A Learner-Centered Approach in Postgraduate English Poetry Classes

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I. Introduction

Research tells us that to really learn something, it takes attention, time, practice, effort, reflection, connection, and application—learning is not short-term regurgitation (Ratey, 2001).

All of us are aware of the role of English in this fast changing world, particularly in the context of the national and cultural life and that's why the academic institutes are giving priority to this language. Learning a language involves various aspects. Besides its literary charm its learning has become paramount for various reasons. Basically in India it seems that teaching of communicative English has gained speed just to cope with the job market. This recent development has somehow squeezed the view of 'Language teaching', with some what a mechanical approach to teaching 'communication' or 'language through literature'. But the supposed problem is that in the whole process the basics are given more priority than the advanced stages of literature which are thought of as some untrodden province secured for intellectuals like poets and novelists. Although Business communication is given utmost priority but on the other hand literary communication is also needed. Literary communication is one of the sophisticated ways of communication. When we try to testify the credibility of a language we search for its literature like its poetry, novels, and criticisms but not for the business letters, applications or corporate reports. Our students must play a much more active role in their learning if they are to deeply know and have the lifelong learning skills they will need to compete in a global environment.

Here my paper basically focuses on an English post graduate poetry class where the chief aim is to see the methodology of the teacher, his approach to teaching, his style of teaching etc. Although the chief aim in a poetry class is to make the students acquainted with the feeling through which the poet was passing on while writing the poetry and we try to let the students have that aesthetic pleasure but simultaneously and also sometimes un-noticedly the communicative skills of the students is also fine-tuned.

In order to show the benefits of learner-centered classroom and to foreground the hidden prospect of learning communication through literature, I would put forward some findings which I got from observing six post graduate English poetry classes in Ravenshaw University, Odisha in the academic year 2011-2012. As this is an ethnographic study so there was no definitive hypothesis here, because the hypothesis was supposed to emerge from the data itself, but before going to the class I had some objectives in my mind which are as follows.

1. Whether the classes are learner-centered or teacher-centered?
2. Whether making a class more learner-centered helps in better learning or not?
3. Whether any focus is given to develop communicative skills or not?

II. Context

My subject of research was based on the analysis of a Master level American literature class where Dr John Cussen , a visiting Professor from Edinbboro University was engaged in teaching the non native students in Ravenshaw University, Cuttack. Then I also observed some Post graduate poetry classes taken by Dr Mrutyunjaya Mohanty, Professor in Ravenshaw University itself. For the ethicality of research I will mention Dr J. cussen as 'Teacher A" and "Dr Mrutyunjaya Mohanty" as "Teacher B", throughout the paper.

III. Review Of Literature

So as regards learner-centered learning, the basic idea is students at the center of the learning process. Although there are many definitions of learner-centered learning, the essence is encompassed in the following:
Learner-centered learning describes ways of thinking about learning and teaching that emphasize student responsibility for such activities as planning learning, interacting with teachers and other students, researching, and assessing learning. Cannon, (2000)[1]

Learner-centered learning has student responsibility and activity at its heart, in contrast to the stronger emphasis on teacher-control and the coverage of academic content found in much conventional, didactic teaching (Cannon 2000[1]).

"Learning" is presently a very exploratory field which is subject to change every now and then. These changes are having its effects on the faculty teaching methods, in course designing, in the academic programmes etc. Basically now-a-days we all are trying to make the classroom atmosphere more student friendly, where learning in its real sense can take place. Across all educational hubs, a jigsaw puzzle picture of a space is beginning to emerge - driven by learning theorists, cognitive scientists, the economy, technology, a changing student population and dedicated faculty rethinking and re-engineering everything they've ever believed to be true about teaching and learning.

As regards 'Communication', we can simply describe as a sharing of information, ideas and knowledge with others. And this process of sharing information is dynamic, interactive and results in an exchange of meaning and understanding. Firstly communication is a dynamic, interactive process that involves the effective transmission of facts, ideas thoughts, feelings and values. It is not passive and doesn't just happen, we actively and consciously engage in communication in-order to develop the information and understanding required for effective group functioning. The term 'process' indicates a condition of flux and change .

