

STUDENT EMPOWERMENT, AFFECTIVE FACTORS, AND ENHANCED LINGUISTIC OUTPUT IN THE BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASS

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Abstract

The paper presents a qualitative research documenting a non-prescriptive teaching approach used extensively with third year undergraduate students of the International Business and Economics School in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, and intended to help them feel empowered as they transition from the skill-getting stage to the skill-using one. The paper highlights a constructivist teaching approach that facilitates student empowerment and generates enhanced linguistic output in the process. The theoretical framework outlined in the first part of the paper is followed by pedagogical highlights and classroom best practices that clearly demonstrate the degree of student empowerment that the affective factors in conjunction with this non-prescriptive teaching approach of choice induce in the language learners.

Keywords: student empowerment, holistic approach, student self-efficacy, affective management.

1. The context

The paper is inspired by the observations of third year student language behaviour in the Business class that I have been able to make over the years as part of my teaching commitments with the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. Third year students are a unique breed in that they are terminal students who devote a significant part of their time in the third and last year of their undergraduate study program to extensive research into the topic they have selected for their graduation paper, which is then followed by the intensive writing process at the end of which their graduation paper is born. The process tends to span over 6 to 7 months, from mid October to spring and it is unprecedented in academic scope, complexity, and demands on the students.

As such, third year students can easily come across as consistently engrossed in work on their graduation paper which soon becomes their number 1 priority, therefore approaching the other academic subjects with less arduous interest than

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the curriculum and the respective teaching staff envisage. In plain English, third year students can be often perceived as somewhat blasé and hard to focus on academic topics that are not directly connected to their graduation paper. The focus of the following sections will be on what pedagogical solutions the Business English teacher can resort to in order to facilitate student learning and increase their specialist linguistic output during this third year of study.

2. Theoretical framework

The concept of student empowerment has been around for decades. Although it appears to benefit language students of all ages, it lends itself particularly well to teaching adult learners as it spurs “teachers to find ways of teaching, which promote the capabilities, resourcefulness, self-awareness, self-direction, and inner strengths of the learner” (Underhill, Barduhn, 1990: 1). With adult learners distinctly self directed and self aware, I have experimented with large-scale empowerment as the teaching approach of choice, particularly with third-year students, especially in the form of attempting to activate student language skills by means of a range of classroom strategies that involve cooperation, interaction, experiential learning, student-centredness and a holistic vision that is called upon to integrate the students’ multiple skills and experiences, academic and extracurricular.

As early as 1987, Cummins stated that “Pedagogical approaches that empower students encourage them to assume greater control over setting their own learning goals and to collaborate actively with each other in achieving these goals” (Cummins, 1986: 28), emphasizing the learning benefits of the “reciprocal”, interaction-oriented pedagogy over the traditional “transmission-oriented” classroom practices.

The holistic approach, also referred to as the “additive approach” (Underhill, Barduhn, 1990: 3), contributes to student empowerment by encouraging them to incorporate their full identities – linguistic, cultural, professional, experiential, etc. – into the learning experience, thus tapping into their own “inner strengths, talents and vulnerabilities” (*idem*). Discovering the multiple resources each participant in the learning environment provided by the Business English class brings to the learning process, and then accessing these resources in the class will certainly enrich the quality of the linguistic interactions and the students’ very commitment to the learning process; their spontaneity, playfulness, and creativity will enhance the overall quality of the interactions and the end result of the learning activity.

The above picture describes the empowered students approaching their learning activities with gusto, that is with strong motivation, and confident about their skills, thereby eager to tackle the assignment. This resonates with the 1996 definition of

student empowerment offered by Frymier, Shulman and Houser, in which empowerment is “the process of creating intrinsic task motivation by providing an environment and tasks which increase one’s sense of self-efficacy and energy.” (Frymier, Shulman, Houser, 1996: 183). However,

Unfortunately, ‘empowered’ is not how many of our students approach learning. They sigh, think about how hard it’s going to be, think about how they aren’t going to like it, worry that they’re probably not smart enough, wonder if there might be some easier way, and wish they didn’t have to undertake such an arduous task. And if they do try and don’t instantly succeed, they give up quickly. We’ve all seen how students who aren’t empowered respond to new learning tasks. (Weimer, 2014: 1)

In order to address the above situation, teachers are wise to plan learning activities that build on at least one, ideally several of the four dimensions of empowerment, commonly known to the teaching community as:

- designing tasks meaningful to the student, thereby impacting student motivation and, implicitly, the quality of the students’ work;
- developing tasks that are at the right level of competence, so that students can perform the task effectively, thereby deriving a sense of being qualified, capable and competent;
- designing tasks that give students a degree of choice. This could materialize in arrange of forms. It could be that the learning task allows the students to decide how they will accomplish the task goals or even what the task goals are.
- developing authentic tasks that allow students to have an impact and make a difference, since their work matters and is of consequence.

