Empowering the Learners through the Process of Language Learning

Mrs R.Ramya

Research Scholar

Manonmaniam Sundarnar University,

Tirunelveli.

Dr.Ruby Ebenezar

Assistant Professor of English,

Quaid-e-millath College for Women,

Chennai 600 004.

ABSTRACT

Teachers of EFL, ESL, TESOL, ESP, ELT, EAP, IATEFL, SIG and whatever other initials you can think of, are all too willing to adopt acronyms. It seems to me that we show even more willingness, indeed eagerness, to adopt 'Buzz words', or perhaps 'Buzz Phrases' would be a better description. Notice I do not claim that teachers accept or even understand the ideas encapsulated in such phrases. No, this use of these phrases is part of our jargon. Of course, all occupations have their jargon; it is a way of letting people in the same occupation know that you are part of that occupation. However, jargon seems to fulfill another function, that of giving the users the appearance of knowing more than they do. Thus, we are inundated with various phrases intended to convey that we are fully up-to-date with all the latest educational theories and practices.

Keywords:- *Learning, Language*

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the years we have had 'The Grammar Translation Method', 'The Direct Method', 'The Oral Approach', 'The Audio Lingual Method', 'The Silent Way', 'Total Physical Response', 'The Natural Approach', 'Suggestopedia', 'Community Language Learning' (Richards & Rogers, 1986), and perhaps the one most of us are most familiar with: 'Communicative Language Teaching.'

It seems that we practitioners of English language teaching are prone to embrace new fashions in teaching without really going into what we are letting ourselves, and our students in for. In the past, there have been many methods held up to be the answer to language teaching, each of these methods being an attempt to react to a perceived change in the needs of society at large, and, by implication, the changing needs of students. I would also suggest that many of the methods mentioned above have, at one time or another, been seen as the only way forward for language teachers, language learners and even administrators; the latter, possibly to gain increases in their budgets, present their institution as a progressive institution using the latest methodologies.

Thus, we hear phrases like 'Our institute/our teachers are trained in/ believe in Life Long Learning, The Learner Centred Curriculum, Learner Independence and Empowering the Learner', being bandied around.

Let us look at this word empowering, and take the word centred in it - the word power. Strange word, this word *power*; it frightens us and has negative connotations. It is emotive; we speak of 'power without responsibility' and, as Lord Acton wrote in 1887, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely*"*. So much does it frighten us that we try not to use the word. How many teachers talk about their power? Not too many. Instead, they opt for words like 'a teacher's responsibility'. But, make no mistake about it, the classroom teacher is a very powerful person and, as human beings, we enjoy that power, we enjoy being in control. Think about how 'invaded' most teachers feel when it comes to classroom assessment by an outsider, no matter how 'user friendly' the evaluation purports to be.

The outsider will, whether we like it or not (and mostly we do not), alter the dynamics of that class. We feel it is no longer our class because we are no longer the most powerful person in that room. The most powerful person in that classroom is perceived

to be the evaluator. The power base of the classroom has shifted from teacher to the evaluator and, no matter how level-headed we think we are, this leads to resentment, because no matter where the curriculum comes from, usually imposed from the top, it is the teacher who interprets and represents that curriculum to the learner. It is the teacher who regulates what goes on in any particular class and, by doing so, sets up the classroom interaction between teacher and learner.

Most teachers plan instruction by (a) specifying behavioural objectives, (b) specifying students' entrance behaviour, selecting and sequencing learning activities so as to move students from entry behaviour to objectives, (d) evaluating the outcomes of instruction to improve planning" (Shavelson & Stern, 1981:477, in Nunan, 1988)

It is the teacher who holds the power. Mostly this feeling of being in control comes with experience. As we develop strategies that are effective for us, we become more and more reluctant to give them up. Indeed, it has been shown that teachers are extremely reluctant to give up the power derived from such strategies, no matter what teaching methodologies they say they support. In a study carried out in the U.S., over 88% of teachers returned to their old ways within three weeks of being told about or subjected to the latest educational research on teaching methodologies (Open University, 1984).

If I understand it correctly, empowering the learner means that teachers should relinquish some of their power and hand it over to the learner. Most of us, in the current teaching climate, and wishing to appear in touch with the latest educational theories, would *say* this a very laudable objective. However, I would contest that in reality teachers would be reluctant to do this. Why do I feel this? Well, I think that most, if not all, the lovely phrases we hear batted around at conferences, in discussion groups and workshops are what Argyris & Schon (1974 & 1978) call 'espoused theories'. These are things that teachers say they believe because P.D.(Professional Development) is now being enforced in a lot of institutions as part of teacher evaluation. However, what they actually practice - their 'theories in action' (Argylis & Schon, ibid) - are somewhat different. As you can imagine, if there is a large discrepancy between what teachers say they believe and what they actually practise, not only are confused signals

sent out to the learner and to teaching colleagues, but they also reflect back onto the practitioner. I would contest that such is the case with learner empowerment.