IV. Methodology

This study is essentially descriptive in nature. The method of data collection was based on a non-experimental design, where there was no intervention. For the triangulization of data, it was collected from various sources like the transcript of the classrooms, questionnaire for the students, questionnaire for both the teachers, researcher's journal and the video recording of the classrooms. Almost all the data collected are qualitative. The method of data collection was based on a mixed paradigm which is non experimental-qualitative-interpretative analysis.

After the class I interviewed the learners followed by the interview of the concerned teacher. The collection of learners for interview was random (whoever was interested was encouraged to answer). In Teacher's interview some of the questions were prepared in advance, while some questions which emerged out of the observation and later discussion with the teacher were added. To enhance the reliability of the study the classes were recorded. Transcripts of the recordings and interviews were prepared. In addition to these data, retrospective descriptive entries were made in journal by the researcher

Data was collected from multiple sources like learner's interviews, retrospective entries of the researcher in the journal, video recording of the class. Before analyzing the data, the transcripts of different sources were compared and recurring patterns were identified. Then conclusions were drawn on the basis of the listed findings and analysis.

V. Data analysis

For the triangulisation of data it was collected through various sources and some points are made keeping in view the recurring patterns that emerged out from these classes.

1.1 Approach towards the students – In his very first class 'Teacher-A' told all the students to write down their names on a paper and to keep it before them. Then he went from student to student and tries to read it out. In this age of identity crisis the teacher's step in making the students conscious of their identity is praiseworthy. A good rapport was made through this. I asked the students about this later, and they all unanimously said that it was a welcome step taken by the teacher.

1.2 Preparedness of the teacher – The teacher needs to be well prepared before going to a class and basically when it is a P.G class it is most necessary. The interview of both the teachers shows that they were well prepared before going to the class.

R- So sir you have come prepared to the class or it's not required?
Teacher A- Oh yeah definitely it's required, and when they are adult learners its really needed. I had prepared myself by going through some articles on internet, also went through some criticism also, and had downloaded certain articles for the students and taken out printouts for them.
To 'Teacher B'
R- Sir were you prepared before you came to the class?
Teacher B- Yeah it was quite necessary. I have to read a lot about 'The Wasteland', I had made my points and most importantly it's a very difficult and complex poem, so we need to simplify it in a class or else the students will be bored. I have well prepared myself, also rehearsed last night how I will stand what I will teach, everything.

These shows how both the teachers were well prepared for the class.

1.3 Preparedness of the students- Like the teachers the students also needs to go prepared to the class, but here it seemed as if they were not prepared for the class.

1.4   Materials brought by the teacher – Materials brought by the teacher shows his preparedness for the class. 'Teacher A' always brought some handouts for the students, which he distributed before the class started, and "Teacher B' also sometimes brought hand out's but not frequently like 'Teacher A'

1.5   Style of presentation – The presentation style is also important as this determines the motivation and interest of the students. Whereas 'Teacher A's style represented the western way of teaching, 'Teacher B's style was more appreciated by the students, may be because he was a bit homely.

1.6   Accent of the teacher – The accent of the teacher is also very important. It should be clear and audible for the students to understand properly.

R- So students, was 'Teacher A' audible?
St- yeah although he was a bit fast and we are not accustomed with his accent so at first it was a bit difficult but after one class it's okay.
R- What about 'Teacher B' ?
St- See 'Teacher A' is a westerner so his accent is bit difficult to understand, but in case of 'Teacher B', we felt at home. He was quite clear and audible.