Teachers can play a role in empowering students. <...> They make the tasks clear and explain what steps to take and in what order. They do it by identifying relevant resources and they do it by supporting student efforts. Then, after they’ve done it for a while, they start asking students to identify the actions they need to take, in what order, as well as locate whatever resources they may need to complete the task successfully. Teachers celebrate successes with students, even small ones, and teachers are there showing students how to make learning experiences out of failures. Students are empowered by good coaching. (Weimer, 2014: 2)

Constructivism emphasizes the integrative nature of learning and the holistic approach underlying it. If we accept that new understanding results from “a combination of prior learning, new information, and readiness to learn” and that “individuals make choices about what new ideas to accept and how to fit them into their established views of the world” (Vico, 1995: 1), then student empowerment has a significant role to play. After all, “when students are empowered, they learn more, and they learn better” (Weimer, 2014: 2) and high student empowerment is considered to generate high standards, therefore a virtuous circle all educators will welcome.

3. Pedagogical highlights

How do we as educators actually make student empowerment happen in our classes? If we agree that student empowerment is “student ownership of learning” (Haynes, 2011: 1) then we need to help “students take control of their own education” (*ibidem*). To many educators the prospect looks unsettling, a perfect recipe for chaos and missed opportunities for learning. “Giving power to my students? Won’t that mean school days full of texting, non-educational movies and zero learning?” (*ibidem*).

As both research and the classroom practice demonstrate, giving students power in the classroom – and the responsibility that comes with it – is a productive way to help them grow into mature, responsible and empowered participants in the learning process, and to act accordingly. Four main directions of student engagement appear to be particularly effective in helping students develop a sense of academic empowerment: they range from putting students in charge to involving them in evaluative work, to making meaningful use of technology for learning purposes in the classroom included and ultimately to expanding their sense of responsibility and awareness of the impact they are able to generate.

A quick survey of the directions listed above will highlight the many techniques and strategies that empowering educators use in order to facilitate learning and to develop learners who invest themselves in the process, thereby obtaining superior learning outcomes. For example, putting students in charge could include a class conversation on student expectations of the course and, implicitly, of their learning goals. This will naturally lead to inviting students’ opinions on the best route to the desired destination in terms of the class activities, assignments, homework policies, and more. As the classroom practice consistently proves, “giving students the power to choose creates a sense of ownership over the learning.” (Svitak, 2012: 1)

Since learning relies on the partnership between educator and student and, by virtue of this, has a complex and strong social dimension, student empowerment will be further re-enforced by involving students in multiple evaluation activities: the self evaluation of the learning progress achieved, the self review of one’s own work, peer review and finally teacher review of the same piece of work. Reflective practitioners who want to turn the students’ learning experience in their class into a more in-depth and democratic process can turn this three-fold evaluation cycle into a student empowering tool, which is also able to highlight one’s personal bias in grading. Since I personally find the approach extremely productive, in what follows I will provide its full description:

Take an essay, lab report, or other comparable assignment. Create a rubric for it. When the assignment is due, provide students with the rubric and ask them to

grade themselves. Then give each student another copy of the rubric and have them evaluate a classmate's paper. Then collect the assignment and use the rubric to evaluate it yourself. Have students compare the three rubrics – the self-evaluation, the peer evaluation, and your evaluation – and ask questions.

This can help students recognize where they may be too hard (or too easy) on themselves and it may help you recognize attitudes in yourself that impact your grading. Average the results of the three rubrics to get a grade so students realize their self-evaluation actually matters. (Haynes, 2011: 2)

The fact that the students perceive their activity as meaningful and with an impact is perceived as empowering and thereby capable to broaden their sense of commitment and responsibility for their own learning. Task authenticity and relevance are hardly an issue in the Business Communication class where students acquire knowledge and hone skills that are applicable to the real world. The concepts and skills students learn in the Business English course are further consolidated by practice inspired by their extracurricular activities, volunteerism, leadership service, pre-service training in the form of internships etc. Class debates on real-life issues could also convey the message to students that what they have learned can help them make a difference; after all, their work is having an impact!

The meaningful use of technology in the Business English class can thus become an additional form of student empowerment: encouraging students to use their mobile devices in class, instead of insisting that they turn them off, could “open up a world of new learning opportunities” (Svitak, 2012: 2), with the educator thus confirming that “learning can happen anytime, anywhere” (*ibidem*).

