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## Teacher Ideology and the Climate for Change

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### Abstract

Whether teachers are aware of it or not, they employ an ideology about teaching which provides the foundation for all aspects of their work. While a teacher should view his or her ideology as something which develops over time, it is often the case that teachers are resistant to change, instead, maintaining a static ideology which is out of touch with the living world of learning. This article focusses on the conditions which encourage ideological change in teachers, and concludes that the most important consideration in fostering ideological changes in the ESL context is better control of the English language itself on the part of non-native English language teachers. With increased confidence will follow a greater open-mindedness to make changes in one's teaching ideology.

If 'ideology' is not a word which you readily associate with ELT let me attempt to clarify it straightaway. 'Ideology' refers to your theory and principles of language teaching, in practice. It refers specifically to what you were taught in your initial period of training, and *includes* all features of addition, adaptation and development during your teaching career, whether this is a few months, or a period of many years. It is not the same, certainly never exactly the same, as 'method' or 'methodology' or 'approach'. Those words refer to theoretical constructs which do not take into account your personality as a teacher, the attitude of your students, or the constraints and conventions of the classroom, wherever you are.

Now, one type of teacher, teaching at the same level, with the same ability range of students, using the same textbooks year after year, may never consciously think about ideology at all. Yet it most certainly exists. It underpins all your teaching, and marking and examining, and relations with learners, and sustains the conviction that you are doing your job well, or as well as you possibly can. A second teacher, who has no ideology, is simply 'bumbling along'. Such a teacher may not notice his or her own lack of ideology. But the students certainly will! At the opposite extreme is a third possibility: a small number of teachers who are highly conscious of their ideology, attending conferences and workshops, reading professional journals, and trying out new materials, new ideas and new classroom techniques, and adjusting their composite teaching strategy where they think it is necessary to do so.

Of these three categories, the first, those who have an established but static ideology, are by far the most numerous, even if their experience is more varied than suggested above. The 'bumblers' exist, in all countries, we know, though we have no statistics. They will certainly not be reading this article. The third group, who though deserving of the adjective 'dynamic' are not necessarily 'correct', are relatively rare. From this I have developed a general hypothesis, as follows :

*TEACHER IDEOLOGY IS RESISTANT TO CHANGE; IN CASES WHERE IDEOLOGY DOES CHANGE IT DOES SO EXTREMELY SLOWLY*

A hypothesis is, by definition, unproven. Does this hypothesis affect you, whether as teacher, as teacher trainer, or as lecturer or resource person to practising teachers? The answer is that it most certainly does. It means that a great deal of *in-service* training is ineffectual; it implies that while the 'receivers' of expertise about the principles of language teaching and language learning *may* pay lip-service to what they hear, they will return to their classrooms and continue doing more or less what they have always been doing; and it means that the more radical the change the greater the resistance. The hypothesis emphasises the vital importance of *pre-service* training. Like learning one's mother tongue, like one's preference for one's own type of food, one's development through the initial phase always remains dominant. This does not imply that pre-service training is always 'correct' either, but it does imply that future teachers should be trained to be flexible (if this is possible), and to consider personal development as a career-long process.

In order to change, teachers must see a need for change. This has nothing at all to do with changes of 'method', as for example in changing from some other method to 'communicative language teaching.' It means rather that the teacher *Develops*. He or she develops knowledge of the target language, develops techniques of interaction, develops sensitivity to what learners find difficult, and develops systems for simplification and exemplification. Few teachers would actually claim that they could do all these things perfectly at the end of pre-service training. In other words there is a *need* for change, where 'change' means simply development. Each step of that development modifies the individual teacher's ideology. Yet by no means all teachers want to modify it, or so my hypothesis holds: they are content to go on doing the same old thing throughout their career. This may be because they have not been *trained* to develop, or because they have lost the idealism that should be part of the make-up of a teacher--teaching has become *just* a job. There may of course be other variables involved, for example poor pre-service training, groups of zero-motivated learners, the necessity to teach a textbook which you hated from the start, and which you know is stuffed with 'text' which bears little resemblance to 'real' language, whether spoken or written. There is also the possibility that an older teacher sees no reason to change further, though that begs the question of how much he has changed over the past ten, or twenty years.

All this, you may say, is at a high level of abstraction. There are nevertheless many people concerned with teacher development, and many teachers themselves, who would like to think they could do their work better, but who do not know how to do so, apart perhaps from seizing on marginal classroom activities like games, or songs, and who are frustrated to find when they attend in-service courses they are being taught all over again about 'lesson-planning', or classroom organisation. This is not what the teacher wants, and even if he acquires something from it, which is by no means certain, it does not change his ideology, which is a complete profile of knowledge, skills *and* experience, and almost certainly includes confidence and mental agility as well. For any significant change in ideology to take place certain conditions are necessary. I suggest some of these conditions here, with comments, though the list is not exhaustive:

- 1) Ideology can only change if the teacher is not committed for life to his original pre-service doctrine.

