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EDITORS

Prof. Dr. Muhlise COSKUN ÖGEYİK,
Prof. Héctor Ramiro ORDÓÑEZ ZÚÑIGA

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THE ROLE OF METHODS IN THE POSTMETHOD ERA

Nina Daskalovska^{1*}, Adrijana Hadzi-Nikolova², Marija Todorova³

¹Goce Delcev University, Faculty of Philology, Stip, North Macedonia

²Goce Delcev University, Faculty of Philology, Stip, North Macedonia

³Goce Delcev University, Faculty of Philology, Stip, North Macedonia

ABSTRACT

Throughout the history of language teaching a lot of linguists, psychologists and educators have been trying to create the best method. The main problem in this search for the best method is that they were looking for a universal method that would be appropriate for all teachers and learners and all contexts. Numerous methods and approaches have been developed, some of which lasted for a long time while others were short-lived, some had an enormous influence on language teachers and learners, while others were discarded as impractical or inefficient, some were widely accepted, while others were severely criticized. However, despite their shortcomings, every method and approach can offer some valuable principles and insights and provide useful activities and techniques that can be incorporated into any language teaching methodology. However, during the last three decades a number of linguists have started questioning the notion of method and the wisdom of searching for the best method. It seems that the zest for the search for the best method has been replaced by the zest for completely discarding the concept of method. Postmethod pedagogy has become the hot topic of discussions and debates in the field of language teaching and learning. The aim of this paper is to present and discuss the characteristics of postmethod pedagogy and the role of methods in the postmethod era.

Keywords: methods, postmethod pedagogy, postmethod era, postmethod frameworks, Communicative Language Teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past thirty years, linguists have increasingly questioned the pursuit of a single “best” language teaching method (Brown, 2002; Kumaravadelu, 1994; Pennycook, 1989). Howatt and Widdowson (2004) argue that methods often fail to align with classroom realities. They suggest moving away from imposing expert-derived methods and toward respecting local teaching contexts, which allow educators to develop approaches suited to their cultural and linguistic realities. Therefore, the main issue today is not which is the best method, but how we can adapt the various procedures and techniques and make them relevant to the local context.

Kumaravadelu (2005) argues that there are five myths about language teaching methods which have created a false image of the concept of method:

1. *There is a best method out there ready and waiting to be discovered*—which overlooks the diverse and uncontrollable variables such as language policy and planning, learning needs, learner variations, teacher profiles, etc.
2. *Method constitutes the organizing principle for language teaching*—which ignores crucial factors like teacher cognition, learner diversity, and socio-political influences.
3. *Method has a universal and ahistorical value*—most methods are rooted in idealized concepts, they are far removed from classroom reality and neglect the unique needs of local contexts.
4. *Theorists conceive knowledge, and teachers consume knowledge*—this reinforces a hierarchical gap between theorists and practitioners.
5. *Method is neutral and has no ideological motivation*—methods often reflect unequal power dynamics, such as gendered division between male conceptualizers and female practitioners or native/non-native division privileging native speakers over non-native teachers.

The author introduces the “postmethod condition”, advocating for teacher autonomy (1994, p. 27). He proposes that teachers construct methodologies grounded in classroom realities rather than adhering to rigid, theorist-defined methods. This approach emphasizes three principles: rejecting one-size-fits-all methods, promoting teacher reflection and experimentation, and using principled pragmatism to evaluate teaching strategies. Similarly, Brown (2002) suggests abandoning the quest for the perfect method in favor of flexible, research-based approaches. Teachers should adapt techniques and methodologies to their specific contexts, taking calculated risks, responding to students’ needs, trying out innovative pedagogical techniques and assessing their effectiveness (p.10).

