Changing the Management of Change in Language Education: Learning from the Past, Lessons for the Future

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Abstract

Change is a constant, and this may be especially true in the field of education, and in language education in particular. The constancy, magnitude and rate of change all mitigate against a careful consideration of one set of major changes before the next is upon us. This lack of reflection may lead to change occurring, but change more of the 'history repeating itself kind', rather than innovative, positive and lasting change. Approaching the end of this period of history would seem to be an ideal time to stop and take stock of what we have learned about managing change in education, so that this knowledge and experience can be applied to language education in the future.

This paper reviews studies of change in education and language education written in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, with a focus on the latter, in order to identify recurring themes which might enable us to derive guidelines for those who will inherit the present systems and be the new generation of managers of change in language education.

The constancy of change

More than 25 years ago, Lee (1973) stated that "It's hard to find the person who doesn't feel that education needs changing" (p.137). Although Lee's comment referred to education in general, rather than language education specifically, as the comment was made in one of the major ELT journals, *TESOL Quarterly*, it implicitly refers to the language education context, and in this case, ELT in particular. Furthermore, although Lee's comment is an 'old' reference in terms of the modern academic research literature, references to the importance of Change in other kinds of literature can be found going back thousands of years. According to Baynes and Boardman (1984), the *I Ching*, or *Book of*

Changes, has exerted an influence on Chinese life for more than three thousand years (p.v).

More recently, but still nearly 15 years ago now, Nunan (1985) introduced his book on trends and issues in language teaching course design with a section on change: "Understandably, the giddy pace of change has left many teachers completely bemused" (p.viii). More than a decade later, Churchill, Williamson and Grady (1997) referred to the ever-increasing volume of literature on educational change (p.156), and with unfortunate appropriateness, given the constancy of war, Levin and Riffel (1998) use a military metaphor and refer to our being "bombarded" (p.113) with change, whilst Whitaker (1997) refers to our turbulent struggles to keep up with relentless change (p.viii).

One fundamental reason for this constancy of educational change is summarized neatly by Sikes (1992), in her *Introduction* to a chapter tellingly entitled *Imposed Change and the Experienced Teacher* (pp.36-55): "since societies throughout the world are constantly changing and developing, education can also be expected to change" (p.36). With the tremendous increases in adult education in recent years, her reference, in the earlier part of her statement above, to education being for "young people" (p.36) would need to be extended. It is also possible that some societies might consider themselves as doing everything they can to arrest and resist change. However, Sikes does provide a simple and elegant answer to the question: Why is educational change a constant?

Although it may be true that *Change is a Constant*, Brindley and Hood (1990) point out

that, in spite of constant changes in language teaching, there is still much we do not know about why some innovations are adopted and others rejected (p.255). Interestingly, some years later, a very similar comment was made by Kennedy and Kennedy (1996), in relation to ELT and our lack of knowledge about the reasons for some changes succeeding and others failing (p.351). In the opening lines of *Change in Classroom Practice* (Constable, Farrow and Norton, 1994), Constable states that still relatively little is known about how changes in classroom practice occur (p.1).

One possible reason for the apparent lack of systematic investigation into the process of educational change is that the constant and complex nature of change makes such investigation difficult. MacGilchrist, Myers and Reed (1997), for example, point out that "Change is complex because it is not linear or mechanistic" (p.12). Hoffman, Reed and Rosenbluth (1997) refer to Fullan's (1991) description of change as being "uncontrollably complex..[and]..inherently unpredictable" (p.7), and describe their own experience of educational change as a long and difficult journey (p.1), whilst Field and Barksdale-Ladd (1997) explain that, for them, learning to adapt to change was frustrating and exhausting (p.205), as it required much time (p.214) and much energy (p.215). Such experiences are summed up succinctly by Brindley and Hood (1990): "bringing about any kind of change is an extremely long, complex and difficult business" (p.256).

Supporting teachers managing change

As a direct result of the inherent challenges and demands of educational change, the need to support teachers involved in managing this kind of change is another of the recurring

themes in the literature. It has been claimed by a number of teacher-researchers that such support would not only increase the likelihood of effective change, but would also play a part in the professional development of teachers (Bailey, 1992; MacGilchrist et al., 1997). For example, Bailey (1992) refers to a number of researchers, all of whom "directly or indirectly identify change as central to teacher development" (p.257). Kennedy and Kennedy (1996) point out that, despite the difficulties, "change can successfully occur *when adequate support is provided*" [emphasis added] (p.90). However, one of the key factors in the (mis)management of educational change, and especially, it seems, in language education, is the lack of support. Sometimes support is provided, but a problem then can be that the support is not targeted at a particular area of need. It is not based on some systematic assessment of teachers' and learners' needs, rather than having those needs identified by those who will not have to live with the change once it is implemented (Curtis & Cheng, in press).

