

TITLE: From “teaching strategies” to “enabling strategies”

AUTHOR: Margarete Nezbeda

NAME OF TA: **TEA**

COUNTRY: Austria

FIRST PUBLISHED: **TEA** Newsletter (ELT News) No 52, Spring 2005 (edited July 2006)

From “teaching strategies” to “enabling strategies” by Margarete Nezbeda

Several years ago I read a statement about formal education which made me very sad both as a mother and as a teacher: “The young child learns very quickly that school is not about learning. School is about avoiding mistakes.” (Peter M. Senge, senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology). What is wrong with school, what is wrong with teaching? Have our teaching strategies failed?

Most teachers (of foreign languages) will agree that effective teaching strategies are needed for successful language teaching and that the better our teaching strategies are, the better our pupils will learn. What do we actually mean when we talk about teaching “strategies”? While recently watching the news on TV, I realized that the term is by no means used only in educational contexts but also in the context of war, politics or business:

strat•e•gy Etymology: Greek stratEgia generalship, from stratEgos

1 a (1) : the science and art of employing the political, economic, psychological, and military forces of a nation or group of nations to afford the maximum support to adopted policies in peace or war
(2) : the science and art of military command exercised to meet the enemy in combat under advantageous conditions (Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=strategy> 10/01/2005)

strategy noun

a detailed plan for achieving success in situations such as war, politics, business, industry or sport, or the skill of planning for such situations:

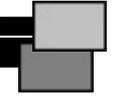
(Cambridge International Dictionary of English <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/define.asp?key=78677&dict=CALD> 10/01/2005)

The fact that the military or economic meaning of the word seems to be the basic entry in all the dictionaries I consulted made me think about the question: Why would teachers want to use teaching “strategies”? Does that mean that we teachers

are generals who have to devise and implement carefully chosen plans and use methodological “weapons” to “defeat” our “enemy”, the pupils on the classroom “battlefield”? As we all know, achieving “a victory” over the “enemy’s” “innate” desire to remain inactive in traditional educational settings does indeed require excellent, in our case, methodological plans of action, state-of-the art equipment, as well as cunning and clever manoeuvres on the part of the teacher. In a scenario like this, success seems to depend entirely on the teacher’s initiative and failure is always her fault, isn’t it?

This “top-down” approach often brings about a great deal of pressure and negative stress even for professionally engaged teachers. Sadly, this permanent pressure can lead to burn-out and frustration and in some cases, even to health problems. We seem to be trapped in a win-lose situation. Or is it even a lose-lose situation? Can anything be done about it? If so, what? Should we continue to improve our teaching strategies? Ignore the problem? See a psychiatrist? Retire? Or should we change our beliefs and our attitude towards teaching?

Let us first of all reflect upon the relation between teaching and learning: Most of us were probably educated in a “jug and mug”-approach learning environment, in which the teacher acts as “the sage on the stage”. These teachers are the source of all knowledge: they usually teach sitting or standing in front of their classes; they explain and demonstrate, make all the decisions, give all the instructions. They are in control, do most of the talking - in short: they are the most active person in the classroom and are the focus of the lesson. In this scenario roles are clearly defined: teachers teach and pupils are supposed to learn: Pupils are the objects of teaching, the receptacles – the “mugs”- into which the teacher pours knowledge from her “jug of wisdom”: pupils listen (or do not), follow instructions (willingly or unwillingly), understand (or do not), ask or answer questions (or do not), reproduce knowledge (or cannot). The individual student is not expected to do a lot of talking; pupils remain seated for hours - in short: pupils are rather inactive and



very often bored.

The hidden assumption of this widespread “jug and mug” approach is that the better the teacher teaches, the better pupils will learn. We all know from experience that this does not always work in practice: pupils may be listening, but are they learning? Although in a disciplined classroom they may all seem to be paying attention, some of them might be daydreaming; others might even be doing something else more interesting at the moment. Let’s face it: although the teacher may be an outstanding “sage on the stage” with comprehensive knowledge of subject matter and methodology - although she may have excellent teaching “strategies” at her disposal, she cannot do the learning for her pupils.