Hall (2016, p. 218) highlights three perspectives on the development of methods: a) Progressive and cumulative—each new method improves on previous ones; b) Cyclical—methods and key principles emerge and re-emerge in response to social and geopolitical changes; and c) Linguistic imperialism—methods from dominant countries are often imposed on diverse global contexts. The author points out that the shift in contemporary English Language Teaching (ELT) emphasizes localization, with teachers integrating various techniques to meet the needs of their learners (p. 323). Macky (1965, p. 138) observes that while scientific progress builds on prior advancements, language-teaching methods have shifted erratically between extremes. Bell (2003) notes that criticisms of methods are mostly based on highly prescriptive methods such as Suggestopedia, The Silent Way or Community Language Learning, which have specific sets of procedures, materials and techniques. However, when viewed as flexible frameworks adaptable to diverse contexts, methods still offer value. Evidence suggests methods were rarely implemented in their purest form, as classroom practices result from interactions among teachers, students, and materials. For example, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) succeeds by incorporating principles from earlier methods, such as peer support, learner autonomy, problem-solving, discovery learning, risk-taking, focus on the learner and so on. Even postmethod pedagogy relies on insights from previous methods and approaches (p. 329). Nunan (1991) emphasizes overcoming the “pendulum effect” in methodology by grounding practices in empirical evidence and insights into learner needs.

Prabhu (1990) argues against the pursuit of a universal “best method”, as teaching contexts vary widely in terms of social, educational, teacher-related, and learner-related factors. Instead, he highlights the importance of teachers’ “sense of plausibility”—their subjective understanding of teaching shaped by experience and reflection. Effective teaching emerges from questioning practices and remaining open to change rather than mechanically following routines. The distinction between dynamic and static teaching is more critical than debates over specific methods (p. 174). Ultimately, the focus should

shift from finding the best method to fostering interaction between teachers' and specialists' pedagogic perspectives. This approach empowers educators to adapt and refine practices, ensuring teaching remains responsive and effective in varied contexts (Prabhu, 1990, p. 176).

Bell (2003, 2007) asserts that methods remain relevant as frameworks for teacher autonomy and contextual adaptability. Teachers often adopt an eclectic approach, blending techniques from various methods to suit specific contexts. He argues that teacher education should include knowledge of methods as a foundation, enabling educators to critically evaluate and adapt them.

In summary, the debate has shifted from finding the "best" method to empowering teachers to make informed decisions based on their unique teaching environments. Teachers are encouraged to integrate methods flexibly and prioritize learners' needs, creating context-sensitive pedagogical strategies.

POSTMETHOD FRAMEWORKS

Can (2009) argues that postmethod pedagogy does not grant teachers absolute freedom in deciding how to teach or which techniques to use. Teachers must still adhere to essential principles for effective teaching. The postmethod approach, informed by conventional methods and personal experience, allows teachers to develop their own context-sensitive methodologies. It is especially beneficial for novice teachers, offering structured guidance, and for experienced teachers, aiding in the evaluation and justification of their practices. The postmethod framework is described as "generalizable, open-ended, descriptive, theory-neutral, method-neutral, and non-restrictive," providing flexibility without rigidity.

Kumaravadivelu's macrostrategic framework

Kumaravadivelu (2001) introduces postmethod pedagogy as a three-dimensional framework comprising particularity, practicality, and possibility:

1. *Particularity*: Emphasizes tailoring pedagogy to specific groups of learners, teachers, and sociocultural contexts. This involves developing localized knowledge through observation, evaluation, and iterative problem-solving.
2. *Practicality*: Encourages teachers to develop their theories of practice by overcoming the divide between expert-driven theories and teacher-developed personal insights. Reflective teaching and action research are critical to this process.
3. *Possibility*: Acknowledges the sociopolitical and identity-forming experiences that learners bring into the classroom. Teachers should address both linguistic and social needs, enabling education to act as a tool for identity formation and social transformation.

These principles serve as a foundation for constructing location-specific pedagogies, offering flexibility without imposing a fixed methodology. Kumaravadivelu (1994) extends the postmethod concept with ten macrostrategies designed to empower teachers to create context-sensitive microstrategies:

1. *Maximize Learning Opportunities*: Teachers should adapt lesson plans to learner needs, treating syllabi and textbooks as flexible tools rather than rigid structures.
2. *Facilitate Negotiated Interaction*: Promote meaningful interactions where learners actively engage in clarification and comprehension through open-ended activities.
3. *Minimize Perceptual Mismatches*: Address potential mismatches between teacher intentions and learner interpretations in areas such as culture, pedagogy, and strategy.

