

## TEACHER AND STUDENT EMPOWERMENT FOR IMPROVED LEARNING OUTCOMES. REFLECTIONS ON A ROMANIAN GRADUATE STUDY APPLICATION

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### *Abstract*

*The paper explores teacher and student empowerment and their respective impact on the language learning outcomes, to finally illustrate the benefits of the approach with a Romanian application involving graduate students. The application highlights the challenges and the opportunities inherent in the approach and leads to the pedagogically exciting conclusion that, overall, student empowerment as enhanced student responsibility and engagement with the learning process and teacher empowerment as comprehensive teacher autonomy appear to be conducive to innovative teaching strategies, renewed student motivation and zest for learning.*

**Keywords:** holistic pedagogical approach, personal investment, self-efficacy, increased motivation, enhanced learning outcomes

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### *1. The setting*

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The present paper is a sequel to the article “Student Empowerment, Affective Factors, and Enhanced Linguistic Output in the Business English Class” published in early 2016. As such, it changes perspective slightly by expanding the scope of the previous research and adding a new dimension: teacher empowerment, so as to ultimately explore the impact of both teacher and student empowerment in the context of a graduate program. Given the exceptionally high standards of the graduate students in the program and their unique status in relation to the graduate learning process – which will be thoroughly contextualized and documented in the paper – they turned out to welcome and encourage innovative pedagogical approaches. In other words, the specific situation of the graduate program in question - that is the changing student profile - invited innovative perspectives in the teaching process, if not requesting it imperatively.

The empowering approach employed with graduate students that is being presented and reflected upon in this paper resonates with Drucker’s views on education:

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“Education must focus on the strengths and talents of learners so that they can excel in whatever it is that they do well ... one cannot build performance on weakness, even correct ones. One can build performance only on strengths” (Duhon-Haynes, 1996: 4).

This is precisely what the empowered teacher together with the empowered graduate students set to accomplish, originally intuitively and building on their teaching experience, afterwards backed by both the literature on empowerment as academic enhancer and the conversations among the reflective practitioners involved in the happy experiment. As the earlier statement suggests, the graduate students who became empowered are teaching staff primarily in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies and other higher education institutions and they are enrolled in a unique master program, taught entirely in English, designed to exponentially enhance their teaching and research abilities.

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## ***2. Theoretical underpinnings***

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Empowerment can mean different things to different people since “empowerment can be considered either as a goal or as a process. Empowerment as a goal emphasises having control, but empowerment as a process emphasises determining the goals and means necessary to create professional relations” (Balkar, 2015: 205). From an academic perspective, empowered students are fully committed to the learning process, therefore they will be “intellectually, socially, physically, and emotionally engaged with the content of the course, with the teacher, and with fellow students” (Bryer and Seigler, 2012: 430).

In the classroom practice, student empowerment translates into a set of principles underlying the learning process. Bryer and Seigler organize these principles as follows:

*Functionally, empowerment, we suggest, means (a) granting control of course content to students, (b) permitting students to co-create the subject matter content with each other and with the teacher, (c) enabling the voice of students, (d) enabling choice for students, and (e) enabling creativity with students.* (Bryer and Seigler, 2012: 430)

Student empowerment has been documented to bring about beneficial changes on student behalf from a two-fold perspective that is the student’s perspective and the teacher’s, as follows:

*On the student side, they [the benefits] are (1) develop ethical reasoning and judgement in complex contexts; (2) develop leadership and management skills in complex contexts; and (3) develop ownership in the learning process. On the*

*instructor side, they are (1) provide space to allow the teacher to show passion and engage that passion with students; (2) ensure buy-in to course objectives; and (3) ensure buy-in to course content delivery methods.* (Bryer and Seigler, 2012: 431)

With the corollary that “Together, these rationales [for student empowerment] reflect Dewey’s (1916) vision of higher education, in which institutions – through their teaching and service – promote democracy, encourage citizenship, and serve community” (*idem*).

A final word on student empowerment: if one considers the enhanced student responsibility that comes with empowerment and the time-honored perception that “Happy dependence is a pleasant state for many adolescents. If little is asked of them, their risk of failure is likewise small” (McQuillan, 2005: 14), then clearly not all students will be willing to embrace student empowerment at all times. When “students view school as essentially a social institution and often seek to limit responsibility so that they can realize their social interests” (*idem*) then empowerment may be a very low priority. But that was certainly not the case of the graduate students who have been empowered in my class and who thrived on the experience, as the paper will later explain.

