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THE MEANING OF INNOVATION FOR ESL TEACHERS

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In the past, ESL teachers' primary function was limited to instruction. More recently, however, we are increasingly involved in the creation and implementation of innovations within educational systems considered more broadly. To discharge this increased responsibility, understanding of innovation itself and of procedures for setting innovations in motion is vital. This paper reviews the literature on educational innovation, in order to inform those interested in undertaking a teacher-initiated innovation in ESL programs.

INTRODUCTION

Recent moves towards professionalization of the field of ESL imply increased responsibility for both proposing and carrying out innovations on the part of ESL teachers. To accomplish lasting reform, awareness of the meaning of innovation and how best to proceed is critical. However, the nature and process of innovation in ESL programs has as yet received little attention. In this paper we refer to general principles in the mainstream education literature on innovation since this has rarely been discussed in our field. (Markee [1992] identifies White [1988] as the sole full-length text giving attention to this topic, for example.) Our intent is to inform those interested in undertaking a teacher-initiated innovation in ESL programs. Our discussion of the concept of innovation was developed in connection with a related case study of innovation as it applies to individual teachers in an ESL program (De Lano *et al.*, 1993). It was motivated by remarks such as the following:

> One of the most fundamental problems in education today is that people do not have a clear, coherent sense of *meaning* about what educational change is for, what it is, and how it proceeds. Thus, there is much faddism, superficiality, confusion, failure of change programs, unwarranted and misdirected resistance, and misunderstood reform (Fullan, 1982: p. 4).

This paper is organized in terms of the following questions: (1) What is educational innovation? (2) What causes innovation? (3) How does innovation proceed? and (4) What is the role of a teacher in bringing about innovation? Our hope is that by gaining a thorough understanding of what is involved, conceptually, in innovation, ESL teachers will be better able both to innovate in their programs and to see the results of their efforts set firmly in place.

WHAT IS EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION?

The term innovation has been defined in extremely varied ways throughout the mainstream educational literature on educational innovation. Most definitions seem to make use of at least one of four key terms to characterize innovation: *change, development, novelty, or improvement.*

Change

One of the central concepts used in the definition of the term innovation is the idea of change. As Hurst writes, "by innovation I mean the idea of a change in a behavior or practice' (Hurst, 1978: p. 14, cited in Papagiannis *et al.*, 1982). Change certainly entails the notion that innovative educational practices are somehow different from existing practices; however, we find the term "change" is inadequate since it is not the case that merely being different constitutes innovation. Change as such is not necessarily advancement—it can also be deterioration. As Rich observes: "Although there could be no innovation without change, most changes are not innovation" (Rich, 1981: p. 145). Therefore, for this paper, we stipulate that an innovation must involve a change in existing pedagogic and related practices such that instruction is better able to promote second language learning.

Development

A second major term appearing in discussions of innovations is "development". In ESL contexts, this is often defined in terms of (1) curriculum development, focusing on students (Rodgers and Richards, unpublished manuscript); (2) professional development, focusing on teachers (Nunan, 1991) or (3) program development, relating to administration (Brown 1995). For Rodgers and Richards innovation is primarily curriculum development. They note a recent redefinition of the role of second language teachers from being curriculum presenters to developers as the "decentralization of the curriculum development process" (Rodgers and Richards, unpublished manuscript). Nunan notes a problem with the increased responsibility placed on teachers by this decentralization:

> . . . in reality, teachers have neither the time, the resources, nor the specialized skills needed for materials development. As a consequence, they must look to published sources. Many of these have been produced for very different purposes from the ones to which they have been put within the program, and reflect neither the policy nor the philosophy of the program (Nunan, 1986: pp. 5–6).

Curriculum development is certainly an outward manifestation of innovation. However, to incorporate new materials into the classroom without a clear vision of the way in which they reflect a new approach to language teaching may result in the materials not serving the purpose for which they were developed. This highlights one of the serious problems in understanding the meaning of innovation for many programs. That is, the assumption that what is new (for example, a new text series) is innovative.