To sum it up, empowering students requires a shift in perspective and in the *locus* of pedagogical control, with the educator facilitating learning and creating options for the students to choose from, instead of imposing, in a steady process of constant adjustment and harmonization between student expectations and institutional demands. This section on the best practices for empowering students and inducing superior learning outcomes in the process finds a perfect conclusion in the following quote which highlights some additional benefits for the teachers willing to break the traditional mold and invite increased student responsibility for their own learning success.

Ultimately, empowering students is about a realization: teachers and students have a lot to learn from each other. After all, as the pioneering American librarian John Cotton Dana once said, “Who dares to teach must never cease to learn.” Empowering students helps us all do just that. (Svitak, 2012: 2)

4. Affective factors and their impact on student learning and empowerment

Student empowerment bears significantly on the affective factors which “include motivation, self-efficacy, tolerance of ambiguity, and anxiety, among others” (Ehrman, Leaver, Oxford, 2003: 1). By engaging in intrinsically motivating tasks, which students perceive as challenging, therefore interesting, they may derive a sense of enjoyment of their own competence in handling the task. This sense of self-efficacy – on account of which “students may experience *flow*, an in-the-moment, optimal sensation of enjoyment and competence” (Ehrman, Leaver, Oxford, 2003: 2) – is a major ingredient of empowerment as it fuels the students’ drive to carry on with their learning process and to maintain their high standards.

Providing and maintaining student motivation is to a large extent the teacher’s realm and its impact on the learning process and on student empowerment can never be underestimated.

By providing students with learning experiences that meet their needs for competence, relatedness, self-esteem, and enjoyment, teachers can increase their students’ intrinsic motivation; and by giving students choices, teachers can often enhance both students’ persistence and sense of autonomy. (Ehrman, Leaver, Oxford, 2003: 2)

Student empowerment is intimately connected to the affective factors and psychological research demonstrates, times and again, that “if people believe they have no power to produce results, they will not attempt to make things happen. Such beliefs influence the amount of effort people put forth and how long they continue to pursue tasks, including learning tasks, in the face of obstacles and failures.” (Ehrman, Leaver, Oxford, 2003: 3). Extrapolating, we could argue that when students feel they are not empowered, therefore they have no say on the formal learning process conducted in class, they may choose not to capitalize on their self-efficacy defined as “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Ehrman, Leaver, Oxford, 2003: 3), which will ultimately impact their self esteem, which turns out to be so closely related to the self-efficacy dimension of their personality.

Since the very goal of student empowerment is democratizing the learning process and, implicitly, the student-teacher relationship, with a view to maximizing student learning, the following conclusion reached by Ehrman, Leaver and Oxford in 2003 in relation to the affective factors is as valid and productive today as it was then.

In order to enable the most learners possible to learn as much as they can, we need to give them every advantage, including a program that enables them to start out in a relatively comfortable and stress-free way. That means giving them the opportunity to learn in their preferred styles, rather than always outside of them,

which can happen in the interest of keeping classrooms paced to the majority or to a standard curriculum. (Ehrman, Leaver, Oxford, 2003: 4)

It may be safe at this point to state that student empowerment is underlain primarily by the teacher's vision and their methodological choices, with the affective factors re-enforcing or inhibiting the former's effect on student learning process. The description of successful learners provided in what follows has much in common with the picture of empowered learners outlined in the earlier sections of the paper, which further speaks to the relevance of the affective factors on student empowerment.

Ehrman, Leaver, and Oxford highlight the psychological profile of the successful language learners (2003:3). According to extensive psychological research, these learners possess a number of distinctive features that account for their successful approach to language learning. According to Ehrman, Leaver, and Oxford they show self-efficacy and they routinely assume responsibility for their success as language learners, in the words of Ehrman and her colleagues, they „have an internal locus of control” (*idem*); moreover, they have developed intrinsic motivation and a positive attitude to the language learning experience and, finally, they show a high degree of autonomy and self-direction.

Based on the evidence above, we could actually equate “highly motivated, successful learner” with empowered learner and the affective factors will turn out to be equally indispensable to learner success. Student empowerment for learning success depends, at the student's end of the spectrum, on learning styles and learning strategies which, no matter how individualized, appear to be intertwined with the affective domain. As such, they become inseparable ingredients of learning.

Paraphrasing Ehrman, Leaver, and Oxford's conclusion on the language learning aptitude, we could infer that student empowerment “is a ‘complex ‘nexus’” (Ehrman, Leaver, Oxford, 2003: 5) of methodological decisions by the teacher, student personality and affective factors, particularly motivation, self-efficacy, and what Ehrman, Leaver, and Oxford call “affective self-management” (Ehrman *et al.* 2003: 5), jointly contributing to the students' enhanced linguistic output in the business English class.

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