While student empowerment has focused the attention of researchers for the past decades, the concept of teacher empowerment is developing as its valuable counterpart and necessary premise: by analogy with student empowerment, “teacher empowerment is defined according to the power that teachers have in participating in the decision-making processes related to school wide learning and teaching processes” (Balkar, 2015: 205). In 1992, Short and Rinehart identified six dimensions as defining for teacher empowerment; almost 25 years later these dimensions continue to stay relevant. The six dimensions that define teacher empowerment include the following: “participation of teachers in decision-making processes, professional development of teachers, teacher status, self-efficacy of teachers, teacher autonomy, and teacher impact on others and [on] educational issues at school” (Balkar, 2015: 205).

Empirical evidence highlights the fact that empowerment has multiple benefits when offered as an opportunity to the teaching staff: a catalyst and motivator, empowerment sparks teacher autonomy and creativity, thereby enhancing teacher job satisfaction. Researchers are unanimous in this respect, according to Balkar’s survey:

*Beach (1996) stated that members of organisations feel a greater desire to take action when they are empowered. Teacher empowerment contributes to the sustainability of the professional development of teachers, via the autonomy it supplies to the teachers and the positive impacts it makes on their job satisfaction. Enabling teachers to make their own decisions related to the teaching processes*

*within the scope of teacher empowerment also serves their professional development (Hine and Lavery, 2014). (Balkar, 2015: 206)*

As the teaching practice demonstrates times and again, empowering teachers serves the learning process in a range of ways. Teachers working in an empowering school culture appear to have an increased sense of confidence together with the autonomy they need in order to take risks in innovating and experimenting with alternative teaching approaches; in addition, the teachers feel safe about the innovation and experimentation they are injecting in the learning process when the learning environment shows tolerance for failure and an interest in deconstructing it so as to identify the premises for improvement and to lay the foundation of the forthcoming success.

Teacher autonomy which capitalizes on the teaching staff's pedagogical practical expertise and theoretical foundations, together with their flexibility and ability to adapt and respond promptly to the students' changing needs, is the cornerstone of empowerment. Balkar points out that

*Peterson (1993) stated that 'willingness to take intelligent risks, an openness to new ideas and the willingness to experiment' (p. 14) are necessary to create an empowered culture. The willingness of teachers to take risks by being open to new ideas depends without doubt on being autonomous. ... Therefore, the empowering culture should first enable an autonomous working environment. ... Similarly, Blase and Blase stated that encouraging individual teacher autonomy is among the strategies that influence the sense of empowerment in teachers. (Balkar, 2015: 218)*

We can conclude that when teachers are allowed or even encouraged to be autonomous and make decisions about the educational process, they will unleash their creativity: spurred by their solid theoretical background and inspired by their own reflections on the classroom practice, the teachers can grow wings that can sweep them off the trodden path as they turn into explorers and innovators. The innovative approaches that teacher autonomy can bring about can thus foster quality teaching and superior learning outcomes.

The OECD Report issued as a guide for higher education institutions looks upon innovative teaching as a comprehensive response to specific contexts ranging from changing student profiles to new job opportunities in the labour market. The innovative teaching that teacher empowerment can induce is reported to have an all-pervasive impact:

*it can involve the content of the programmes offered, pedagogy, student support, student assessment and/or the learning environment. Innovation typically requires experimentation with alternative pedagogical approaches and alternative teaching practices that mostly occur at the programme or class level. ... Significant*

*innovations need careful pre-implementation scrutiny and ongoing monitoring for unexpected drawbacks.* (Henard and Roseveare, 2012: 33)

Since empowered teachers and students may come up with new teaching patterns in response to a changing learning environment, higher education institutions that aim to respond to new challenges, to find creative solutions, and to “deliver learning outcomes more relevant to corporate and societal demands, including skills such as critical thinking, self-management, teamwork and communication” (Henard and Roseveare, 2012: 33), have developed policies to encourage innovation, both by teachers and by students. To this end, teachers and students are stimulated to become active innovators by means of a number of policies and practices. The top three – as documented in the OECD Guide for Higher Education Institutions – are the following:

- *Encourage experimentation and innovation in teaching practices, while recognising that experiments that fail are also important learning opportunities.*
- *Foster exploratory approaches and incremental changes, including pilot testing and careful evaluation of innovative teaching methods.*
- *Involve students in the design, implementation and evaluation of innovative teaching and learning experiments.* (Henard and Roseveare, 2012: 33-34).

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### ***3. A Romanian graduate application***

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Based on the practice in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, it is safe to state that student empowerment is productive with undergraduate students and graduate students alike. Since adult learners are self-directed and self-aware, student empowerment turns out to be exceptionally relevant in their case as it determines “teachers to find ways of teaching, which promote the capabilities, resourcefulness, self-awareness, self-direction, and inner strength of the learner” (Underhill and Barduhn, 1990: 1).