1.7   **Examples and references** – Students seemed to be more attracted to the examples given by 'Teacher A', the cause was that his examples were drawn from our day to day life. For example when he was talking about Marxism he gave the following example
T-If you and i go to the gate and you say to the guy in the auto...take me to badambadi...how much the guy is gonna charge you........Badambadi
ST-20 or 30
T-20 rupees.........twenty, but if i go to him and ask him take me to badambadi how much he is going to ask me......
ST-...(instantly)fifty to hundred
T- Fifty ...hundred ...who knows...ok
ST- laughs
T- Why.....because class matters......class, perception of money all those things matters...and the Marxist theorists basically says that don't neglect that..in literature don't neglect who the characters are and what level of society they are in. Then that's what really important in their interaction. It may look like they are interacting but that's not what is going on it is the interaction between two classes....likewise if the literature does not take that into account and it ignores this then the literature is not a good literature ....yeah not a good literature but silly.

1.8   **Methods followed by the teacher in the classroom -** The research was carried out in a non native setting where 'Teacher A' was a native speaker teacher and 'Teacher B' was a non-native speaker teacher. The method followed in the class room by both the teachers were a bit different but the overall environment seemed to be a learner centered one.

1.9   Role of feed back in the class – Feedback plays an important role in a classroom, positive feedback leads to better learning, whereas negative remarks hamper the process of learning. Teacher A constantly used 'Good' for nearly correct answers and 'Very good' for correct or innovative answers. Although Teacher B was a bit different in the sense that he no doubt encouraged the students to answer but gave very few feed backs like 'good', 'very good' etc. But he at the same time always tried to encourage them and there were no negative remarks for wrong answer, he just smiled and moved to another boy, may be this also helped in the teacher-student interaction.

1.10
1.11   Interaction between teacher and the student – Here basically the students were quite expressive, no doubt they were encouraged by the teachers but they answered and expressed their views clearly.
As we have a brief idea about the classrooms, let's focus on some of the findings of this paper

VI.   Major Findings
1.12   **Whether the class was learner-centered or teacher-centered** – It's really difficult to give any definitive statement regarding the classroom, because the control was definitely in the teachers hand but the students were free to express their views in the class. The teachers kept in view the need of the students. 'Teacher A' used to bring hand-outs for the students in his class, 'Teacher B' also told in his interview that he also uses hand-outs, but not frequently. 'Teacher A' had done something peculiar, he had gone to the library

himself, had searched for books available on American literature, marked them and had give instructions to the librarian that if any student comes and tells that he/she belongs to J. Cussen's American literature class, then to provide them these selected books. Wow very rare sight where a teacher toils hard for the student. Attention towards students is clearly visible.

1.13 **Difference in methodology** – The most interesting thing is that the methodologies of both the teachers were different. While 'Teacher B' in his class has divided his time into three parts, first he summarized what he have taught in his previous classes, then he read out the poem and analyses it, then he clears the doubts of the students. Once done with this, he starts asking short questions to see whether the students have understood or not. But on the other hand the method of his western counter-part is bit different. 'Teacher A' tried a different way, means he gave some back ground information to the students and then read the poetry. Once finished with that he asks the students to say whatever comes to their mind. The students tried hard, because it was a new method for Indian context. They hesitated a bit but still responded and sometimes the teacher is also amazed and at one point expressed, 'Oh I have not looked at the poetry from this angle, pretty good'. So it helps in developing the analytical bent of mind of the students.

1.14 **Constraint of time** – Both the teachers complained about the insufficiency of time provided to cover the course. First of all 'Teacher A' was of the view that here in India, generally the syllabuses are very complex and lengthy, and here the only of evaluating student's learning is exams. Our system is so exam oriented that everybody is after finishing the course only. When asked about their syllabus, he told that 'In USA we generally keep in view the needs of the students and the syllabus is not that much complex there.
       T – The course is the dog and exam is the tail, generally it is the dog who wags the tail but here the tail is wagging the dog.

1.15 **Difference between Indian students and the foreign students** – When asked about their students in America, 'Teacher A' told that there they are more expressive and the teachers don't help them all the time, means they were not spoon-fed like our students.
Teacher A – When you talk about American students, let me tell you one thing here in India your Lecturers take you on their back and swim across the river and on the other side ask you, you see how to swim? Next time try yourselves, but we take our student on a boat to the deepest part then throw him to the river and ask him try to swim and save your life. That's why they are more efficient and expressive than their Indian counterparts.

