

TEACHER EMPOWERMENT: A CHALLENGE FOR THE TWENTY – FIRST CENTURY

Anne-Marie de Mejía
Universidad del Valle

Introduction

The term *empowerment* is becoming increasingly commonly used, not only in the spheres of gender studies (Leon, 1997), but also in such diverse fields as Business Management (Harari, 1993), Linguistics (Cameron et al., 1992) and more recently, in English Language Teaching (E.L.T), as can be seen by a section of the textbook series *Amazing English* (Addison Wesley, 1996) dedicated to this topic. The term itself, while proving attractive at first sight, provides challenges both for analysts and translators. While Leon (1997) maintains that the appropriate Spanish translation is *empoderamiento*, others have rejected this as rather unwieldy and propose terms like *potenciación* or *apoderar* which are, perhaps, more transparent terms.

In this article, I would like to examine the notion of empowerment specifically as related to teacher development in the areas of English Language Teaching and Bilingual Education programmes in Colombia. If we are thinking about the type of teachers that will be needed to cope with the challenges of the teaching and learning of foreign languages in the twenty-first century we need to consider ideas like 'autonomy', 'responsibility' and 'capacity for decision-making'. In other words, we need to consider how far language teachers will be empowered to take these kinds of decisions which are called for in a society where the international technology revolution has completely changed the communicative practices of individuals and

groups throughout the world at all levels and where globalism and internationalism have revolutionised the idea of the nation state.

I will begin by considering two visions of teaching which implicitly and explicitly foreground the need for teacher empowerment; the first, a general philosophical view of the role of a teacher as proposed by Heidegger (1972); the second, a vision of the role and responsibilities of a teacher in a bilingual education programme according to García (1993).

Perspectives on Teaching and the Role of Teachers

According to Martin Heidegger the process of teaching is more difficult and demanding than the process of learning because, teaching means 'allowing learning'... the real teacher does not leave anything to be learnt except learning itself. For this reason his actions sometimes give the impression that nothing has been learnt from him, if 'learning' is only understood as the obtaining of useful knowledge. The teacher deserves the respect of the learners in so far as he understands that he has still to learn much more than they do: he has to learn to allow learning. (Heidegger, 1972 : 20-21)¹

Ofelia García sees the role of the teacher in

¹ Author's translation.

the following light :

The teacher must abandon her limited role as instructor, merely knowledgeable about educational approaches and materials. Teachers must become true educators, questioning and shaping the social goal of the educational programme and providing students with the knowledge and resources needed.

The responsibility of a teacher goes beyond the classroom and beyond the immediate community. She must stop being an instructor, accepting orders, or the curriculum planned, or material given, and must claim her role as an educator, empowering the community she teaches by providing it with the appropriate knowledge and resources it needs. (García , 1993 : 25, 36)

The first vision of teaching rejects the notion of transmission of 'useful' knowledge as the main aim of the teaching-learning process and emphasises instead, the need to allow the students to learn. In modern E.L.T. terminology this could perhaps be classed as the need for 'learner autonomy. Heidegger also points out how difficult it is to achieve this. In spite of our talk of facilitation, learner centred approaches and learner strategies, old habits die hard and we as teachers often feel guilty if we do not intervene sufficiently in classroom interaction.

García rejects a limited instructional role for teachers which does not take into account wider socio-cultural and educational influences. Her vision of a 'true' educator implies a critical commitment and active involvement in constructing knowledge which is valid for the wider community. She refers explicitly to the need for teachers to empower the

community they work with. We may ask what this implies in the context of E.L.T. in Colombia. What community is being served ? How is it to be empowered ?

In order to provide an answer, I think we need to begin by examining the meaning of the word itself. We can analyse the verb *empower* as a transitive verb involving both an agent who carries out the process of empowering, and a recipient, or object, of this process who is empowered. However, we then have a problem. How can someone empower someone else? Can power be transferred at will from one person to another ? Things are not that simple. Rather, we need to think of a process where individuals are able to come to an understanding and value their own knowledge, which will result in them being empowered. As Gieve and Magalhaes (1994:131) say, "Empowerment is the ability to value one's knowledge and meanings through a process of critical reflection on the meanings and knowledge of others."

If we accept this definition of empowerment there are certain inferences that can be drawn. First of all, it is our own knowledge and meanings that will lead to us being empowered, not knowledge imposed on us or given by others. However, the process is the development of our own knowledge through critical reflection of the meanings of others. In other words, we have to decide on our position in relation to the knowledge we receive from outside and make it our own. Let's take an example from the realm of language teaching by looking at the changing view of grammar teaching in E.L.T. over the last ten to fifteen years. Initially with the enthusiasm generated by the Communicative Approach in the late 70s and early 80s, grammar teaching was

definitely 'out'. Recently, however, grammar teaching has been revalued, as evidenced in a series of recent publications, such as "Focus on Grammar". Unless teachers are able to step back a little from the current positions in vogue and reflect upon their validity and implications, they will be pushed from one extreme to another as a result of the 'pendulum effect' and will not be able to take an informed decision about their views on the teaching of grammar in E.L.T. programmes.