4. *Activate Intuitive Heuristics*: Encourage self-discovery by exposing learners to contextual examples for inferring grammatical rules.
5. *Foster Language Awareness*: Increase learners' understanding of linguistic structures through explicit and implicit methods.
6. *Contextualize Linguistic Input*: Integrate linguistic components in meaningful contexts to aid comprehension and usage.
7. *Integrate Language Skills*: Holistically develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, avoiding fragmentation.
8. *Promote Learner Autonomy*: Equip learners with strategies to self-direct their learning.
9. *Raise Cultural Consciousness*: Enhance learners' awareness of and empathy toward the target culture, integrating cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions.
10. *Ensure Social Relevance*: Align teaching with societal, political, and economic contexts to address learners' real-world needs.

Kumaravadivelu emphasizes that the framework is descriptive rather than prescriptive, allowing for ongoing modification based on classroom feedback and experimentation. Teachers are encouraged to conduct action research, analyze classroom interactions, and reflect on their practices to create tailored microstrategies. The ultimate goal of the postmethod framework is to balance teacher guidance and autonomy, empowering educators to develop effective, locally-relevant pedagogical practices. By using diverse materials and adapting to specific classroom contexts, teachers can effectively implement the macrostrategies. Each macrostrategy can have various microstrategies that depend on the local learning and teaching situations. The teachers can use materials from newspapers, books, the Internet or any other sources in order to design suitable microstrategies for a particular macrostrategy.

Stern's three-dimensional framework

Stern (1983) observed that the move away from rigid, method-centered language teaching in the 1960s and 1970s marked a significant step toward addressing the shortcomings of traditional approaches. He proposed a three-dimensional framework for a "postmethod" pedagogy that integrates diverse strategies to suit learners' needs and contexts (p. 477). The dimensions are:

1. *Intralingual-Crosslingual Dimension* - explores the use of the learner's first language (L1) in teaching a second language (L2):

- *Intralingual Strategy*: Immersive learning where L2 is the sole medium of instruction, emphasizing immersion, communication, and separation from L1 (e.g., the Direct Method).
- *Crosslingual Strategy*: Uses L1 for comparative learning, translation, and cultural connections (e.g., Grammar-Translation Method).

Stern (1992) explains that while crosslingual methods are effective for beginners, fostering comprehension by comparing L1 and L2, advanced learners benefit from an intralingual focus to build fluency and authenticity. Both strategies have complementary roles, and the choice depends on factors like learners' goals, prior experience, and context.

2. *Analytic-Experiential Dimension* - contrasts analytic and experiential learning approaches:

- Analytic Strategy: Focuses on studying language forms (grammar, vocabulary) through structured, non-communicative activities such as drills and analysis (e.g., Grammar-Translation).
- Experiential Strategy: Centers on using the language for meaningful communication, emphasizing fluency over accuracy, as seen in Communicative Language Teaching.

Stern (1992) highlights that an overreliance on one strategy often leads to imbalances: experiential approaches enhance fluency but may compromise accuracy, while analytic methods provide precision but lack authentic communication. A balanced mix, tailored to learners' levels and goals, is ideal.

3. *Explicit-Implicit Dimension* - examines whether learning should be conscious and structured (explicit) or intuitive and subconscious (implicit):

- Explicit Strategy: Employs cognitive techniques such as grammar instruction, rule discovery, and conscious practice.
- Implicit Strategy: Involves exposure and intuitive absorption, leveraging activities like imitation, memorization, and contextual engagement (e.g., Suggestopedia).

Stern (1992) emphasizes the value of complementing explicit and implicit methods. Learners benefit from shifting between conscious understanding and intuitive acquisition, depending on their preferences, tasks, and developmental stage.

Stern's framework aligns with the principles of postmethod pedagogy, which moves beyond fixed methods and empowers teachers to adapt their practices to classroom realities. Kumaravadivelu (2005) underscores that this framework is both "theory-neutral and method-neutral," advocating flexibility and contextual responsiveness. Stern's framework highlights the importance of balancing intralingual and crosslingual strategies, combining analytic and experiential approaches, and integrating explicit and implicit techniques. Postmethod pedagogy builds on this flexibility, promoting teacher-driven, context-sensitive practices. However, its success depends on preparing teachers to meet these challenges effectively (Akbari, 2008; Kumaravadivelu, 2005).

