinking in our language teaching programmes". (N. Krishnaswamy et.al. 2000: p. vi) A text book is not simply meant for explanation of meaning and the semantic content. It is not a mere linguistic object. "Learners will improve their language skills by using their text books as useful instruments for provoking discussions, cultural debate and a two way flow of information.." (Vidyavathi, 2012 : 130)

Emphasizing the need for making the learner work on the texts, the applied linguists appeal to the teachers 'to expose the learner to the text and not to expose the text to the learner.' So far as the Engineering colleges are concerned, in the name of ESP, the text books are prepared with more of scientific or technical stuff. The materials are factual and some applied linguists point out that they are 'frozen' and not dynamic. The questions to be answered are not open ended. They do not generate serious discussions in the class. They simply add quantitatively to the knowledge store of the students without sharpening their creative and critical ability. Even this knowledge addition takes place only when the text book is used in the classroom. Their obsession with results forces the teachers to depend more on workbooks than textbooks.

Empowerment and Materials

Learner empowerment presupposes a shift of responsibility for learning from the teacher to the student, as pointed out already. The materials have to stimulate the learners and involve them in the learning process. This can be achieved through inviting the learners for lively discussions, arguments and counter arguments based on the text. In the context of the Engineering colleges and ESP Texts, it is difficult to provoke such discussions as the texts deal with scientific facts. Taking this limitation into account, applied linguists point out that ESP is not a special English but a special way of using English. They question the use of technical material which does not facilitate lively discussion in the class room.

When teachers face a barrier in the form of the prescribed text book, they have to overcome it by introducing additional materials which are amenable to a lively presentation, and discussion in the classroom. These will be supplementary or additional materials, which will allow the learners enough freedom to act and react. Newspaper clippings, simple short stories and other stimulating materials are to be used in the classroom.

At present, some institutions follow two sets of materials. One is the prescribed text book and the other containing practice materials to face the Verbal Ability Tests conducted by MNCs and other





Recruiting Boards. Instead of two different text books, we can think in terms of combining both in the form of a single text book and offer the course in the II Semester. The stimulating additional materials in the form of short stories, novels etc., will expose the learners to a wide variety of context and keep the critical bent of mind ever alive. This is where the empowering materials differ from conventional, ready-made materials.

Empowering materials will change the teaching/learning culture to a great extent. “The classroom will become a discourse arena. Instead of just negotiating the basic progress of a lesson, the lesson will become a series of negotiations” (Mc.Sinclair, 1982:258) An empowered text will be “activity-centered and each lesson has to provide scope for ‘expansion and production’ of language and content as different from conventional texts with lengthy texts, that end up in reduction and reproduction” (Krishnaswamy, N. et.al, 2000: vii)

Some of the colleagues with whom the presenter discussed, Learner Empowerment and Learner Autonomy, expressed their doubts: “Is it not an unattainable ideal?”. The reply given to them was this: “True, it is an ideal, but not unattainable.”

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