

Humanizing English language teaching in Slovakia

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Abstract

The article focusses on the urgent need to humanize education in Slovakia, namely to look for more effective ways of teaching English as a foreign language. Traditional teaching still dominant in many mainstream schools should be replaced by more learner-centred teaching of English. The theoretical analysis of possible reasons for the discrepancy between the educational philosophy stated in pedagogical documents and real life foreign language teaching is followed by some recommendations for teacher training and education.

Key words: Learner-centred teaching, experiential learning, teacher training – content, methodology, teaching practice

Over the last two-three decades much has been said and written about the need to humanize education both in Slovakia and other Central European countries. However, it seems that English instruction in mainstream schools in Slovakia has not changed much. Generally speaking, our learners seem to achieve a relatively high level of knowledge about the target language, but their ability to use this knowledge in real life communication is often inferior. This opinion is supported by abundant empirical evidence and research findings (Lojova a kol. 2015, Strakova, 2005, Rafajlovicova, 2000). The findings confirmed the hypothesis based on everyday experience, observation and discussions with students and teachers that traditional approaches to teaching English are still dominant in our schools, even though their effectiveness cannot be considered sufficient. Therefore there is an urgent need to humanize the teaching of English and to replace traditional teaching by more learner-centred (LC) approaches.

Learner-centred teaching (LCT) has been here for more than forty years, since Carl Rogers developed his client-centred therapy. It was subsequently adopted by educators and transformed into learner-centred teaching (Rogers and Freiberg 1994) and soon adapted for foreign language teaching (e.g., Nunan 1988, Campbell and Kryszewska 1992, Tudor 1996, Weimer 2013). It is based on the same approach to human beings and the same fundamental philosophy that is expressed in Rogers' well known words: *“All individuals have within themselves the ability to guide their own lives in a manner that is both personally satisfying and socially constructive. ... we free the individuals to find their inner wisdom and confidence and they will make increasingly healthier and more constructive choices.”* (Rogers in Kirschenbaum and Henderson 1989: XIV).

In a very short time the LC approach spread and was applied in many countries where it became a fundamental educational philosophy underpinning all pedagogical decisions and methodological steps. Those are the countries where education seems to be highly efficient, as shown in various statistical documents, standardized test results and research findings in pedagogy and educational psychology.

In Slovakia, the essential LCT principles are stated in all of the current pedagogical documents underlying educational policy. So it is obvious that officially and formally the LC approach is supposed to be at the core of our education. In addition, the

approach and various issues related to the humanization of education are researched, discussed and analysed in numerous professional publications (e.g. Kosova 1997, Zelina 2004, Oravcova and Karikova 2011). However, is it really applied in our schools? When observing classes in mainstream schools (state schools), analysing educational results (e.g. PISA) and various classroom research findings, it is obvious that traditional teaching approaches are still dominant. In addition to some research findings (Lojová et al, 2015), this hypothesis is supported by a survey conducted in 2015 at the end of a course specialized on LCT for English language teacher trainees at the Faculty of Education of Comenius University in Bratislava. The results showed that only 40.7% of those questioned experienced a LC teacher during their primary or secondary schooling in state schools; 21% of respondents experienced LC teaching but it was in private schools or in abroad. The survey has been conducted for 8 years and it seems that there is a very slight shift towards more humanistic English language teaching. (A detailed analysis of the findings will be provided upon the completion of the research).

Thinking about the apparent discrepancy between the philosophy stated in pedagogical documents and real life education in Slovakia and seeing the effectiveness of LCT in some other countries, the question emerges: What are the reasons for this discrepancy? Why is it so difficult to apply LCT in our educational environment? Focussing on teaching English, the next section will examine possible explanations and offer recommendations.

Based on empirical evidence and long-term experience in teacher training, it can be hypothesised that the discrepancy between the theoretical description of LCT in educational documents and its practical application might be caused by the simplified or superficial comprehension of what LCT principles really mean and how they should be applied in an English language classroom. It is believed, that this phenomenon could be prevented or cured by teachers' experiential learning or proper teacher training.