The phrase "doing to, doing with and doing without" has been used to distinguish between teacher development forced upon teachers vs. collaborative teacher development vs. the absence or lack of teacher development (Curtis, 1997). However, the phrase could be applied equally well to the issue of educational change management. The few studies of the implementation and management of change in language education that are based on teacher's voices (for example, Churchill et al., 1997) show, perhaps not surprisingly, that language teachers generally feel that change is something that is done 'to them', via 'educational initiatives' from 'up on high', rather than with them, as a

consultative, collaborative, pedagogically motivated and mutually beneficial process .

The apparently obvious but frequently 'overlooked' lesson here seems to be that, as teachers are ultimately the ones who decide what happens in their classrooms after the door is closed, the more input from teachers and/or teachers' representatives (who need to be in the classroom regularly, if they are to truly represent teachers), the better. The notion of 'stakeholders' has, as is the way in academe, caught on and been used to the point of cliché, but it would seem to be fairly obvious that the more 'buy in' from teacher-stakeholders there is, the more likely it is that the change will be successfully implemented.

Another important consideration is that, as Cheng's studies of washback and ELT-related change in Hong Kong classrooms (1997, 1999) showed, teachers can 'fake change'. The teachers in Cheng's study generally made minimal, exam-oriented, surface changes in their approaches to English teaching, but more lasting and more substantial changes were not generally seen. If teachers are not involved in the design and implementation of the change, if they are not convinced of the pedagogical motives and methods, they have the option and opportunity to change only the surface features, *to appear* to change.

An interesting finding relates to the negative affective factors related to educational change. Again perhaps not surprisingly, many negative emotions have been expressed by teachers faced with, as some see it, yet another government initiative on language education. At least two important considerations emerge from such reactions. The first is that the potential influence and

impact of these negative affective reactions should not be underestimated by policy makers. Secondly, that teachers and learners need to be 'left alone' from time to time, so that they can fully adjust to one set of language teaching/ learning/ assessment changes, before being hit by the next wave.

The metaphors used by some Hong Kong English teachers in Hong Kong to describe their change situations relate to 'the wave after wave', 'drowning in yet more new guidelines' and other similar Titanic images, which recall Churchill et al.'s (1997) reference to the unstoppable "tide of educational change" (p.156). Sikes (1992, p.36) cites the OECD's (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) 1989 report on *The Condition of Teaching*: "Scarcely has one set of reforms been formulated, let alone properly implemented, and another is in genesis" (p.110). This OECD observation and concern, expressed as it was a decade ago, shows that we appear to have learned little in the intervening ten years, at least in Hong Kong and perhaps elsewhere, about the need for periods of change to be punctuated with periods of stability.

Another aspect of change management which needs to be considered if successful change is to take place relates to the process-product distinction, referred to by Fullan and Parks (1981) (cited in Field & Barksdale-Ladd, 1990, p.214): "Change is a process, not an event". In education systems such as those of Hong Kong, the examination-driven nature of the system means that product still reigns supreme, one small but telling example of this fact being that process writing is still considered an 'innovation' here in Hong Kong (Pennington, Brock & Yue, 1996). One of the

many challenging by-products of this product driven approach to language education is that change is often not introduced gradually, incrementally, step-by-step, but more often introduced in the form of sudden, large and hurried change. Once again, perhaps not surprisingly, the latter approach tends to be less successful than the former.

As MacGilchrist et al. (1997, p.15) point out: "teachers need to be the main agents of change". Add to this the fact that teachers have been found to have a great deal of, largely untapped, experiential knowledge of both successful and unsuccessful change within their school systems (Curtis & Cheng, in press), and it should be clear that classroom teachers and learners need to be consulted at all stages of the change process - before, during and after. As was pointed out earlier, in relation to the notion of the 'stakeholders' cliché, the more input there is from teachers and learners, the more 'buy in' there will be from them, and the more likely a change is to be successfully implemented. One of the benefits of this kind of consultation is the opportunities it provides for as much as agreement and consensus on the aims, methods of implementation and assessment of outcomes, *before* implementation is initiated, rather than as an afterthought, perhaps in response to apparent resistance to change or other implementation difficulties.

The metaphors used to relate the spending, saving, etc. of time and money are well-established by now, but the notion that 'time is money' may be especially true in Hong Kong, occupying as it does such a key position in the world's financial trading markets. This time = money equation means that time, as well as space, is constantly at a

premium here, frequently resulting in insufficient of either being given. What this means for educational change management is that insufficient time is usually allowed for those implementing the change, for example, to fully discuss the rationale and implications for the change, develop the necessary new skills, adjust their attitudes, beliefs and methodologies, etc. Churchill et al. (1997) use the term "abbreviated timelines" to refer to this particular aspect of educational change (mis)management, and summarize the response of the teachers in their study thus: "Not a single teacher [out of the 100 in the study] in the sample felt that sufficient time had been available for effective implementation" (p.147).