Let us now return to García's notion of the empowering of the community. In the first instance, I think we may say that this means empowering the students we teach, enabling them to have their own knowledge without imposing our own on them. Paulo Freire (1972) sees this as helping people to identify and develop their own agendas and scenarios, looking outside for whatever expertise they need. It is obvious that these ideas are very closely linked to current E.L.T. notions of the role of the teacher as a facilitator of students' learning, learner-centred approaches and learner strategies.

Yet, how can these ideas be put into practice? How can people actually "learn to speak with (their) own voice"? (Bhavnani, 1990). As a partial answer, I would like to describe a recent research project carried out by two researchers from Universidad del Valle in Cali, which specifically focused on the process of empowerment involved in the construction of a bilingual curriculum in a monolingual educational institution. This experience has provided valuable insights about ways in which the participants in the project, teachers, administrators and university researchers, have been able to better their understanding of the roles and mutual responsibilities in the process of bilingual

curriculum construction and have become 'empowered' to take decisions.

An Experience of Teacher Empowerment in Cali

In order to understand this experience appropriately, it is necessary first to sketch in some details of the specific educational and sociocultural context in which this study was carried out.

During the past five years, there has been great interest in the area of bilingualism and bilingual education in the whole of Colombia in general, and in Cali in particular. Very frequently we witness the opening of new schools which announce that they are 'bilingual', 'bicultural' or both. While there are some schools that may use these labels for the purpose of charging higher fees for their services, there are many serious institutions which are concerned about the need to respond to the changes brought about by the globalisation of the economy and new demands of increasingly complex multilateral international relations in a world which is becoming ever more interconnected and therefore in need of a *lingua franca*, which more often than not, is English.

There are also many monolingual schools in the country, mainly catering for an upper middle class population (Estrato 5 and 6, in Colombian terms) which see the need to offer their students a bilingual programme. They see the advantages of developing a high level of proficiency in two languages as providing a good preparation for university education both in Colombia and abroad, better job prospects, a wider knowledge of the world, as well as increased opportunities for travelling and working abroad. However, up to now,

there has been very little research carried out into bilingual education programmes in the country. Most schools either look towards Britain, U.S.A. or Canada to provide an appropriate model for bilingual education provision, or find out what other bilingual schools within Colombia are doing and copy certain practices. In both cases the results are often less than satisfactory, because there are no firm bases for decision making or criteria for curriculum development and the models have been developed in different socio-cultural and educational contexts in response to other needs and circumstances.

In view of this, Harvey Tejada, professor in the Department of Foreign Languages of Universidad del Valle, and I decided to design a project which would help schools to make the transition from being monolingual to becoming bilingual. We had two main objectives in mind: i. to work with members of the educational communities to construct a bilingual curriculum which would be appropriate to their philosophy, context and specific needs; and ii. to transform the visions of the participants in the project by means of a process of collaborative research which would be empowering.

When schools and university departments work together it is generally through a process of consultancy. In these cases, university professors are usually seen as outside experts, who are brought in to carry out an analysis. They observe, interview key personnel and write a report, detailing the results and recommendations for future implementation. They then leave and often have no further contact with the institution. The findings and recommendations contained in the report may be difficult to interpret without expert knowledge and power is kept firmly in the

hands of the consultants. There is an intervention, which may bring about some positive results but there is little opportunity for learning on the part of the participants.

The bilingual curriculum project was conceived as having a different emphasis. All participants, teachers, administrators, psychologists and researchers, were recognised as having different expertise, which would form the basis for the joint construction of the curriculum. Through a series of interactive sessions the participants would work together to draft, comment on, suggest and criticise the emergent proposals. No one person would be responsible for the final proposal, it would be a collaborative effort.

In the circumstances, we felt it was necessary to create our own working definition of empowerment which would reflect our second project aim. We therefore proposed the following: "Empowerment is the process through which the participants in research become conscious of their capacities, potential, knowledge and experiences in the area, so that they can assume responsibilities in the development of autonomy and full participation in decision-making, not only during the research process, but also in the following phases of assessment and modification of the proposals in the light of the changes and new advances in national educational policies."

As can be seen, the emphasis in this definition is on development rather than product and therefore implies a longer time scale than is often considered in consultancies. The process of consciousness-raising is seen as leading to a greater degree of responsibility and participation in decision-making both

during the research and afterwards. Furthermore, everyone taking part in the project is considered as a participant. There is no division between researchers, on the one hand, and their subjects, on the other.

This new approach had repercussions on the way in which the project was carried out and how the university researchers acted in the meetings. For example, we refused to respond to demands on us as "the experts", which were common, particularly at the beginning of the project. At times, we decided to keep silent and not give our opinions, in an attempt to help others to take the floor. We also encouraged presentations and discussions of different aspects of bilingualism and bilingual education by members of the group. The written reports on each of the sessions were analysed, modified and approved by all participants.