Most English language teachers in Slovakia were educated in a traditional way. Due to natural subconscious mental processes, they have a tendency to copy their teachers - role models and the teaching strategies that they were exposed to as learners in their primary and secondary education. As the obvious outcome of their traditional education, they may not be able to sufficiently critically analyse, re-evaluate and modify them in light of currently dominant educational theories (humanistic, i.e., more learner-centred). The most effective way to overcome this "traditional burden" would undoubtedly be experiential learning, which is obvious not only theoretically but also from numerous teachers' stories. It means that if teachers had the opportunity to attend, for instance, an English language course supervised by good LC teachers, they could experience and fully enjoy the positive impact of LCT on their achievements as well as on their attitudes to learning English. In so doing, they would experience effective, motivating and inspiring learning. Moreover, they would be exposed to both different teaching strategies, which they could consciously or subconsciously copy, and to new role models that could replace their former ones. Drawing on their personal learning experience and reflecting on it introspectively, teachers could evaluate the impact of the analysed LC principles from their own perspective, perception, emotions, and learning success. Subsequently, they could better understand what goes on in their learners' minds and better comprehend learning processes and mechanisms underlying the effectiveness of LC teaching of English. The importance of these aspects was clearly expressed by Medgyes and Malderez: *"If you want to learn about teaching, start by looking into learning"* (1996: 36).

Furthermore, it is obvious that the fundamental tool for replacing traditional teaching by innovative approaches is teacher training, both pre-service and in-service. As for training and educating LC teachers of English in Slovakia, there are some essential aspects to consider:

1. What is the place of LC teaching in the content of teacher training programmes? Is it just one of numerous teaching approaches that teacher trainees are supposed to learn about explicitly; and it is up to them to decide which approach they will adopt, interiorize and put into action in their teaching? If this is the case, it can be hypothesized that teacher trainees are very likely to adopt traditional (teacher centred and content centred) approaches that they have been exposed to and therefore are familiar with. Or is there a specific explicit focus on the LC approach with the main objective to help teacher trainees fully understand and interiorize its principles and juxtapose it with traditional ones?

Another question is which courses in an English language teacher training study programme focus on LC teaching explicitly and implicitly. Apart from general pedagogical courses, the crucial attention to LC approach should be paid in English language methodology courses where the specific characteristics and peculiarities of foreign language learning could be analysed as a base for developing relevant teaching skills. In LC teaching, understanding what goes on in learners' minds is the very fundamental reason for any pedagogical action (Lojova 2005). And the best way to understand it starts with the introspective analysis of our own experiences. Therefore, one of the most effective teaching strategies seems to be comparing and contrasting traditional and LC teaching; analysing the principles from the perspective of a learner and drawing on teacher trainees' own learners' experiences through introspection.

Furthermore, it is our strong belief that apart from an explicit focus on the LC approach, it should be implicitly a part of the basic framework of all teacher training courses, whether focused on language, linguistics, literature, or life and culture.

2. LC teaching as part of the study content is undoubtedly of vital importance. However, even more important seems to be its appropriate pedagogical processing enabling teacher trainees to interiorize theoretical knowledge and transform it into required pedagogical skills. Logically, the teaching of the LC approach should be learner-centred. Teaching strategies and the way and manner of teaching may be even more influential than the content itself; it should serve as a model of LC teaching that teacher trainees can experience in full action. The choice of methods, techniques, activities, and tasks must enable a teacher not only to transmit knowledge but to facilitate trainees' learning in a way that helps them understand it properly, critically analyse and evaluate it, to restructure their body of knowledge and finally to proceduralize it. Therefore, the lessons should be composed of various ways of active learning such as problem-solving, brainstorming, introspection, critical analysis, experimenting, discussion, and debate. In so doing, teacher trainees activate their full potential, particularly higher cognitive processes, and develop their pedagogical-psychological-linguistic thinking. They also interiorize required LC principles as the essential component of their competences and teaching skills. Furthermore, they develop and strengthen their own system of beliefs, opinions, attitudes, values, and other affective features. In accordance with constructivist principles, the importance of beliefs and attitudes lies mainly in their function as a filter for the interpretation of new information and experience, and therefore as a sound foundation for the development of professional skills (Richards 1998). Due to this characteristic, beliefs, opinions, and values comprise a fundamental part of teacher trainees' own theory of learning and teaching. The objectives of teacher training imply that it is essential to focus on creating teacher trainees' own theory of foreign language learning and teaching. The reason is obvious: It is commonly believed that when entering a

classroom, teachers do not behave in accordance with some learned (prescribed) theory. They behave according to their interiorized beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and understanding of learning and teaching processes based on their subjective experience, adopted and created opinions, copied role models, pedagogical intuition, and learned knowledge (Lojova 2009).

3. The analyses of pre-service study programmes in Slovakia from the perspective of educating and training LC teachers of English show that the most pressing problem is undoubtedly a lack of teaching practice. This fact has been continually criticized and professionals at all levels have been calling for changes for years. The analyses of teacher training study programmes in countries with a highly developed system of education show that teaching practice is the fundamental component of pre-service teacher education. Training skilled teachers is hardly achievable unless there is sufficient teaching practice supervised by highly qualified professionals. Teacher trainees can see and experience how theory works in real life; they are learning how learners behave, interact, perceive, think, and learn, they are exposed to complex and multifaceted classroom situations. Furthermore, they can experience various real-life classroom problems, analyse their causes and roots, seek solutions, theoretically as well as practically, and experience the responses of learners to positive pedagogical steps. In so doing, they gradually tune and interiorize their knowledge and develop cognitive, interpersonal, and practical skills. This is hardly achievable in anything other than an authentic environment.