Comment: This is unlikely. Most teachers realise that pre-service training has left many gaps.

- 2) Ideology is more likely to change if the teacher is working with a dynamic staff who are receptive to new ideas, and help and encourage one another.

Comment : Such conditions are by no means common. Sheer pressure of work may be one problem. Non-academic constraints make it almost impossible for a young member of staff to return from specialist training and influence older or senior staff.

- 3) Ideology can only change where there is an opportunity, and willingness, to experiment in the classroom.

Comment : There is no such opportunity where the teacher is obliged to work closely through a textbook; and there is no willingness to experiment where the teacher *depends entirely* on the textbook for material.

- 4) Ideology is more likely to change if the teacher has access to a range of recently published textbooks, supplementary materials and teacher's books.

Comments: (1) It is a very advanced skill to be able to flick through a book and assess whether or not its contents may be of value to you.

(2) Separately: This is a desperate problem in Thailand, where there are too few books relating to English studies and no pattern of habitual reading among teachers.

- 5) Ideology changes as control over the language, and how it works, improves.

Comments: This is the real problem, and the major obstacle to change. The vast majority of teachers of English have reached a plateau and stay there, or even regress. In-service training programmes evade the problem because of the difficulties. No amount of 'methodology' is a substitute for a significant improvement in language proficiency.

The circumstances in which each individual teacher works are all different, and it is therefore not possible to assess the likelihood of a change of ideology without knowing details of colleagues, facilities, student attitudes, and indeed, something of the personality of the teacher him/herself. Change and development are however both desirable, as there is little doubt that the cost effectiveness of the English teaching programme is very low. A change of 'method', or improved 'methods', may contribute something to an improvement, if teachers believe in them, and such method/methods can be adequately explained and demonstrated. Where in-service training provides such explanation and demonstration teachers should be encouraged to experiment, leaving ideological development to the individual (as, indeed, we must), but without indicating that what he has been doing for a long time is wrong, and without absolute prescription.

Such a recommendation must seem piecemeal, untidy, and above all extremely slow. Teacher trainers and in-service training programmes would all like to be able to offer something which is complete, tidy, and quick--to claim, for example, that teachers can become 'key personnel' after a six-week course. Such satisfactory results are unlikely. A better approach altogether may be through Point (5) above, which is language improvement. Better manipulation and control of the target language is in itself a goal, and not a change. It is safe to say that *no* teacher who enters the profession has reached a stage of proficiency in the target language where he/she did not need to acquire more language. There is neither encouragement nor incentive to go on acquiring language. Teachers know that acquisition may be difficult, but it is not a threat, as it sometimes is to change one's classroom skills, and to discount one's experience.

More control over the target language means that the teacher is better equipped to do his job. With that better equipment the practising teacher can be more open-minded about a new

ideology. Resistance to change is then no longer a defence mechanism to what is new or perhaps only partially understood. Language proficiency contributes to increased confidence, and may have a positive effect on experience gained.

A direct assault on ideology is not recommended. Change and improvement (on a national scale rather than in individual cases) are more likely to come through increased language proficiency and a subtle but well-reasoned approach to ideology. But while there are diploma courses for TEFL and various short courses for teachers, there is little or no direct language improvement (DLI) for teachers. Are such courses not practicable? It is difficult to see why they should be any more difficult to arrange than any other type of training, except, as always with language acquisition, you cannot easily set objectives and guarantee to fulfil them. Is there a psychological barrier to such courses? Is it in some way damaging to say 'I know you have been teaching (English) for some time but you still need some more DLI'? Certainly these questions would have to be discussed by all institutions which arrange courses, and to give *all* teachers an opportunity to attend would be both costly and administratively complex. It is nevertheless essential to do so to create the climate for change. Who will take the initiative to begin such courses?

#### **The Author**

Mike Long has been working in the Supervisory Unit of the Teacher Education Department since 1972, during which time he has been involved in various aspects of pre-service and in-service teacher training. His extensive experience in the Teacher Education Department has enabled him to observe the problems of teachers at various levels, and he has organised a very large number of courses and training programmes in an attempt to find solutions to these problems. In addition to teacher training he is interested in the teaching of literature to nonnative speakers. He also writes short stories, several of which have been published.