In order to document the process of empowerment, we collected three different types of data. First of all, we recorded the interactive sessions with a view to carrying out a later analysis of power relations within the group, examining such things as, who initiated, who had the longest turn, who spoke most frequently, what type of speech acts predominated, etc. We also recorded our own observations as to the process of empowerment in an on-going research diary. In addition, we asked all the participants to reflect on their experiences in the project every three months, asking them how they felt about the process and mode of working as well as trying to find out how they felt they were contributing.

I will now talk about some preliminary results of this study. According to our observations and diary notes there was a

definite change in orientating. At first, as I have mentioned above, we were frequently asked for our views as "experts" and this forced us into taking a low profile in the sessions, guiding and orientating the process by provision of draft documents for discussion, guidelines and reflections. This lack of overt leadership led to a gradual increase in participation on behalf of the other participants.

An interesting indication of these changes was the appearance of a new member of the team half way through the project, the newly appointed High School Coordinator. His reactions and the questions he asked, such as, "Tell us which is the best way to teach English?" showed by contrast how far the rest of the group had advanced in the process of empowerment. Another key indicator was the presence of new teachers who were starting to work in the bilingual programme. Initially, they kept asking, "Is it correct to do this?" "What should we do about that?" Later, they relaxed sufficiently to be able to discuss their concerns with the other members of the group and to propose possible solutions to try out in class and later be evaluated. At the end of the project, the school members of the research team felt sufficiently confident to be able to contemplate the further implementation of the bilingual programme, with only occasional reference to the university researchers.

Conclusions

What can we conclude from this experience of empowerment? First of all, I think we have to acknowledge, as others have (Ivanic, 1994), that carrying out the type of collaborative research project is far more time-consuming than making use of the results of consultancies. So, the question is whether the benefits outweigh

the cost. The preliminary results indicate that the collaborative research process is more effective in that it tends to lead to deeper conviction on the part of the participants for implementation of change. It is a truism that change cannot be decreed from above (a top-down approach). It is also true that initiatives implemented by individual teachers (a bottom-up approach) are often doomed to failure, if these are not supported by the school administration, or at least by a sizeable group of other staff. A collaborative approach to curriculum design helps to avoid these two extremes.

Secondly, this type of project is more threatening initially to individual participants, as each person is partly responsible for the decisions taken. No-one can blame other instances, such as the administrative office or the director, for unpopular outcomes. However, this also means that all participants are helped towards assuming responsibility for decision-making with the support of the other participants in the project. This can lead to the growth, professional development and empowerment of everyone, including the academic researchers and the school administrators, who traditionally have been considered a powerful elite within society.

Perhaps most important of all though, is the consideration that this kind of collaborative enterprise is directly in line with a humanistic approach to teaching and learning and to the carrying out of research with human beings. Participants, (teachers, students, researchers, administrators) are treated as people who all have expertise in different areas and not as efficient cogs in an institutional machine. They are encouraged to share their knowledge and experience and this leads to richer insights and more valuable results in

relation to the immediate school context.

Collaborative research is not new in Colombia as can be seen by the work of the sociologist Orlando Fals Borda and his colleagues (1987). What we have attempted to come to terms with in our work is how to carry out a project which will have repercussions in the construction of bilingual education programmes in Colombian schools and most importantly, it will have repercussions in the training of teachers, researchers and administrators so that they will be able to take on the challenges and be successful in the new millennium.

Acknowledgement: The author would like to thank Harvey Tejada for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

REFERENCES

- BHAVNANI, K. 1990 What's power got to do with it? Empowerment and social research. In I. Parker & J. Shotter (eds.) *Deconstruction Social Psychology*. London: Routledge.
- CAMERON, D. Frazer, E. Harvey, P. Rampton, B. Richardson, K. 1992 *Researching Language: Issues of Power and Method*. London: Routledge.
- FALS BORDA, O. ZAMOSC, P. SANTANA, P. VELASQUEZ, F. CARDENAS, J. GARCIA, C. (eds.) 1987 *Investigación Acción-Participativa en Colombia*. Bogotá
- FREIRE, P. 1972 *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

GARCIA, O. 1993 Understanding the societal role of the teacher in transitional bilingual classroom: lessons from the sociology of language. In K. Zondag (ed.) *Bilingual Education in Friesland*. Ljouwert: GCO / MSU.

GIEVE, S. & MAGALHAES, I. (eds.) 1994 *Power Ethics and Validity: Issues in the Relationship between Researchers and Researched*. CRILE Occasional Report 6. Lancaster University.

HARARI, O 1993 Deje de otorgar poder a su gente. *Management Review*.

HEIDEGGER, M. 1972 *Qué significa pensar?* Buenos Aires: Ed. Nova.

IVANIC, R. 1994 Collaborative research: enriching the contribution or contaminating the data? In Gieve, S. & Magalhaes, I.(eds.) 1994 *Power Ethics and Validity: Issues in the Relationship between Researchers and Researched*. CRILE Occasional Report 6. Lancaster University.

LEON, M. (ed.) 1997 *Poder y Empoderamiento de las Mujeres*. Bogotá: T.M. Editores.