The importance of teaching practice has been a topic of many professional discussions all over the world for more than two decades, particularly as a result of research conducted in schools, among language teachers and teacher trainees. It is closely related to current tendencies emphasizing an increased focus on training and development, i.e., skills and competences. It is a kind of reaction to the emphasis on the amount of knowledge and the command of rules and methods, which is dominant in traditional teacher education. (Richards, 1998, Medgyes and Malderez 1996, Kosova 2012, etc.). However, nowadays the process of training differs fundamentally from traditional behaviouristic training focussed on creating habits, prescribing methods, techniques and classroom behaviours of teachers. It is understood as a holistic approach to a teacher as an independent, knowledgeable and critically thinking human being (Richards 1998, Roberts, 1998, Lojova 2009, Chodera 2013).

In Slovakia there is an urgent need to re-evaluate English language teacher training programmes in the light of the aforementioned analysis and state-of-the-art-developments in teacher training worldwide. A useful comprehensive guidance could be provided by the outcome of the EU project *European Profile for Language Teacher Education – A Frame of Reference* conducted at the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom in 2004 in cooperation with a group of international teacher educators (Kelly et al, 2004). Based on the complex analyses of the training and education of foreign language teachers for primary and secondary education in 32 European countries (<http://ec.europa.eu/languages/documents/doc493en.pdf>) they propose an innovative foreign language teacher training frame of reference. The Profile presents a toolkit of 40 items which could be included in a teacher education programme to equip language teachers with all of the professional competencies, to enhance their professional development and to lead to the greater transparency and portability of qualifications (<http://www.lang.soton.ac.uk/profile/report/MainReport.pdf>). The material comprises detailed recommendations aimed at the structure of study programmes, content, and knowledge, with the main emphasis on developing skills, competences, strategies, values, and attitudes. It emphasises that the fundamental component is teaching practice and that the education should take place on targeted school premises.

Very similar recommendations comprise the outcomes of several projects conducted in the Czech Republic at the Faculty of Education of Masaryk University in Brno in 2005 and 2012

http://www.akreditacnikomise.cz/attachments/article/425/AK_analyzaDCJ_5_11_2012.pdf).

The analyses of these materials show similarities with the large-scale project of the Ministry of Education in Slovakia conducted in 2011- 2012 „ *Transformácia vysokoškolského vzdelávania učiteľov v kontexte reformy školstva*” (<https://www.minedu.sk/data/att/1903.pdf>). The project team lead by professor Kosová was comprised of professionals from all of the Slovak institutions involved in teacher training. The complex issue of teacher education and training was discussed and analysed and recommendations for changes and further developments in teacher training and education were suggested. Special attention was also paid to foreign language teacher training. The need to find a solution for more effective teaching practice was particularly emphasized. The project report provides a frame of reference for teacher education consistent with the latest developments in teacher education in other European countries. Unfortunately, the project outcomes and restructuring of teacher education have yet to be implemented.

Conclusion

The importance of LCT for more effective English language learning is obvious. Apart from the empirical evidence, this is being confirmed by research findings and the latest developments in the psychology of learning and teaching, neurodidactics and other fields that can shed more light on these processes. Current foreign language teaching methodology is increasingly based on findings in the field of psychology (psycholinguistics, psychodidactics) (e.g. Dornyei, 2005, Hinkel, 2005, Williams and Burden 1997) and particularly on the rapidly developing neurosciences (neuropsychology, neurolinguistics, neuropedagogy, neurodidactics) (e.g. Jensen 1996, Blakemore and Frith 2005, Schumann 2004, Paradis 2004). Their findings, which focus on various cognitive and affective processes, provide educators with clues to understanding what happens in classrooms and fundamental guidelines for pedagogical decisions. As expressed in the very basic golden rule: “Everything that is achieved in a classroom eventually depends on what goes on in the learners’ minds.” Therefore the first and foremost aim of a good LC teacher must be to get to know what goes on in their learners’ minds, respect it and adjust their teaching to it as much as possible. To achieve this level of humanizing in our schools, to train and educate English language teachers who are able to shift their focus more towards learners, there is still a long way to go. It requires the continual up-dating of teacher training in light of humanistic principles. Furthermore, it is obvious that effective teacher education must be based on sound research findings. Therefore, in Slovakia there is an urgent need to support basic research as well as research focussed on the application of the LC principles to our socio-cultural, political, language and educational environment.

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