Novelty

Given that what is novel is not necessarily innovative, it is surprising how much of the innovation literature relies solely on the term *new* in defining the concept—for example, "by innovations, we mean any new programs, organizational changes, or modifications in the teaching–learning process that mark a departure from existing practices" (Rich, 1981: p. 145). This idea is reiterated in the following definition of innovation, "the process by which

something 'new' is introduced to a system" (Dill and Friedman, 1979: p. 411). In addition, it is perplexing to note that what is "new" is, for some at least, defined not in terms of current trends in the field, but rather in terms of a "personal" experience: "'Innovation' is our generic term for any program, process, or practice—new or not—that is new to a person" (Hord *et al.*, 1987: p. 3). This definition leaves some very important questions unanswered as pointed out here by Rich, ". . . how novel does something have to be before it can count as innovation?" (Rich, 1981: p. 145). It also fails to address the fact that what is new is not necessarily *better*.

We find the term "new" to be unsatisfactory in defining innovation because what is new to one person may not necessarily be new to another—the novelty of innovation cannot be defined in terms of personal experience (cf. Hord *et al.*, 1987). We would prefer to see the experience or position of the field as the benchmark against which newness should be judged. Any definition of innovation should include the notion of an informed change. The impetus for an innovation should come out of a broad understanding of the current conceptions of second language learning and teaching within the field.

Improvement

The final key concept used in the definitions of innovation which we explore here is improvement. Certainly, it is an underlying goal of innovation that changes implemented will actually constitute progress. However, if we are to use the notion of "improvement" to help us understand the meaning of innovation an understanding of what will constitute being "better" than what was being done before needs to be conceived at the outset of an attempt to innovate. Otherwise, as Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991: p. 4) state, "resisting certain changes may be more progressive than adopting them".

In short, consideration of these four aspects of innovation and associated definitional efforts suggests that for maximum utility the notion needs to be both restricted and made more explicit than has been the case previously. Based on the above discussion, we define innovation as follows: An innovation in a second language teaching program is an informed change in an underlying philosophy of language teaching/learning, brought about by direct experience, research findings, or other means, resulting in an adaptation of pedagogic practices such that instruction is better able to promote language learning as it has come to be understood.

WHAT CAUSES INNOVATION?

Previous discussions of this topic suggest three broad ways in which a decision to embark on an educational change may arise: (1) critical incidents, (2) recommendations from research and (3) promoting of innovation by change agents.

Critical incidents

Critical incidents, which can create an intention to implement innovation, are often the result of problem identification. Kelly (1980) suggests that for an educational change to be initiated, the existing state of affairs must be considered unsatisfactory by participants in an educational culture. Students, colleagues, test results, and administrators as well as teacher self-evaluation, are all possible sources of evidence which can show current practices to be unsatisfactory.

Questioning the soundness of an instructional program, and/or noticing that current practices are not creating desired results can lead to dissatisfaction, and may result from an evaluation of teaching practices or a program as a whole. This is related to the idea of accountability: the notion that teachers' practices should produce particular results (Lessinger, 1981: p. 150). The more dissatisfied participants are, the more likely they will be to seek new solutions through innovation.

When in a given program there is not a shared and generally accepted theory of what constitutes language learning, or of how teaching can promote learning and how learning can be measured, the utility of second language educational practices can be disputed. Such critical incidents "challenge or reinforce fundamental beliefs, practices and values of an organization" (Shaw, 1978: p. 446, cited in Merriam, 1985).

Research

A further source for an intention to change can grow out of an awareness of new and supposedly better teaching practices, curriculum, materials, and so on. Although there are various sources from which new procedures can arise (observations, workshops, etc.), one of the more generally proposed causes of change is research. Changes in accepted conceptualizations of language teaching and learning may lead to a desire to modify teaching programs:

> Research on foreign language teaching and learning has been closely connected with the history of innovation in language teaching. New developments in linguistic theory and language learning theory have repeatedly fostered new methods in foreign language teaching (Wagner, 1988: p. 99).

However, it is, at times, unclear how research can best be used to inform pedagogic practices. "Criticisms of educational research frequently center on the perceived lack of impact of research upon classroom and school practice" (Vandenberghe, 1988: p. 74). Richardson notes that a schism between researchers and practitioners can be created when there is not careful consideration given to the role of research in innovation. In particular, she points out that some who attempt to initiate change try to exercise control over teachers through suggesting that research is a "higher authority" (Richardson, 1990: p. 10).

