Innovation in language education: Educational requirements vs. practical considerations

Mohammed MELOUK
Mohammed V - University
Faculty of Education

Introduction

Educational systems are currently challenged, more than ever before, by rapid changes in all walks of life, just as are states, economies, societies, etc. Indeed, globalization has reached an unprecedented level of influence on people and is increasingly tearing down frontiers and barriers, leaving no one immune. The liberal values of competition, efficiency, cost effectiveness, among others, have become the driving forces of all systems, including the educational field. The forces of these dynamics, coupled with evaluative reports by international organisations and agencies, are exerting a lot of pressure on governments for change. Modes of change are blooming, giving rise to models, slogans, recommendations, guidelines, practices, etc. The quest for novelty and innovation is greater than ever. In a sector such as education, known to be highly conservative (e.g. teachers), reactions to pressures for change are varied and range from rejection, to imitation, to adoption, adaptation, etc.

On the other hand, the paradigm shift to learner centeredness, autonomy, learning strategies, high order skills, critical thinking skills, among other things, is pressing teachers (ELT) to change their approach, strategies and techniques. In other words, they need to be innovative. However, it is legitimate to ask the following questions: aren't teachers innovative enough? What are the prerequisites for pedagogical innovation? At what level and under what circumstances can innovation be introduced? To what extent are teachers, headmasters, advisors, (The system), prepared and willing to be innovative when they are expected to implement an official curriculum, conform to a set of official rules and guidelines, and prepare their students to sit for national exams? These are some of the questions that need to be addressed before embarking on the merits of pedagogical innovation. In fact, the purpose of this article is to discuss the issues pertaining to the concept itself and how it can be applied to ELT. But before addressing these issues and examining ways and means of implementing pedagogical innovation, it is worth recalling that how this concept has evolved in terms of means to achieving educational goals.

1. Definition of and rationale for pedagogical innovation

A brief review of the existing literature indicates that many definitions are available. These have historically evolved, especially with the emergence of new approaches to education in general, and ELT in particular. The following, though broad, offers a general definition.

"Pedagogical innovation is here defined as the emergence of new learning models supported by the use of technology and networking technologies. Organisational innovation is here defined as the emergence of new organisational models supporting learning. In both cases the term "new" does not imply emergence of unprecedented models, rather it refers to models which are substantially different from current practices in Education and Training formal contexts". JRC, EU,2010 P. 13

As indicated in the introduction, the pressure to innovate is greater today. In addition to the technological revolution which is increasingly affecting all aspects of our lives, including education, many factors lie behind this trend. Among the concerns (economic, social, etc.) which currently underlie the educational field, one which seems highly influential is clearly articulated in the following:

The pressure to increase equity and improve educational outcomes for students is growing around the world. Teaching practices, in contrast to student background variables such as socio-economic status and cultural capital, are factors affecting student learning that are more readily modifiable. Moreover, additional professional practices have received attention, especially those that help transform the school into a professional learning community. OECD, 2012, P. 15

However and despite all the claims that can be made, pedagogical innovation as a concept and as practice is not a recent phenomenon. Drawing its sources from various areas, pedagogical innovation has accompanied all educational changes which occurred since the end of the 19th century. Indeed, a close look at the recent history indicates that many pedagogical revolutions have taken place and have affected all aspects of education. These range from conceptions of education to educational planning, curriculum, teaching methods and techniques, modes and techniques of assessment and exams, classroom management, teacher training, etc. As it is practically impossible to review educational innovation in all these areas, in the following, focus will be on pedagogical innovation in broad terms, showing areas of innovation in ELT to illustrate not only the evolution of pedagogical innovation, but especially to highlight the evolution of the concept.

2. Historical and conceptual background

Over the past century, the field of education in general, and ELT in particular, have witnessed many pedagogical 'revolutions' across the whole educational spectrum: approaches, curriculum, teaching methods and techniques, materials... At the time of their

launching, these have been labelled 'innovations'. The impetuous came from various sources: advances in knowledge and in technology, economic and social pressures, competition, human development, etc. The concept of education (teaching and learning) has also evolved and been stretched to embrace many concerns. ELT is perhaps the field of education which best illustrates educational 'revolutions', especially since the adoption of the communicative approach. The technological revolution gave birth to new 'teaching methodologies' (vs. methods).These have become pregnant premises and appropriate ventures for Pedagogical innovation. Innovation as a concept and as a practice gained momentum and became a widely spread slogan. Sources for innovation were sought in all fields: industry, business, IT, media, the Internet, etc., and other disciplines such as computing, management communication, neurosciences, social psychology, anthropology, cultural and media studies, etc.

