

Designing a Textbook for Undergraduate Students to facilitate Relevance, Reflection and Response

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ABSTRACT

One of the major challenges faced by teachers is the of lack of engagement with the textbook among the students. The reason behind this is that the content of the text is of little relevance to the students and is not close to their hearts. Moreover, the language of the text is not accessible to the students and cannot be comprehended by them without a teacher-directed lesson. The present paper shares the parameters used by the researchers in designing a textbook for general English undergraduate students so that it promotes engagement and critical thinking among them. The paper also shares the ways in which classroom instruction was used to help students connect the content of the text to their own lives and also provide opportunities for them to not only develop their vocabulary and communication skills but also their high order thinking skills.

Key terms: *Textbook, Relevance, Engagement, Communication, Vocabulary, Critical Thinking, High Order Thinking Skills*

Introduction

One of the major challenges faced by teachers is the lack of engagement of the students with the text. This stems from the fact that the textbooks prescribed for them are too bland, irrelevant or inaccessible to the students. With such textbooks to read, students are slowly but surely put off by reading in general, and by the textbooks prescribed to them in particular. The

present paper shares the parameters used by the researchers in designing a textbook *Golden Harvest* for general English undergraduate students of RashtrasantTukadojiMaharaj Nagpur University when the opportunity presented itself to them. It also discusses the ways in which the textbook was used so that students could respond to it actively using the tools of collaboration, communication and critical thinking.

Before beginning to cull various kinds of text for the textbook, there were a few parameters that were kept in mind and followed:

Exposure to various types of text genre:

The text genres chosen and their difficulty level were such that it matched the kinds of texts the students would encounter outside their classroom and in various standardized assessments. Since *Golden Harvest* is a textbook for General English which is compulsory for all undergraduate students, care was taken to keep in consideration the needs of the non-English medium students who are linguistically challenged compared to their English medium counterparts.

Although teachers are often led to believe that only fiction is appealing to the students, McEwan (2004) makes a strong case for exposing students to a wide variety of text materials with varying levels of text difficulty. Smolkin and Donovan found that students engaged in more meaning making discourse with their teachers and each other when they were exposed to expository texts (McEwan, 2004). The researchers therefore chose a balance of fictional and non-fictional texts from various sources such as magazines, speeches made in reputed institutes, autobiographies etc.

For instance, the chapter “What India Inc wants” was reproduced from magazine articles written by people in the serious business of recruiting people while “Go, Kiss the World” was a speech delivered by Subroto Bagchi to the class of 2006 at the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore and *A Simple Philosophy* is a speech by

Seethi in response to the US government’s offer to buy their land in 1854. The textbook is a mix of fiction, nonfiction, autobiographical excerpts, poetry and one act plays so that students are exposed to the different characteristics of each form.

Relevance of the text to the readers: One of the most frustrating aspects of reading for the students springs from the fact that the content of the text is of little relevance to them. They can’t help but wonder in what way the matter that they are reading is of relevance or significance to them. As pointed out by Beck and Kosnik (2006), “if students have not had experience relevant to a given idea, they may not be able to deepen its meaning” (19). Williams (2003) points out that there are three doorways that help students gauge that something is relevant to them and thereby prompt high order thinking skills among them. They are “emotions, significance and flow” (17). It is only when the content that students are reading strikes a chord in them can we expect an appropriate triggering of emotion and an involvement in the learning environment. Williams (2003) goes on to point out that these emotions can lead a student to attention, which in turn can lead him/her to learning and memory and thereby to high order thinking.

The researchers while designing the text made sure that there was a connect between the content of the text and the life situations, complexities and the challenges of the students’ lives. For instance, “*A Real Good Smile*”, with a touch of humour, talks about the efforts taken by the character to improve

his body language in order to impress his interviewer and “*What India Inc Wants*” throws into perspective the employability skills expected of job aspirants which helps them connect the matter they are reading to their life outside the classroom. *My Struggle for an Education* shows Booker T Washington’s resolve to educate himself against all odds and his determination to use education as a passport to a better social standing and a better life while the poem *Flowers are red* gives us a peep into the insidious ways in which the education system kills creativity. Dilip Chitre’s *Father Returning Home* draws a vivid picture of a man’s life in an Indian city and the toll it takes on familial relationships.