Fullan also advises careful consideration as to the role of research when he states that attempts at innovation in the past have failed because of "faulty and overly abstract theories not related or relatable to practice, limited or no contact with and understanding of the school, ignorance of the lessons of experiences of the reformers . . . and above all the failure to consider explicitly the relationship between the nature of the proposed innovations and the purposes of schools" (Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991: pp. 22–23). Therefore, although research can serve as a primary source for new ideas which are promoted for educational innovation, the implications of making recommendations to pedagogy from research need to be carefully considered in order for changes to be well-founded.

Change agents and their strategies

Individuals who cause or facilitate change are sometimes called change agents (Scileppi, 1988). Lambright and Flynn (1980) refer to change agents as "entrepreneurs" who act as catalysts for change and as a link between different participants. Within an educational culture, change agents can be found among administrators, teachers and even students.

External change agents include consultants, evaluation teams and other experts recognized by the educational culture. According to Scileppi (1988), the position of a change agent in the educational culture is not necessarily important; what is important is that change agents support, help, assist and nurture (Hord *et al.*, 1987). Their task is often to encourage, persuade or push people to change, to adopt an innovation and use it in an appropriate context. As Scileppi comments rather idealistically:

> The change agent should have personal characteristics such as an open mind, a good sense of humor, and a high tolerance for ambiguity. The change agent must *not desire to lead but must strive to be a catalyst,* organizing the group to use its own "people power" to obtain social change (Scileppi, 1988: p. 169, emphasis added).

"Researchers and change agents often express frustration that teachers do not willingly or quickly accept and implement their suggestions" (Richardson, 1990: p. 10). This resistance may be due to the fact that a decision to embark on change is at times based on reasons of "personal prestige, bureaucratic self-interest political responsiveness, and concern for meeting unmet needs at both local and societal levels" (Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991: p. 9). In order to understand the complex, underlying causes of change in a particular educational culture, a successful change agent needs to be sensitive to the fact that innovations are necessarily viewed by different participants from different perspectives.

As Scileppi (1988) notes, it is helpful to "develop a strategy for encouraging a school system to accept the innovation" (p. 153). There are various ways in which change agents can go about persuading people to make a change. One useful strategy for initiating an innovation is to gather support from all those who will eventually have to act upon the innovation, such as teachers, program administrators, and members of upper administration, as well as from those who will be affected by the innovation, for example students. Innovations need strong local advocates. If the head of an educational culture is committed to a change, chances of success can be increased (Kennedy, 1988; Vandenberghe, 1988). In addition, to help establish trust (White, 1988) and sustain ongoing interaction, it is important for communication by all participants in the innovation to be open, as opposed to covert.

Another strategy used by change agents is to persuade others by presenting information which connects the new program to some value highly prized by the target individual or group. Participants need to understand the implications of a proposed change personally. They are more likely to support a change when they perceive the direct benefit as outweighing the cost (Brindley and Hood, 1990). Building in rewards and incentives are motivating factors which promote cooperation, as teachers may quickly become disillusioned without evidence that any tangible rewards will be forthcoming for their time and effort (Kennedy, 1988).

People are more likely to accept an innovation if they feel they have an active role in all stages of the change process. In any organization, successful accomplishment of goals and objectives requires co-operation and collaboration in order to create a sense of ownership (Rudduck, 1991) such that all members feel they are contributing to the innovation process. Successful change agents are able to foster this sense of ownership on the part of all involved. One way of accomplishing this is by asking participants for their input concerning the innovation. This can serve as a valuable source of data for making informed decisions. Each participant can then be aware of the extent of existing problems and the degree to which they are personally involved in helping make decisions based on these problems.

Successful change agents try to form a collaborative relationship between participants in an innovation. By including administration and staff in developing a prescription and recommendations for change, they enable participants to take on the responsibility for the development of their program. Beer (1980, cited in Illback and Zins, 1984) describes this as vertical loading, whereby fostering a sense of responsibility increases the degree of a participant's control (and thereby motivation). For example, the change agent might review the literature on innovative programs attempted elsewhere that could be relevant in enhancing a desired change. As a result, the change agent might design and present a proposal for staff in service training in a jointly perceived area of need. Using strategies such as these enables the expertise of the change agent to be utilized more efficiently (Scileppi, 1988).