3. Innovation: Conceptual framework

In the beginning, pedagogical innovation was equated with pedagogical practices inspired from technological innovations of the 20th century, coupled with professional behaviour and actions largely inspired by various schools of psychology anchored either in behaviourism or cognitivism. Most educational practices today (curriculum, classroom practices, evaluation, etc.) illustrate this approach. The main drive has been pedagogical efficiency measured in terms of educational performance. However, a recent trend is gradually gaining ground, giving a new dimension to pedagogical innovation:

- At the beginning of the 21st century, socio-constructivist ideas (i.e., examining a learner's psychological processes within the context of the learning process) became prominent in normative approaches to classroom teaching. However, research on school effectiveness suggests that practices based on these theoretical ideas are insufficient to foster student learning. Rather, a combination of clear, well-structured classroom management, supportive, student-oriented classroom climate, and cognitive activation (e.g. challenging content that promotes deep reflection in the student) has been shown to be effective. The conceptual framework therefore incorporates both socio-constructivist thinking and more classical process-product research, which provides a way to build a bridge between constructivism and direct instruction approaches to education. (OECD 2012)

As suggested above, pedagogical innovation should not simply be limited to the use of technology or recourse to new teaching techniques or new classroom management techniques, but should be conceived of as encompassing both new techniques and traditional ways of teaching and learning. The ultimate goal is to achieve better learning outcomes and hence school effectiveness. Indeed, research on school effectiveness clearly indicates that improving learning outcomes does not reside solely on improving pedagogy by introducing new techniques, but acting on the all the factors that affect directly or indirectly teaching and learning. In addition, any conception of innovation cannot

ignore the influence of the learners' environment on their learning modes, strategies and achievement. All of these aspects constitute real challenges to families, schools and teachers.

4. Current educational challenges

The new millennium is characterised by a rapid extensive use of technology. Societies and families are currently undergoing unprecedented changes manifested in new behavioural patterns towards traditional institutions including the school, especially among the young. Today, no one can deny the effect of Information Technology, Multimedia and the Internet on education in general, and ELT in particular. On the other, the paradigm shift to learner centeredness, autonomy, learning strategies, high order skills, critical thinking skills, etc. has created new demands and expectations requiring a differential educational treatment. In the field of ELT, the adoption of the communicative approach in formal curricula is still posing tremendous problems to practitioners. In the same vein, the adoption of a competency -based approach, coupled with a standard -based approach, has not truly found its real way into classrooms practices. The reasons are numerous, among which lack of clarity of concepts, inadequate resources (human and material), etc.

On the other hand, social changes brought out by, among other things, economic crises, technology, globalisation, democratisation of access to information, and a quest for more freedom are increasingly creating a new social culture, with new values, including those related to education. Indeed, the Information technology revolution clearly illustrates the changes that are affecting both society and school, resulting in new behaviours.

"Electronic media (television, computers, interactive video) now dominate as the principal means by which people receive information and spend their leisure time. Electronic media will far outweigh, for example, the influence that the school may have". Littlejohn (2000).

In this turmoil, one of the main challenges facing the school is to how to safeguard its main function as a place of education and learning. The social and cultural roles of the school are increasingly being questioned, though no one yet has called for its closure. Instead, there are many voices requesting its change, reshuffling its various components and modes of organization. This is what is being observed in some private schools. Without succumbing to the pressing trend, the public traditional school can manage to cope with new demands provided that it adopts a new strategy.

5. Premises for innovation in Moroccan ELT

Indeed, there is a lot of room for pedagogical innovation which can be conducive to change. The example below drawn from the Moroccan ELT curriculum is an attempt, not at giving examples of pedagogical innovation, but at showing areas where this innovation can be conceived and implemented. Taking into account the following general

guidelines for Secondary Schools (2007), teachers can design and implement appropriate tasks and activities as well as classroom management techniques (See 6 below) to achieve the set objectives within the framework of the following standards.

5.1. Standards for ELT 1

- Communication: Learners will communicate in both oral and written forms, interpret both oral and written messages, show cultural understanding and present oral and written information to a variety of audiences for a variety of purposes. Three modes of communication are involved here: the interpersonal, interpretive and presentational communication.

- Cultures: Learners will gain deeper understanding of their culture (s) and other cultures in terms of their perspectives (e.g. values, ideas, attitudes, etc.), practices (patterns of social interaction), and products (e.g. books, laws, music, etc.).

- Connections: Learners will make connections with other subject areas, and acquire information and use through English for their own purposes.

- Comparisons: Learners will gain awareness of cross cultural similarities and differences (in terms of language (s) and culture).