It was observed that when reading the textbook, the learners could draw on their personal experiences and make personal connections with the text. As pointed out by Tileston (2000), “if we can draw from personal experiences, especially those with emotional ties, we have a greater chance of making the new information relevant to the learner.” This personal connection with the matter in the textbook also played an important role in helping students gain ownership of the learning process and link the ideas they already have to the new learning process.

Connecting to Values: Although a wide range of topics have been chosen for the textbook, a common thread that runs through the content is its focus on moral values and humanistic aspects of life. Given the fact that the target readers of this book are adolescents and young adults, the

textbook aims to enrich their understanding of the world and of themselves and also explores the relevance of these values in their own well being. This aspect of education is emphasized by Sternberg (2003) – “When schools teach for wisdom, they teach students that it is important not just what you know, but how you use what you know— whether you use it for good or bad ends...Students learn to think wisely and understand things from diverse points of view.” (7-8). In keeping with this idea of Sternberg’s wisdom oriented approach, the text gives much food for thought and enough room for engagement in reflection. For instance, in *Go, Kiss the World*, Bagchi gives a very different perspective of success and shares the many values of life that he imbibed from his humble parents. In the same vein, the poem Youssuf talks about the value of forgiveness while Edward Dyer’s *My Mind to me a Kingdom is* talks about the power of the mind and glorifies the concept of contentment. Kipling’s *If* gives concrete steps as to what a man should do in order to live a life of integrity and wisdom.

Raising social consciousness through the text: The researchers, while selecting texts, also chose to focus on topics that would engage the learners with issues requiring social consciousness and critical thinking. For instance, the story *The Thief* which shows how when bestowed with compassion and trust, even a hardened criminal can be transformed into a pure soul, can raise the issue of punishment as a deterrent for any form of crime. Similarly, Gaboriau’s *An Accursed House* shows how people get

carried away by the rumours around them and let them come in the way of making a fair assessment of the situation. This brings to fore the role played by the media in influencing the views of the people.

Similarly, Sisodia's *The Last Salvation* and Langston Hughe's *Drama for a Winter Night* give the learners a glimpse of an ugly but real aspect of the world- the apathy and callousness with which the vulnerable section of the population is treated by others. The environmental wisdom that Seathl's speech *A Simple Philosophy* holds has more relevance today than ever before as this planet of ours is on the verge of environmental and ecological disaster due to heavy industrialization with many human rights violation taking place. These issues were discussed when students got together to find the binary concepts (for instance, powerful versus powerless, privileged versus underprivileged) and recognize the content which embodies these concepts.

Focus on developing students' richness of the language: The focus of the textbook is as much on developing accuracy as it is on developing fluency. The vocabulary section deals mostly with idioms, phrases and collocations that can be used in their daily interaction. These language items are reinforced by giving them practice in meaningful situations so that they become a part of the learner's active vocabulary. The grammar exercises have been designed in order to give practice to students for the assimilation of key grammar points. The reading comprehension exercises focus not just on questions with direct answers but

also interpretive ones which call on learners' ability to read between the lines and also activate their background knowledge. The focus of the reading comprehension passages is also to equip students with the reading skills of skimming, scanning, summarizing, making inferences etc. The aim of the language exercises at the end of the chapter is to not only make the learners proficient with the skills of reading, writing, grammar usage and vocabulary but also to add richness to their language and make them sensitive to the nuances of the language.

The section below deals with the motivating and productive ways in which the textbook was used in the classroom.

Facilitating the application of ideas and concepts to their own lives: When teaching this textbook in the language classroom, the researchers assumed the role of a facilitator rather than an information giver. A safe and secure environment was provided to the students so that the learners share and discuss their ideas, beliefs and experiences. The topics in the book provided enough opportunity to help build a class community. For instance, when discussing the poem "Flowers are red" which deals with the education system, almost all students were unanimous in sharing that the Indian education system stifles creativity. The students got an opportunity to connect their ideas to what they were reading when they were asked to come up with their idea of an ideal education system. It is activities such as these that allowed the students to pull out ideas and concepts from what they have

read and apply it to their own lives.