It is important to note that various combinations of strategies should be considered to encourage acceptance of change (cf. Bracey, 1991; Hord *et al.*, 1987; Jones and Lewis, 1991; Kennedy, 1988; Larson, 1991; Papagiannis *et al.*, 1982; White, 1988). Experience gained in the field coupled with research-based knowledge, can be used to generate strategies for effecting change in education (Diesing, 1971; Wacker *et al.*, 1988). Change agents need to plan how to manage a range of strategies within an innovation to ensure its success. Most important, however, is the need for change agents to have good social interaction skills in order to effect a desire in others to change. This is essential because as Hord says, "only people can make change by altering their behavior. The real meaning of change lies in its human, not its material, component" (Hord *et al.*, 1987: p. 7).

HOW DOES INNOVATION PROCEED?

Awareness of the phases through which innovation proceeds can help "avoid piecemeal change . . . instead directing efforts toward developing substantial, effective and lasting reform" (Scileppi, 1988: p. 149). Most researchers in this area (e.g. Fullan, 1982; Kennedy, 1988; Rudduck, 1991; White, 1988) see three broad phases involved in educational innovation. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) identify these as initiation, implementation, and continuation. The first phase, initiation, is the process that leads up to and includes decisions to go ahead with a change. Beer (1980, cited in Illback and Zins, 1984; and cf. Rogers, 1983, in White, 1988) further describes the initiation process as involving two steps: (1) a diagnosis of the current situation, and (2) a prescription for improvement of that situation through change.

It is generally accepted that attempts to change an educational system should begin with a diagnosis of the problems facing the system (Beer, 1980: p. 24, in Illback and Zins, 1984). The diagnostic stage should include an assessment of the overall health of a system and an evaluation of the extent to which the institution of an innovation will be effective. For a change to get under way, there should be a recognized need or use for the resource that is proposed (Brindley and Hood, 1990; Kennedy, 1988). Therefore, the diagnosis phase should establish the need for change.

This recognized need for change should be data-based, as rational argument alone is generally not sufficient to bring about change (Brindley and Hood, 1991). In other words, "content knowledge and commitment on the part of those planning the innovation are not in themselves

enough to bring about the change" (Brindley and Hood, 1990: p. 241). Rather, data collected during the diagnostic phase, such as evaluations and needs analyses, and feedback devices (interviews, questionnaires, etc.; cf. Scileppi, 1988), can be used both to provide evidence necessary to demonstrate the need for a change, as well as a baseline against which to assess areas of a program such as goals, objectives, testing, materials, teaching and evaluation instruments which may need to be changed during the innovation process (Brown, unpublished manuscript). In addition to identifying specific targets for the innovation, plans for its successful implementation should also be considered and jointly agreed upon during the prescription phase. As Candlin (1984: p. 153) comments:

> The road to curriculum innovation is littered by wrecks of plans for which no shared responsibility existed and for which there were no agreed procedures for implementation and evaluation.

The second phase through which innovation proceeds is implementation or initial attempts to put new ideas into practice. "Implementation is critical for the simple reason that it is the means of accomplishing desired objectives" (Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991: p. 66). During this phase, goals and objectives are translated into classroom materials. These materials are piloted, evaluated, revised and finally implemented into the instructional program. The final phase, continuation, refers to a period during which the change is either accepted, built in and adopted over a period of time, or discarded. It is during this phase that meaning and value are assigned to the innovation. An evaluation of the overall success or failure of implemented changes will determine whether there is support to continue and sustain the innovation. Huberman and Miles (1984) stress that continuation depends on whether or not the change gets embedded or built in to the structure.

Although it can be helpful to think of innovation as proceeding through these three phases of development, it should be noted that the process of innovation may not be so simple in practice. First, it is not necessarily linear. Events occurring at one phase can alter the effects of decisions made in previous phases (Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991) and what happens at one phase of a change process can strongly affect subsequent phases. In addition, it is obviously the case that conditions can favour or obstruct innovation, and that innovations in certain areas may be easier to implement than others. White (1988) discussing Rogers (1983) exemplifies this with regard to the introduction of a new syllabus versus the introduction of video. Because the use of video equipment can be observed on a small scale within an ESL program, it has high "trialability". The introduction of a completely new syllabus, however, might on this basis be expected to be more difficult.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF A TEACHER IN BRINGING ABOUT INNOVATION?