While postmethod pedagogy values teacher autonomy, critics like Akbari (2008) caution that it places significant demands on educators, particularly novices, who may lack the experience to navigate its complexities. He argues that effective implementation requires robust teacher training infrastructure and recognition of the socio-political constraints in real classrooms.

Brown (2002) emphasizes the importance of a "principled" approach to language teaching grounded in research-based principles. He outlines twelve widely accepted theoretical assumptions about second language acquisition, such as meaningful learning, intrinsic motivation, risk-taking, self-confidence, language ego, etc. The author remarks that a principled approach to language learning encourages teachers first to identify the learners needs, then formulate effective pedagogical objectives taking into account all the contextual variables in the classroom, and finally systematically evaluate the accomplishment of curricular objectives. He proposes ten principles for effective teaching practices, aligned with successful learner traits:

1. *Lower Inhibitions*: Use interactive and fun activities to reduce fear and build confidence.
2. *Encourage Risk-Taking*: Reward effort and create opportunities for language use without fear of errors.
3. *Build Self-Confidence*: Instill belief in students' capabilities through encouragement and acknowledgment.

4. *Foster Intrinsic Motivation*: Highlight personal and professional rewards of language learning.
5. *Promote Cooperative Learning*: Encourage teamwork and knowledge-sharing among students.
6. *Engage Right-Brain Processing*: Incorporate creative and holistic activities like movies, rapid reading, and free writing.
7. *Cultivate Ambiguity Tolerance*: Simplify explanations, address a few rules at a time, and occasionally clarify using translation.
8. *Support Intuition*: Encourage guesses and selective error correction to foster independent learning.
9. *Leverage Mistakes*: Use errors as learning opportunities through peer and self-assessment.
10. *Encourage Goal-Setting*: Guide students in setting personal objectives and committing to consistent language practice.

POSTMETHOD PEDAGOGY VERSUS CLT

Throughout the history of language teaching different periods were characterized by the use of specific teaching methods, each with different goals, characteristics, teaching techniques and procedures as well as different assumptions about how languages are learned. Among the first methods were the Grammar-Translation Method, the Direct Method, the Audiolingual Method and the Situational Method, then going through the alternative methods such as Total Physical Response, the Silent Way, Suggestopedia and Community Language Teaching, which were not widely accepted, we come to the Communicative Approach. Unlike the other methods, Communicative Language Teaching is an approach that does not propose specific procedures and techniques, but incorporates “a diverse set of principles that reflect a communicative view of language and language learning and that can be used to support a wide variety of classroom procedures” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 172). Brown (1994) states that CLT is not related to a specific theory of learning, but it is based on “a unified but broadly based, theoretically well-informed set of tenets about the nature of language and of language learning and teaching” (p. 77). The main goal is developing learners’ communicative competence and it incorporates many of the positive characteristics of previous methods. Its main characteristics are that it is a learner-centered and an experience-based approach that takes into account the interests and needs of the learner, the materials and activities are often authentic and reflect real-life situations, skills are integrated, it attempts to create relaxed and nonthreatening atmosphere, it is motivational for the learners as it develops learners’ communicative competence through meaningful communication, so there is a lot of collaborative learning, errors are regarded with greater tolerance, discovery learning and learner autonomy are encouraged, the teacher’s role is less dominant, and so on.

If we look at Kumaravadivelu’s ten macrostrategies, we can find many similarities. Almost all of the core principles described in the ten macrostrategies are incorporated in CLT. Some of the differences are that postmethod pedagogy places greater emphasis on context sensitivity, greater focus on teacher autonomy with greater flexibility and adaptability in teaching practices, as well as greater emphasis on reflective practice and the need for teachers to construct their own theories based on their classroom experiences. However, the emphasis on teacher autonomy, flexibility and openness as well as the lack of clear guidelines may be confusing for teachers, especially for novice teachers who need more structure and cohesive framework, and it may lead to unprincipled eclecticism where teachers randomly select materials and techniques without any theoretical basis and may cause a lot of stress and uncertainty.

Moreover, by emphasizing context sensitivity teachers may neglect broader educational principles and standards that have been established and proven effective in diverse contexts.

