TO BE OR NOT TO BE ... RESISTANT TO CHANGE

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Abstract

The paper intends to show how people's resistance to change applies to teaching, especially to teching a foreign language, due to inter-cultural interferences, age, backgrounds, education, disposition, etc.

Life is a continuously evolving project. Everything we do is part of an untired process, a process that forces us to move forward, either out of belief or out of inertia...not that it matters anymore...

The secret lies in us being ready, if not to be aware of the *change*, at least to accept it. They say that `nothing is lost, everything is being transformed`. Especially us. But the question is: are we ready?

If we observe closely, people usually do not encourage change, due to the novelty it might bring about. Thus, they seem to be reluctant and even resistant to change, since it implies dealing with things and situations never met before.

Individuals are, by nature, `doomed` to be permanently subjected to change, some of which self-chosen, but most of the times imposed by the reality they live in.

Paradoxically, if change does not occur by itself, individuals have the tendency to make it happen, probably due to the human nature continuously in the need to experience something new. Even if admitting that they fear, or at least appear to be `en garde` when it comes to changing something in their lives, they seem to encourage, sometimes even uncounsciously, it to happen. And when it does happen, they show resistance.

In the classroom

At the beginning of every course, the teacher presents the outlines of the course in question, how the classes are going to be developed, what the expectations are, etc. At this very point, things may or may not become very clear, but, they are surely new to the students. Therefore, some of the students may feel at ease with the situation, while some other uneasy. Students, just like any group of individuals, are very different (even students at university level where they are supposed to be rather homogeneous). They come from different backgrounds, have different education, at times have different dispositions, etc. All these factors may affect their attitude towards what is being discussed in the classroom.

In our classes[1] students are between age 18 till age 23+, coming from Mures county and not only, from uni or bilingual families (Romanian and Hungarian). Some of them graduated prestigeous highschools in the town, others come from highschools in the countryside,

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therefore, their preparation and expectation differ. To them, everything is changed, nothing is the way they were used to up to that moment.

Thus, the language teacher[2] has to deal with all these and find the best way to cope with the novelty of the situations. He or she has to deal with the difficulty induced by

- the *age* of the group, teenagers and young people hungry for information, very picky and attentive to details, not easy to convince and very demanding;
- the *intercultural differences*, due to, for instance, their mother tongue, where grammar doesn't `sound` the same anymore;
- the *family background* as the language spoken at home is completed by a new language, with many new terms and few similarities
- the *educational background* since the knowledge they brought along has been affected by it: things may seem different to a young student who has spent all his/her life in a village, where he/she was the head of a class of 9 students, as compared to a medium ranked student in a class of 25 students in a town highschool;
- the *preparation*: certain students were used to a certain style in teaching and studying than others, etc.
- the *disposition*: never will individuals be in the same disposition in the same time

Regardless of the dificulties the English teacher encounters, he needs to make sure that he spares no efforts to meet the demands of his students. Obviously, he will have to face the students' attitude to everything new or already known, and cope with their possible resistance to any type of change.

It is true that the students will not always show resistance to what is being brought to them, they are not there for this reason, but the novelty of a certain situation might generate certain actions and reactions, some of them taking the form of cooperation, others, even if fewer, taking the form of resistance. This resistance may have different reasons, as mentioned above.

Resistance to change is the action taken by individuals and groups when they perceive that a change that is occurring is a threat to them. Resistance may take many forms, including active or passive, overt or covert, individual or organized, aggressive or timid.[3]

When resistance to change occurs, then it is very helpful to be able to spot it coming and hence respond appropriately to it.

Early signs of resistance: gossip

When the change is announced, the teacher[4] might notice grumbling and complaint as natural ways of airing discomfort, so he should not try to squash it. The biggest danger of it is when it is allowed to ferment in an information vacuum. It would be better to respond to gossip by opening it up, showing he is listening to concerns and taking them seriously, and providing lots of valid information that will fill the vacuum.

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Collectivism of resistance

Resistance can happen both on an individual case-by-case basis or people may band together.

Individual action

Individually, people may resist, although this is generally limited to the extent of their personal power. For those with lower power, this may include passive refusals and covert action. For those with more power, it can include open challenge and criticism.

A good idea would be to handle individual action individually, starting with those with greater power. If necessary, the teacher facing this problem may need to make an example, and disciplining a `head resistor` can send a strong signal to other resistors.

Collective action

When people find a common voice in organized resistance, then their words and actions can create a significant threat to the change, even though they are individually less powerful. Organized resistance is usually a sign of a deep divide. People will not bother to organise unless they have serious issues against change.

The teacher should try to manage collectives by negotiating with their leaders (which can be much easier than dealing with a myriad of smaller 'fires'). Possible concessions may well need to be made, but at least some key elements of the change should be rescued. Another idea would be to 'divide and conquer' by striking deals with individual key players, although this must be done very carefully as it can cause a serious backlash.

Visibility of resistance

Sometimes resistance is out in the open, but more often it starts out in a more underhand, covert way.

Covert resistance

Covert resistance is deliberate resistance to change, but done in a manner that allows the perpetrators to appear as if they are not resisting. This may occur, for example, through sabotage of various kinds. Covert resistance should be handled by showing that you know what is happening and setting in place investigations designed to identify the people responsible.

Overt resistance

Overt resistance does not try to hide, and is a result either of someone comfortable with their power, someone for whom covert acts are against their values, or someone who is desperate. This may take forms such as open argument, refusal or attack. Deal with overt resistance by first seeking to respond openly and authentically.

Passive resistance

Passive resistance occurs where people do not take specific actions. At classes, for instance, they will sit quietly and may appear to agree with the change. Their main tool is to

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refuse to collaborate with the change. In passive aggression, for example, they may agree and then do nothing to fulfill their commitments. This can be very difficult to address, as resisters have not particularly *done* anything wrong.

Active resistance

Active resistance occurs where people are taking specific and deliberate action to resist the change. It may be overt, with such as public statements and acts of resistance, and it may be covert, such as mobilizing others to create an underground resistance movement. Overt active resistance, although potentially damaging, is at least visible and you have the option of using formal disciplinary actions (although more positive methods should normally be used first). When it is covert, you may also need to use to covert methods to identify the source and hence take appropriate action.

Conclusion

No matter what type of resistance the teacher has to deal with, he has to do it smoothly, in a manner that does not interfere with the learning process. Keeping in mind the complexity of aspects this issue might take, the teacher has to develop a complex personality, and be able to show fermity, determination, but in the same time compassion, empathy, patience.

He has to be a good leader, a good counselor, manager of time, resources, stress, be able to ask and answer the right questions, spot the problem before it developed beyond any solving posibility. He has to prove to be a good organiser, a capable stimulator, an attentive monitor, a model. But before all, in order to gain credibility, he has to be an expert of the teching-learning act, position which confers him the statute he needs in order to conduct properly.

Evolution has shown that change is being achieved no matter what, but it is up to us to prevent it from happening just 'anyhow'.

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NOTES:

[1] classes formed by students majoring and minoring in English, `Petru Maior` University of Tg. Mures
[2] English teacher, in our case
[3] http://changingminds.org/disciplines/change_management/resistance_change/resistance_change.htm
[4] in our case, as explained above

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