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Backbone of classroom instruction

By Bilqees Patel



A TEXTBOOK can be defined as one of the tools to enhance the knowledge of students and it helps teachers know ‘what to teach’ and ‘how to teach’ it.

“The term textbook refers to materials employed by school or college students as standard works on a particular subject. They are designed for classroom use with appropriate vocabulary, illustration, student’s exercise and teacher’s aids.” (Abbas, 1993)

Textbooks are of vital importance in education the world over, and even more so in the developing countries, such as ours, where the literacy rate and standard of education are abysmally low.

In the Pakistani context, the curriculum wing is the main centre working for curriculum planning, development and implementation. The textbook board is a part of the curriculum wing, which works separately in all the provinces while maintaining a list of potential authors for producing textbooks. The four provincial textbook boards in Pakistan, by and large, follow the same managerial practices with regard to textbook development.

All over the world, textbooks have an important place in the teaching and learning process. Ideally, they have many important roles, one of which is to attract the learner and provide him with an incentive to learn by highlighting the important features of any concept.

“Textbooks with coloured illustrations provide an incentive to learning and they provide attraction for the learners.” (Sidhu, 1988)

This is important as by reading a textbook, the learner wants to learn more and seek other sources for further information. So the textbook is one of the motivational forces to learn and study more. In addition, textbooks are supposed to specify the standards to be attained at a particular level. It sets a direction towards objectives. It also helps the teacher know the content to be taught at each level. This is what makes the work of the teacher easier as the book has been

designed keeping in mind the students' psychological and physiological needs at a particular level.

“Only graded books can satisfactorily deliver the goods to the waiting child, whose environment, needs, interests, reading levels and learning level have been kept in mind ... Through a textbook, the child is helped to acquire skills and knowledge in a meaningful way so that s/he uses them in a correct and gainful manner for a better tomorrow.” (Dossal, 1996)

These are some of the ideal roles and purposes of the textbook. However, the scenario has been completely reversed in Pakistan.

Textbooks prescribed by the Sindh Textbook Board are full of factual information, failing to generate an attitude of inquiry in students. Reasons for this include the lack of interest of our authors in designing and producing interesting texts that would generate curiosity in the learner for a particular topic. “Textbooks usually give answers before the students ask the question; that's why they seem so dull. Textbooks often fail to stimulate inquiry, discovery and problem solving. Because the process of publication takes so long, the textbooks are frequently out of date.” (Erikson, 1972)

Although the science curriculum of the Ministry of Education (2002) emphasises the inclusion of “open-ended questions” as an important feature in textbooks to encourage thinking critically and creativity, most textbooks here only include questions such as:

- Which animals lay eggs? (Science textbook, Sindh Textbook Board, Class V)
- Write the names of seven fundamental units and seven derived units. (Physics textbook, Sindh Textbook Board, Class IX and X)
- Write the chemical equation for reaction of sodium metal with water in a liquid state. (Science textbook, Sindh Textbook Board, Class VIII)

Such low order questions and factual text in the books takes students towards the rote memorisation process where they only have to remember the available information by heart to be regurgitated in the examination hall.

If any, pictorial representations in the books are also rare and unattractive. They may be colourless, black and white, blurred and unclear images failing to do their bit of showing what a certain thing really looks like. And there are hardly any pictures in the mathematics and English language textbooks.

The same old textbooks with very little modification are being used for the past several years. They all fail to cater to the needs of the changing times. Even the facts provided by them are out of date. The sequences of topics included within them are sometimes also not very accurate which makes even the easy concepts difficult to understand. For example, in geometry, theorem number 8 of a triangle is converse of theorem number 2. It means it should follow theorem

number 2 so that the students are able to easily understand the differences. So the sequence of the topics too needs reconsideration.

A little creativity in the preparation of textbooks, the backbone of classroom instruction, can go a long way in motivating students to learn as well as make them critical thinkers of a society.