On the other hand, CLT offers clearer and more structured framework for language learning and teaching while still allowing flexibility and freedom for teachers to select activities and implement teaching strategies in order to achieve specific learning and communicative goals. Moreover, CLT focuses on developing learners' communicative competence by fostering active learner engagement through interactive activities and integration of the language skills, and by focusing on real-life communication situations effectively prepares learners for using the language outside the classroom. Even though there is less emphasis on context sensitivity, by using authentic materials and incorporating cultural elements in lessons, CLT helps learners develop cultural awareness and understanding of different cultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

The search for a universal “best method” in language teaching, as noted by Cehan (2014), has been flawed due to its disregard for the diversity of learners, teachers, and contexts. While earlier methods aimed for universal applicability, they often failed in real classroom settings. Communicative language teaching (CLT) emerged as an improvement, offering flexibility and accommodating various teaching and learning needs. Bell (2003) argues that many of Kumaravadivelu's macrostrategies are very similar to the principles and procedures of CLT. According to him, postmethod pedagogy is “an attempt to unify practices in a more holistic way” and “may be understood as a synthesis of various methods under the umbrella of CLT” (p. 332). Therefore, postmethod pedagogy does not really discard the methods all together, but draws on the positive aspects of all the methods in order to create a sound basis for developing appropriate methodology. Bell (2003) maintains that the creation of new methods is a positive thing because they are “vehicles for innovation and challenge to the status quo” (p. 332) and as such they drive the teaching practices forward.

Olagoke (1982) highlights that different teaching methods represent distinct theories and approaches to language learning. Though this diversity complicates the selection process, it provides teachers with a rich foundation to craft methodologies tailored to their contexts. The existence of various methods and approaches are invaluable for teachers because teachers who are familiar with the various theories, principles, procedures and techniques have a sound basis for making informed decisions and developing their own methodology or methodologies that would be suitable for their learning contexts.

Harmer (2001) underscores the importance of adapting methods to cultural contexts, advocating for compromise between teacher and student expectations. He lists critical principles for language teaching, including exposure to language, input with consciousness-raising, communicative activities, reducing anxiety, and balancing grammar and vocabulary instruction. Teachers must blend these principles with cultural sensitivity to develop effective teaching strategies.

Kumaravadivelu (2003) categorizes teachers as passive technicians, reflective practitioners, or transformative intellectuals. Reflective practitioners critically assess and adapt their teaching, while transformative intellectuals connect pedagogy to broader social issues and foster change inside and outside the classroom. These roles emphasize ongoing teacher development and the creation of personalized teaching theories through reflection and adaptation. Therefore, it is important that teachers constantly reflect on their teaching and students' learning, evaluate the effectiveness of the techniques and activities they use, try out new things, and make changes and modifications in order to arrive at the most suitable methodology for the particular group of students in the given context. As Richards (1990, p. 35) remarks: “Methodology is not something fixed, a set of rigid principles and procedures that the

teacher must conform to. Rather it is a dynamic, creative, and exploratory process that begins anew each time the teacher encounters a group of learners”.

Bell (2007) examined the claim that while the concept of method is no longer significant for applied linguists, it remains vital for teachers. He used data from interviews, discussion board postings, autobiographies, and teaching journals which showed that teachers view methods pragmatically, using them as resources to address specific teaching contexts. They often describe their methodology as eclectic, combining elements from various methods. The study concludes that methods are not dead but are seen as useful options for teachers, emphasizing the importance of teacher autonomy and context sensitivity in teacher education. Teachers define methods as goal-oriented, systematic, and concerned with techniques and do not see them as restrictive but as adaptable to context. They view them as useful resources rather than fixed practices.

Ultimately, methods are not rigid formulas but dynamic tools. Larsen-Freeman (2001) argues that having diverse methods enriches teaching by offering a broader array of choices. Teachers should view methodology as a creative and evolving process, tailored to the unique needs of each group of learners, rather than striving for a singular, ideal method. The knowledge and experience accumulated from the various methods that have been used in language teaching offers guidance to teachers and a wealth of ideas, materials, procedures and techniques. The main issue is how teachers use that knowledge to help learners achieve their aims.

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