In my teaching activity with graduate students I have particularly used the holistic approach to student empowerment, so as to integrate the graduate students’ range of experiences, both academic and professional, as well as their multiple skills. Underhill and Barduhn refer to this holistic approach as the “additive approach” (Underhill, Barduhn, 1990: 3) and they look upon it as quintessential to the student empowerment process by encouraging the students to integrate their full identity, multi-tiered as it is, that is professional, cultural, linguistic, etc., with the learning experience. As a result, the empowered students are able to activate what Underhill and Barduhn call their “inner strengths, talents, and vulnerabilities” (*idem*).

The empowering strategies I implemented in the graduate class the design of which relied extensively on student empowerment were inspired by the definition of

student empowerment worked out in 1996, according to which empowerment in its most generic form, and student empowerment included, 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 and Houser, 1996: 183).

Inspired by Weimar’s work and his conclusions that “when students are empowered, they learn more and they learn better” (Weimar, 2014: 2), I took literally Haynes’ approach to student empowerment as “student ownership of learning” (Haynes, 2011: 1). As such, the pedagogical choices I made for this particular graduate class were intended to help the students invest themselves in the process, thereby generating enhanced learning outcomes. In addition, with students’ agreement and based on our comprehensive conversations and in-depth discussion of the learning itineraries they could opt for, we intuitively followed in Svitak’s footsteps when she stated that “giving students the power to choose creates a sense of ownership over learning” (Svitak, 2012: 1).

In the particular case of the graduate class under focus, student empowerment involved a welcome shift in perspective and in the *locus* of pedagogical control that the students fully cherished. As mentioned earlier, the students in the graduate program which has provided fertile ground to my student empowerment initiatives and piloting are all teaching staff in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. Most of them are in the early days of their academic career, but others are seasoned academics, as advanced in their academic careers as associate or full professors. They all have decided to register for the Educational Research Master program which is taught exclusively in English, both as a way to upgrade their language standards and to learn or brush up the research and academic skills they require for academic writing and publication. As a result, they had the perfect profile for being successfully empowered.

In terms of language standards, this select graduate contingent with 15 to 18 members attending the classes regularly ranges from B1, but with a lot of potential, to C1, in multiple instances verging on C2, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The students in this innovative graduate program come, as a rule, from all the 11 schools in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, which means that each group of students will include a range of specialists in statistics, public administration, computer science, marketing, management, and the like. A tiny minority of the students will come from other higher education institutions in Romania. So these unique students brought to our class of Business English for Academic and Research Work a solid expertise in their specific fields, knowledge of the learning process and the teaching strategies that can foster it, as well as a drive for excellence.

In addition, I soon found out that all of them were teaching full loads, if not handling multiple loads. Given their tight agendas and the innumerable professional demands on their time, alongside the constraints and pressures they were juggling, it soon became apparent that relevance of the teaching content and strategies, together with task authenticity were cornerstones of their learning motivation. The situation was complex and I realized that no matter what teaching content I should bring to class, there would always be little chance for me to be able to focus everybody's attention and generate learning across our whole group, while adjusting and harmonizing student needs and expectations with institutional demands.

In this complex learning context with multiple stakes in it, focusing student attention on intrinsically motivating tasks appeared to be the solution of choice. As the teaching experience shows, students look upon intrinsically motivating tasks as challenging that is interesting. Moreover, such tasks induce in students a sense of enjoyment of their own competence in handling the task successfully, also referred to as self-efficacy which is a landmark outcome of student empowerment. As a result of this sense of self-efficacy "students may experience *flow*, an in-the-moment, optimal sensation of enjoyment and competence" (Ehrman, Leaver and Oxford, 2003: 2) which is responsible for the students' drive to continue to learn and maintain high academic standards.

Given the academic profile of the graduate students in my group, I soon came to see the depth and relevance of the following statement by Ehrman, Leaver, and Oxford:

*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 and Oxford, 2003: 2)

The graduate students I worked with definitely corresponded to the successful language learner's profile put forth by Ehrman, Leaver, and Oxford. Not only that they "have an internal locus of control" (Ehrman, Leaver, Oxford, 2003: 3), but 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" (Arsene, 2016: 219) that rounds off what Ehrman, Leaver, and Oxford call their "affective self-management" (Ehrman, Leaver and Oxford, 2003: 5)

The empowering approach I adopted with this class, after mature consideration, extensive reading, reflection and professional discussion with the program director and the graduate students themselves relied on giving the students the opportunity to introduce the group to their own specialism by means of a TED presentation

they were expected to pick, prepare and present to the class, and ultimately coordinate the conversations around it. The project was adopted enthusiastically by the group who cherished the opportunity to autonomously select a TED conference that they found relevant and telling to their area of expertise which thus they had the opportunity to highlight extensively.