VII. Researcher's Views

As far as my view is concerned the class seemed to be very interesting, the students seemed to be motivated, may be due to the fact that a foreign teacher was teaching. 'Teacher A' sometimes went on narrating a movie and suddenly towards the end relates it to a critical theory. His choice of examples was very nice. And I liked his method of teaching, first make you flow with an influx stimuli and suddenly manages the situation by making us conscious of a theory. So also in 'Teacher B's class the students enjoyed thoroughly which is seen in their interview. And basically I was seeing that classes after class the students' participation in an interaction increased, and unknowingly the students were gradually able to express their ideas in a more simple any coherent way.

When asked about whether they are trying to develop the communicative skills of the students or not both the teachers answered like this-

Teacher A- In USA we don't have these communication classes, but here I see that some students are able to express their ideas in a better way day by day, what else do you mean by communication. It's ok that we are not specifically focusing on communication, but you see as a secondary aspect it is present there even in a poetry class.

Teacher B – A good question, we should try for the all-round development of students, irrespective of a poetry class or communicative class, but still in my class I make them express their views, sometimes I have to intervene and help them in expressing their ideas, but still it is working, they are developing the communicative skills, but nobody is aware of this.

VIII. Conclusion

So almost we can conclude that time demands us to focus basically on communication for its utilitarian perspective and everybody thinks that English course has bifurcated into two- literature and communication. But the truth is that literature can facilitate communication and vice versa. We should make an integrated study rather than an individual study.Learning occurs best in a positive environment, one that contains positive interpersonal relationships and interactions, that contains comfort and order, and in which the learner feels appreciated, acknowledged, respected and validated. In Teacher A's class students were given chance to guess the meaning of the poem by themselves without the help or intervention of the teacher and they responded quite

well. Teacher B never seemed to be making the students answer reflective and analytical questions in the classroom, however he made his classroom environment such that the learners felt free to answer and ask questions. This is corroborated by the data analyzed from the interview of the students, where the students told that Teacher B's class is always interesting and we never miss his class. Inside the class we are not afraid of him so we answer his questions without any fear and also can ask questions anytime when we can't understand. It shows the confidence the learners have on their teacher. From the data collected of classroom observation it is seen that Teacher B was basically playing the role of a giver of information rather playing the role of a facilitator. He gave away the information and then elicited the answers from the learners. The learners were participating not playing an active role inside the class but they were passive receivers of information they had no active role to play in the process of learning. While in Teacher A's class they seemed to be taking some responsibility of their learning as they were not passive receptors rather they played an active part in the teaching-learning process.

Here we can't give any generalized comments regarding the classroom situation because, as regards Teacher A's teaching style is concerned we can't take him as the representative of western teaching community and also Teacher B is not the representative of Indian Teaching community. Again as regard the methods adopted by both the teachers inside the class, we can't exactly say whose was better because methods adopted in a classroom, style of presentation, learner-centered , teacher-centered are all abstract and we can conclude by one sentence that,' it all depends'. All these are context specific. The method adopted by the teacher inside the classroom depends on availability of the time, infrastructure, back ground of the learners, mood spirit and enthusiasm of the learners as well as the teacher. So these differs from person to person and from context to context. The method of the teacher will not be same while teaching the school students, the college students and the University students. It also depends on the context where the college or University is situated. So we can just try to give our learners more freedom inside the class, try to change the process of assessment here, try to make the syllabus better keeping in view the time available with the teachers and learners. If the given procedure is implemented, may be with some improvements the students would be benefitted to a large extent. Until now we are trying to foresee our students as receptive statues of information, by using the predefined patterns of teaching. But if a thought is given to the *being* and not the *acting* and some such efforts can be spent by the teachers and the authorities, the tender minds can feel the vastness of their creative and aesthetic skills. This can make them understand that they are not mind-machines and have greater roles to play in the development of the organization and society at large. This will ensure a smooth transition from traditional 'Teacher fronted classrooms' to contemporary 'Learner-centered classrooms'.

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