Gathering support for an innovation

As mentioned above, it is essential to gather support from all members of an educational culture in order to ensure the success of an innovation. This point is of particular importance in teacher-initiated innovations since schools are hierarchically structured and it is often administrators, not teachers, who hold the power. It is important to remember that the various members of an educational culture will necessarily have differing perspectives and motivations with respect to the advantages and disadvantages of a particular proposal for

change. Administrators can be quite removed from the classroom level concerns which can drive a teacher's desire to implement an innovation. It can be quite useful to provide an opportunity for administrators to see things from the teacher's point of view, though this is not always emphasized in the literature.

The motivation for undertaking an innovation

One of the driving forces behind the proposals for change from teachers can be the desire to gain professional recognition through implementing an innovation. In addition to gathering support for the innovation on an administrative level, it is essential to provide a motivation for one's colleagues to support the innovation. In order to create a desire for change on the part of teachers, it is helpful to appeal to values and ideals which one's fellow teachers hold. For example, key issues which can motivate teachers to seek change include not only a desire to promote better learning for their students, but also the need for equity, recognition and respect. In other words, innovation can promote professional development as well as development in classrooms. "Teacher development is a complex process whose success depends upon a favourable context for learning and practical, engaging activities. Availability of resources, flexible working conditions, support, and recognition can make all the difference in the desire of teachers to refine their practice" (Loucks-Horsley *et al.*, 1987: p. 7, cited in Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991: p. 318). Although innovations can represent professional development for teachers, as Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) remind us, this benefit comes at a high cost, primarily in terms of hard work. More time and effort is required of teachers involved in the beginning phases of an innovation, and our performance as teachers may even decline at first. In promoting an innovation, then, it is important to build in rewards and incentives in order to motivate participants and promote cooperation.

The importance of participation

It is essential that all teachers fully participate in an innovation. As Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) note, "intensification-type reforms focusing on narrowly defined and imposed curriculum and teacher competencies repel good people from entering and/or staying" (p. 332) whereas ". . . staff development experiences that build on collegiality, collaboration, discovery, and solving real problems of teaching and learning summon the strength within a staff, instead of just challenging them to measure up to somebody else's standard" (Loucks-Horsely *et al.*, 1987: p. 7, in Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991: p. 318). For this reason, provisions should be made for all interested parties to be involved in the innovation. Innovation can be viewed as a vehicle through which teachers can explore their interest in the field of ESL, recognize the opportunities within the profession, and act on their desires to develop their knowledge and experience in the field. "We cannot develop institutions without developing the people in them" (Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991: p. 349).

Sustained effort

"Successful staff development . . . like successful change, requires great skill, sophistication, and persistence of effort" (Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991: p. 318). Those interested in initiating innovation need to recognize the amount of commitment necessary to creating change. Persistent efforts for change over a long period are necessary. Development, whether it be curriculum development, program development or teacher development, is not something which is achieved in a moment, but rather involves an ongoing commitment. It is helpful to consider this on-going nature of innovation as a cyclical process. Initial efforts almost always

require successive cycles of revision. For this reason, implementation of a successful innovation requires long-term involvement and commitment of teachers.

CONCLUSION

In this survey, we have developed an extended definition of innovation itself, and outlined some broadly characterized causes and processes of innovation. This has laid the ground for a discussion of the role individual teachers can play in bringing about change in their programs. In this regard the main points we would like to leave the reader with are: (1) innovation involves a change which can occur on a variety of levels, from the individual up to the program and even radiating out to have broader consequences; (2) innovation is not an isolated event, but a cyclical process of revision; (3) an innovation should constitute improvement. Defining the way in which an innovation will make things better is a key to gathering the support and motivation necessary to bring about change.

Throughout this paper, we have drawn almost entirely on mainstream as opposed to ESL-specific literature. On the one hand we feel this is justified, as the social characteristics of formal educational institutions have a fair degree of congruence world-wide. On the other hand, free-standing ESL/EFL programs do exhibit their own peculiarities. Obviously, innovations are being attempted in ESL/EFL programs all around the world (e.g. Young, 1992). We hope that our survey will be of use to teachers, and we look forward to the time when it can be supplemented with ESL innovation case studies, which will help to deepen our understanding of what teachers can do to innovate in ESL contexts and to what extent the similarities we have assumed hold good.

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