- Communities: Learners will extend their learning experiences from the EFL classroom to the outside world through activities such as the use of the Internet. They will therefore be made aware that we live in global world.

6. Areas of pedagogical innovation in ELT

6.1. Some basic assumptions

- Education aims at providing learners with an adequate and safe learning environment conducive to learning, using all necessary resources (material and human) to help them develop their potential and to ensure their well being.

- Learner differences require differential treatment.

- Learning context requires adaptation.

- If education is necessary, innovation in education is a 'natural professional endeavour'.

- Teaching is 'more of an art than a science': creativity vs. Innovation.

6.2. Dimensions of classroom teaching practices (TALIS OECD)

- The structuring dimension: teaching practices that clarify the structure of a unit or lesson and its ultimate goals, as well as test whether all students have understood the content and performed their tasks.

- The student orientation dimension: group work and adaptive instruction, student participation in classroom planning.

- Both dimensions ask for practices that involve close interaction of the teacher with the whole class, small groups or individual students.

- Enhanced activities dimension, which summarises practices that give students the chance to work independently over a longer period of time.

6.3. How can teachers be innovative?

- Classroom teaching practices, participation in professional learning communities.

- Teacher-directed vs. Self-regulated teaching

- Diverse pedagogical classroom activities

- Involving students in decision making and classroom management:

- What to teach (informed decisions): topics, themes

- How will learners learn (Tasks, activities, assessment)

6.4. How can different types of learning activities promote effective learning?

- Making clear the structure and purpose of the learning experience, through informing, describing and explaining

- Using questions, dialogue and discussion to facilitate and explore pupil learning.

- Enhancing learning through: Structured reading and writing tasks, Investigational work, individualised programmes of work, small group work, experiential learning, and using ICT.

The task of being innovative seems awesome. However, in order to meet current and future challenges, and achieve learning effectiveness through the implementation of the suggested actions, there is an urgent need to develop and enhance a new culture of education within schools. This culture requires a change in the vision of the school and its roles, including the roles of all the participants in the educational enterprise. This can begin by breaking down the barriers set by the traditional conservatism of schools, teachers and parents through introducing gradually new attitudes towards learning and education. One of this concerns professional development.

6.5. Teacher professional development and learning communities

Since its inception, the concept has evolved and been operationalised in various ways. The following definition captures the essence of teacher professional development in all

its dimension, indicating areas of potential educational innovation and hence learning effectiveness.

- Personal development goes hand-in-hand with other forms of learning, such as knowledge and skill acquisition for practical and professional aims. Evidence shows that the interaction among members – regardless of the aims of the community – leads mostly to the acquisition of horizontal skills such as: critical thinking, active participation, sense of initiative and socio-civic competences. Little support is provided to members in structuring and scaffolding their learning or in developing learning-to-learn competences. Aceto, S., et al (2010)

Traditionally, teachers have limited their role to imparting knowledge through implementing the various components of the curriculum. Today, they can no longer afford to recline in the comfortable position defined by the curriculum, the textbooks and the guidelines which provide a sense of security. Indeed, the need for change and hence continuous development is no longer a sinecure. One way of enhancing professional development is through the development of professional learning communities. In fact, the changing environment is constantly pressing teachers to change their ways of doing things. Many factors affect learning and teachers can no longer work efficiently in an individual manner. The tasks can be manageable if teachers adopt the culture of professional learning communities.

- The concept of professional learning communities is also rooted in socio-constructivist ideas, as well as in models of learning organisations. These models of learning organisations, which originated from the business sector, focus on the interactions between teachers and students and on how these interactions can achieve the goals of fostering students' learning. These interactions are driven by norms, rules and expectations that are, to a large extent, shaped by teachers and school leaders. This requires a system that promotes collaboration and the sharing of values and knowledge, i.e. a professional learning community. Aceto, S., et al (2010)

Conclusion

The world is changing quickly, creating new needs and expectations. Schools are required to face these challenges; otherwise, they face the risk of being obsolete or simply disappear, at least in their current form. Likewise, teachers, whatever their specialisations, have a crucial role to play. The survival of their socioeconomic and cultural functions largely depends on their capacity to change their attitudes and behaviour in order to meet the existing real challenges.

'The eagerness to continually improve the educational experience of students has been growing steadily around the world. We are now more aware of how teaching practices help shape the student learning experience and advance motivation and achievement. When teachers work well together they tend to also work well with students. So, it has

become important to encourage teachers to share more of their expertise and experience and in ways that go beyond the mere exchange of information'. Barbara Ischinger (2012), Director of Education, OECD, Introduction

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