Churchill et al. (1997) give four characteristics of the feelings of the teachers in their study regarding the educational changes they had experienced, one of which was "a considerable *cynicism* about the real motives behind, and the results of, educational innovations" (p.151). The message here being that teachers need to be given clear and honest rationale for the changes they are being asked to implement and manage. For example, changing trends in professional development in Hong Kong, have meant that teacher portfolios are becoming increasingly fashionable as part of new staff appraisal systems. Language teachers are being told that their portfolios should be developmental, showing the teachers' areas for development or weaknesses, as well as their abilities and strengths. However, the teachers are also well aware of the staff cutbacks which need to be made, and are unwilling to present themselves in anything but their best light, fearing that the developmental/judgmental distinction claimed will not be made, and that the portfolios will,

instead, be used as "just one more way of deciding who stays and who goes", as one Hong Kong teacher put it recently. If teachers feel there are ulterior motives for a change, they will, understandably, show reluctance and resistance.

Another aspect of managing change in language education relates to the learners. Although, so far, the focus has been on teachers and their administrators, MacGilchrist et al. (1997) remind us of the importance of "having pupils' learning as the main focus for change and improvement" (pp. 15-16). Although the few opportunities for input from teachers into the change process have been identified as one the recurring features of educational change (mis)managment, an even more serious omission, even more conspicuous by its absence, might be the absence of the learners' voices in all of this.

The last factor to be discussed in this section relates to another conspicuous by its absence: evaluation of change outcomes. This may relate to a number of the other aspects of educational change (mis)management, such as the insufficient time allocated, the lack of genuine consultation and collaboration with teachers and learners, and apparent or assumed ulterior motives for the changes. Whatever the reasons, there do seem to be relatively few examples of changes in language education being fully, or even partially, evaluated against original aims or goals. Although there may be many reasons for this, one near certain consequence is that, without any kind of systematic evaluation of the successful (or otherwise) implementation of one set of changes, it is much less likely

that the next set will be successful, and history may yet again end up repeating itself.

Developing guidelines for managing change in ELT

The following list summarizes the main points made so far, and might perhaps be of some use as guidelines for administrators, teacher developers and others on how to help teachers to manage change:

1. Provide targeted support, based on *teachers'* identification of their support needs.
2. Do it *with* them, not *to* them, i.e., consult and collaborate as much as possible.
3. Be aware that teachers can 'fake change', if they do not believe in it.
4. Leave teachers alone for a while, to let them get used to one major change at a time.
5. Introduce change, especially major changes, gradually, incrementally, step-by-step.
6. Find out what teachers already know about (un)successful change in their contexts.
7. Change is never instant, so allow the necessary time to learn new skills, attitudes, etc.
8. Give teachers complete and honest accounts of the rationale for the changes.
9. Consult the learners, listen and take note of their 'expert user' views.
10. Evaluate on-going outcomes against clear sets of original goals and aims.

Having considered this summary list, we can also learn much from consideration of lists from other sources. The constant nature of change was recently highlighted in a new book, *Improving the Primary School* (Dean,

1999), in which Chapter 9 is entitled *Managing Change* (pp.100-110). At the end of the chapter, Dean gives what she refers to as the "list of dos and don'ts of change for headteachers" (p.110) given by Fullan (1991, pp. 106 - 7):

1. Do not assume that your version of what the change should be is the one that should be implemented.
2. Assume that any significant innovation, if is to result in change, requires individual implementers to work out their own meaning.
3. Assume that conflict and disagreement are not only inevitable but fundamental to successful change.
4. Assume that most people need pressure to change (even in directions they desire).
5. Assume that effective change takes time.
6. Do not assume that the reason for lack of implementation is outright rejection of the values embodied in the change, or hard-core resistance to all change.
7. Do not expect all or even most people or groups to change.
8. Assume that you will need a plan that is based on the above assumptions and addresses the factors known to affect implementation.
9. Assume that no amount of knowledge will ever make it totally clear what action should be taken.
10. Assume that changing the culture of institutions is the real agenda, not implementing single innovations.

(Dean, 1999, p.110)

MacGilchrist et al (1997), whilst acknowledging that: "The literature makes it quite clear that there is no set recipe for achieving improvement" (p.9), do present what they have chosen as "six key interrelated

messages" (p.9) related to managing educational change in schools:

- Change takes time.
- A school's capacity to change will vary.
- Change is complex.
- Change needs to be well led and well managed.
- Teachers need to be the main agents of change.
- The pupils need to be the main focus for change.

3. We need to take a systemic view of change...

4. We should include observation of classrooms in any evaluation of implementation of change...

5. In any change process it is important to involve respected/powerful groups that may influence teacher behaviour...

6. We should perhaps design around the context rather than impose a change on it.

(pp.359-360)

Kennedy and Kennedy (1996) also give six points, in the Conclusions section of their paper on *Teacher Attitudes and Change Implementation*, in answer to the question: What conclusions can we draw about change and its evaluation? (p.359):

1. Beliefs about the innovation, about its consequences and the contextual variables associated with it are all important in determining behaviour...

2. We should beware of using attitudinal measures alone as indicators of future behaviour...

It is interesting to see, in light of the nearly ten years between them, the areas of overlap and difference between the four lists, especially in relation to recurring themes such as time, the role of teachers and learners and the complexities of change. One aspect of education, and particularly language education in Southeast Asia, which will not change in the foreseeable future, is the need to involve teachers and learners more in bringing about successful, positive and lasting change in the language classroom.

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