As I said above, teachers work out strategies that they find effective, and tend to return to those strategies because they work in the dynamics of the learning/teaching ambiance that teachers build up in their classrooms. These are their 'theories in action' (Argylis & Schon, ibid). Of course, teachers *do* 'espouse theories'. They listen to new ideas, and try out new methods of teaching that, in some cases, work for them. However, when the pressure is on to deliver results, to reach objectives, to prepare for exams or to keep in step in a 'lockstep', curriculum teachers return to methods that they believe in, that they have found work for them; in short, to their 'theories in action.'

Now, just as I would argue that teachers are reluctant to hand over some of their power, so I would argue that students are reluctant to accept this exchange. As Brindley (1984: 111, in Nunan, 1988) suggests, students, especially adult students, have fixed ideas about the course, how it should be taught, the content of the course and their position in it. Thus, they are somewhat reluctant to accept ideas outside their preconceived parameters. Students are used to regarding the teacher as a dispenser of knowledge, but they are not used to regarding the teacher as a guide or facilitator. Furthermore, as Nunan reports, learners should never be forced to engage in learning experiences to which they object" (Nunan, 1988: 46)

Nunan goes on to say that if this does happen, then resistance may be expected. Such resistance may not be overt, but can manifest itself in forms of passive resistance to the learning process. Sounds familiar doesn't it? It would seem that learners and, again, adult learners in particular, are in no way sympathetic to methods, which we might file under the heading 'communicative'. In fact, teachers and students hold quite opposite ideas of what is beneficial.

In a study by Alcorso & Kalantzis (1985, in Nunan, 1988) students rated grammar exercises and structured writing as the two most important aspects of learning a language. Both these activities are very much teacher-centred. Other teacher-led activities

rated as important, in a further study by Willing (1985, in Nunan, 91 ibid) were:

· Pronunciation Practice
· Explanations to the Class
· Error Correction
· Vocabulary Development

Following this study, a group of language teachers in Australia in the Adult Migrant Education Programme asked students to evaluate the usefulness of different classroom activities. The results echoed almost exactly the Willing study. Pronunciation practice, explanations to the class, error correction and vocabulary development were all rated 'very high', whereas those activities much practiced by language teachers such as pair work, self-correction and the use of audio and video cassettes were rated 'low'. Language games were rated 'very low' (Nunan, 1988).

Thus, it would seem to me that we have here a dilemma. On the one hand, there are the theories which teachers say they believe in, because they see P.D. as part of an evaluation package. This is something I called 'professional jargon' earlier, and the difference between these professed beliefs and their actual practices leads to a reluctance to share or give up power.

On the other hand, we have students who are reluctant to take up any offer of power, who feel threatened by such an offer and who resist this offer by either refusing to cooperate in it or cooperate with reluctance and offer passive resistance. It follows, therefore, that there has to be a shift of perception and practice on the part of everybody involved in the learning/teaching process. I would include administrators in this, advising them not to set goals or build up expectations that are unrealistic, and to make professional development something that teachers want to partake in rather than be forced to partake in for the sake of good evaluations. Teachers should want to take part in P.D. because they see it as a way forward *personally* - not because they are forced to. There can be no really significant development of a person's teaching which does not also involve personal change." (Edge, 1999)

II. CONCLUSION

Institutions should build an atmosphere whereby teachers want to develop in their own way and at their own pace. Teachers could then open themselves up to new practices honestly. Surely they would be more willing to do so when the pressure on them to perform and conform to someone else's preconceived notions were taken away. When such pressures are eased, they can spend time on teaching students to be learners rather than just recipients of dispensed knowledge. When students have learnt to be learners, they too will see the benefits of those activities they now resist. Only then will they be truly empowered.

REFERENCES

[1] Argyris, C. & Schon, D. (1974). *Theory In Practice*. San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.
[2] Edge, J. (1999). Managing professionalism or 'Hey, that's my development. *IATEFL Issues,* 149. June/July 1999.
[3] Nunan, D. (1988). *The Learner Centred Curriculum*. Cambridge: CUP.
[4] Open University (1984) D102 Course Book. Milton Keynes: Open University Press
[5] Richards, J. & Rogers, T (1986). *Approaches & Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: CUP