Let us look at the “objects” of teaching now, the learners. What does learning involve? How do we learn? How did we learn as children before we were instructed at school? Just try to remember how you learnt to ride a bike: maybe you watched somebody do it and you wanted to imitate this person, maybe somebody demonstrated the action, maybe there were a few explanations what to do and what not, but then you probably got on the bike and you tried to DO it. You probably fell off several times, tried again, listened to friendly advice and fell off again wondering what had gone wrong this time before you finally managed to perform the action automatically and without thinking.

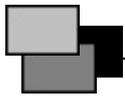
The process of experiential learning can be described in the form of a cycle: we must DO what we want to learn, recall how we did it, reflect on it, then draw our conclusions for our next attempt, make any necessary adaptations and get ready for new action (Scrivener 1994: 3). In such a scenario teachers or tutors help the learners to become autonomous by creating a positive learning environment, by providing information, by offering guidance, and by giving useful feedback. Each pupil in our classroom is a unique personality with her/his own biography, her/his strengths and weaknesses and, most important for learning, with her/his own individual learning style. Bearing all that in mind, it

would be naïve to believe that even the most perfect teacher could simply fill empty minds with her knowledge: “... the essential learning experience is in doing the thing yourself” (Scrivener 1994:3), teaching just surrounds the learning process, the focus is on learning and the learner. In this scenario the teacher has become a “guide by the side”.

Back in 1997 about 1,000 books were published internationally every day, and the total of all printed knowledge doubled every five years according to Reuters Magazine - today the time span may even be much shorter - which means that we cannot only teach our pupils knowledge but we have to educate learners for life-long learning, and help them develop study skills and competences in order to become autonomous learners, who “can do their own thing”. That is why teachers, whose core qualities according to US psychologist Carl Rogers, should be “positive regard”, “empathy” and “authenticity” can no longer be the exclusive focus of the lesson, but need to become their pupils’ counsellors, their “facilitators” or “enablers” (Scrivener 1994:6). This means nothing less than a paradigm shift: the “sage on the stage” must finally evolve into a “guide by the side”. Like coaches, we have to enable and empower our pupils so that they may become successful life-long learners. In order to achieve this aim, we will need to share responsibility with learners and develop “enabling strategies” rather than improve our teaching strategies.

Let me conclude my reflections with the following propositions:

1. The learner is the focus of the learning process, not the teacher. Children may learn without a teacher but a teacher cannot teach without pupils.
2. The “jug and mug” approach is inappropriate in the long run because learners are not “empty receptacles” but real human beings with their own biographies, who construct their own knowledge by fitting new information into what they already know.
3. Pupils must DO what they are supposed to learn.



4. Learning in the 21st century is no longer about the acquisition of knowledge only but about study skills, and the development of competences.
5. Good classroom management can help teachers to structure lessons meaningfully and - in this way - encourage learning.
6. The European Language Portfolio <http://www.coe.int/portfolio> , which is being promoted by the Council of Europe, is a powerful innovative instrument for language learners on their way to autonomy and for teachers in quest of effective “enabling strategies”.

References:

Cambridge International Dictionary of English. © Cambridge University Press 2004. 12/02/04. <<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/define.asp?key=78677&dict=CALD>>.

Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary copyright © 2004 by Merriam-Webster, Incorporated. 12/02/2004. <<http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=strategy>>.

Scrivener, Jim. *Learning Teaching. A guidebook for English language teachers*. Oxford: Macmillan Heinemann, 1994.

Information Overload Causes Stress. 1997, March/April. Reuters Magazine.

Council of Europe. *The European Language Portfolio*. <http://www.coe.int/portfolio>

Bio-data:

Margarete Nezbeda – TEA Board member since 2004, Summer School organizer, ELT News coordinator; taught English and German at a secondary academic school in Vienna and English methodology at post-secondary college for teacher training. She has been involved in innovative projects at the Austrian Centre for Language Competence, Graz www.sprachen.ac.at and is co-author of the Austrian versions of the European Language Portfolio for 10-15 year-olds and young adults (15+).

She can be contacted at margarete.nezbeda@tea-austria.org or margarete.nezbeda@chello.at