The approach allowed all the self-direction they needed and amply demonstrated their professional standards, self-efficacy, and competence. They all prepared their presentations thoroughly and relished the opportunity to bring in their professional expertise. The approach galvanized the class and instilled a sense of excitement and joy in the participants who all had the chance to guide the group through their own professional territory. As a result, what were initially overworked course participants who appeared to be attending the class primarily to meet the attendance requirements for course completion in a context in which it seemed I could never possibly find the common denominator of the group so as to motivate them all and maintain their drive for learning, were magically transformed: my originally blasé group turned into eager participants, looking forward to the opportunity to be enriched by their colleagues' presentations and TED videos and, ultimately, to enrich them in their turn.

Emulation played its part and the quality of the presentations soared, to everybody's enjoyment. Attendance improved dramatically, course participants were adjusting their agendas to make sure they would be in class for their colleagues' surprise presentations. The topic of the presentations was initially familiar only to the student who was due to present and to me. A year later I still remember the presentation and the video offered by a graduate student who teaches in the Agriculture department and who chose to show us some very creative, out of the box approaches to food production and supply. Another memorable presentation was made by the student employed in the Statistics department who painted a most creative picture of her specialism by showing us a TED video by a world-famous statistician from Sweden whose presentation had been viewed more than five million times.

Thanks to student empowerment, the group of graduate students turned into a community of "learners helping each other to transform latent capabilities into active powers for the enhancement of all" (Duhon-Haynes, 1996: 6).

In retrospect, I realize that my focus at the time was to generate student engagement through empowerment and, additionally, excitement for learning. In the early stages of student empowerment, as it materialized in the graduate class last year, I missed the opportunity to inject more structure into the learning activities when I allowed the students to fully enjoy their unbridled autonomy and I just opted for providing flexible adjustment to the direction they imposed on the class. This year as I am planning to resume the approach with the current cohort, I



am looking into refining the approach by keeping the student autonomy and responsibility for the teaching content and form of delivery, but adding more structure to the language work that could well round off the students' presentations, or even integrate this with their presentations in the individual pre-class preparation stage when I coordinated efforts with every group member for the success of their individual presentations.

Reflections on the intertwined impact of teacher and student empowerment in our particular case, as well as a review of the course content and form of delivery as shaped up specifically by student empowerment have brought to light the changing dynamics of the teacher-student relationship and the magnitude of the overall changes. Fleeting instances of disequilibrium were remembered together with the massive changes in the traditional pedagogical practices and structures induced by student empowerment and its specific manifestations in the specific learning environment at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies.

The following massive quote by McQuillan provided some solace and guidance at the time of values and beliefs upheaval commonly associated with student empowerment.

*...efforts to promote student empowerment will probably generate disequilibrium, a sense of unease or a feeling that things are not quite as they should be (Wheatley, 1999). From a cultural perspective, disequilibrium seems unavoidable given that student empowerment contradicts what many students, teachers, administrators, and parents believe students and schools should do. Students seldom have real power in schools; to accord them power risks abuse or misuse and can generate unease and uncertainty, not unlike that described by Reldan Nadler (1933) in research on "adventure education". According to Nadler, disequilibrium may arise when "people [in this case, students, teachers, and administrators] do things they might not ordinarily do ...leav[ing] their safe, familiar, comfortable and predictable world and enter[ing] into uncomfortable new territory ... an experience beyond their comfort zone" (p. 59). However, if people have sufficient support, disequilibrium can help them see the world differently and thereby become an impetus for changed beliefs, precisely what Cummins (1986) maintained was needed for student empowerment to occur:*

*The required changes [needed to promote student empowerment] involve personal redefinitions of the way classroom teachers interact with the children and communities they serve... Implementation of change is dependent upon the extent to which educators [and I would add "students"], both collectively and individually, redefine their roles. (p.18)" (McQuillan, 2005: 26-7)*

In an academic context in which I enjoy all the teacher empowerment one can dream of, as well as the comprehensive support of the graduate program director, I

feel very fortunate and thrilled to be able to explore new avenues to enhance student learning and bring about improved learning outcomes for all the actors involved, me included. That is why I can think of no better conclusion to this reflective paper than the inspirational statement below made 20 years ago:

*Finally, in order for students to truly become empowered, the concept of empowerment must be seen as more than just another strategy for boosting academic success. It must be seen as a philosophy of education that can help students to be productive in school as well as become productive members of society.* (Duhon-Haynes, 1996: 6)

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