According to Williams (2003), this skill of applying is crucial that finally makes the material meaningful to students' everyday life.

Facilitating a dialogic discussion among learners: In the course of reading the chapters, some learners would agree with an idea promoted by the writers while there would be some who would disagree. For instance, in the poem *Youssufand the story The Thief* the idea of using compassion and forgiveness as tools to transform the lives of people who have taken to crime is promoted. This concept was not agreeable to some who believed that people should be made to pay for their wrong deeds. The learners would then be divided into groups representing two views and each group was asked to persuade the other to change their minds. The learners were at times made to follow the IPSO (Issue, Position, Support and Outcome) format for the idea that they are discussing. This helps them think critically about different concepts and develop deep understanding and critical thinking.

Facilitating collaborative work: Students were given enough opportunities to work collaboratively in order to help them build their self belief in critical reflection. The idea was to help them explicitly articulate their ideas, reflections and share them with their fellow learners. This collaborative learning was also used in order to promote mutual helpfulness, cooperation and active learning among the learners. The students when working in heterogeneous groups also got immense opportunities to learn from each

other. After presenting the information to the students, they were first asked to share their ideas and reflections in pairs. They were then asked to work in small groups and then gradually move on to bigger groups. This kind of social interaction helped the students get multiple perspectives on a topic and also promotes the intellectual standards of intellectual fair mindedness, intellectual confidence and intellectual humility. Thus students were required to develop their high order thinking skills by brainstorming, synthesizing their ideas, responding personally to what they have read, summarizing the content, applying what they have read to the contexts of their own lives, critically analyzing a subject or topic through argumentation, discussion and debate. The various student accountability tasks which they were required to perform were summarizing, retelling, organizing, thinking aloud, defending their stand, brainstorming, lateral thinking, peer teaching, evaluating etc. As Wells (1994) puts it, "As the learner appropriates the knowledge and procedures encountered in interaction with others, he or she transforms them, constructing his or her own personal version. But in the process, he or she is also transformed." (8)

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Dr. M.L. Tickoo - A Tribute

Dr. M.L. Tickoo is a legend in the history of English language teaching in India. His demise has created a deep, unfathomable chasm in the hearts of all teachers, students and lovers of English. As an unparalleled scholar, a writer par excellence, a teacher beyond compare, and one of the finest human beings, his name is written in letters of gold in our memory.

A Kashmiri by birth, Dr. Tickoo completed his PhD in London. He was the head of the Department of Materials Production at the CIEFL, Hyderabad. Later he was invited to head the Regional Language Centre in Singapore. For a scholar of his calibre, there could be no retirement. He was always in great demand, globally, as well as locally.

Dr. Tickoo’s favourite haunt was the CIEFL library. His day was not complete without a visit to the library. In fact, he had turned his house into a mini library. Every morning, he and his wife, Dr. Champa, started the day, not with a cup of tea, but with a book in hand! Any new publication in his field had to be read. His amazing scholarship proved an inspiration to one and all.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that that Dr. Tickoo was the Pitamaha of materials production. It is impossible to keep track of the number of books he has written. The Gulmohar series of school textbooks has stood the test of time for more than half a century and bears testimony to his power of feeling the pulse of learners.

If research in ELT has taken deep roots in this country, it is largely due to the inspiration of doyens in the field, like Dr. Tickoo. As a guru, he mesmerised his scholars and enticed them into pursuing research in ELT. His love for his subject, his concern for his scholars, turned research into a labour of love for himself as well as his students.

It was a great honour for us in ELTAI, when Dr. Tickoo was kind enough to accept our Eminent English Teacher Award. It was a momentous occasion for us. His interest in ELTAI and concern for its growth are unforgettable. We, at ELTAI, believe that he is still with us, for, “To live in the hearts of those we leave behind, is not to die.”

Dr V Saraswathi
Former Editor, JELT (India)