Postmethod Pedagogy and ELT Teachers

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Abstract
After experienced dissatisfaction with the language teaching methods and approaches in the early and mid-twentieth century, the notion of postmethod pedagogy was deemed a viable solution to the problems that methods created for both language teachers and learners. This paper briefly addresses the controversial issue of postmethod pedagogy by first introducing it and then elaborating some backbreaking problems that a postmethod pedagogy creates for a postmethod teacher in practice.

Keywords: Postmethod, Method, Approach, ELT Teachers

I.   Introduction

After the successive rise and fall of a couple of methods and approaches in the early and mid twentieth century, The ELT researchers and practitioners came to realize that no single method or approach of language teaching would be the optimal framework to draw upon to bring about success in teaching a foreign language especially as it was seen that certain learners seemed to be successful regardless of methods or techniques of teaching (Brown, 2000). Then, in this tight situation, post-method pedagogy, as proposed by Kumaravadivelu (1994) emerged as a response to a call for the most optimal way of teaching English that will free itself from the method-based stranglehold.

II.   The Postmethod Pedagogy

This newer understanding in foreign language teaching methodology has been described as the postmethod condition because of its underlying beliefs and assumptions concerning foreign language teaching practices. As Kumaravadivelu (2006) describes it:

> *The postmethod condition is a sustainable state of affairs that compels us to fundamentally restructure our view of language teaching and teacher education. It urges us to review the character and content of classroom teaching in all its pedagogical and ideological perspectives. It drives us to streamline our teacher education by refiguring the reified relationship between theory and practice.*

This dramatic shift and change from the method era to postmethod era indicates a shift from a positivist-oriented perspective to a constructivist-oriented one and "a shift from transmission, product-oriented theories to constructivist, process-oriented theories of learning, teaching, and teacher learning" has been particularly conspicuous (Crandall, 2000, pp. 34-35). Brown (2000) maintains that constructivism sprang into being as a dominant paradigm only in the last part of the twentieth century. Similarly, he points out that constructivists conceive of reality as socially-constructed and it is now an accepted practice to hold various constructions of knowledge. Thus, this new conception of knowledge puts the act of learning in an entirely different context. As Cunningham (2001) explains, "constructivism views learning as an active process where learners reflect upon their current and past knowledge and experiences to generate new ideas and concepts" (p. 2). As a consequence, "a shift to a constructivist perspective of teaching and teacher learning makes teachers a primary source of knowledge about teaching" (Crandall, 2000, p. 35), and this, in turn, has paved the road for democratic approaches of teaching to come to the fore. As Akbari (2005) puts it, new avenues are being probed and language teaching is no longer seen as a mere technocratic enterprise. He sums it up "the shift in paradigm is due to the change of scope observed in modern language teaching literature and a concern for disciplines and issues previously regarded as irrelevant by both practitioners and theoreticians" (p. 14).

Apparently such a dramatic shift is bound to have some ramifications. As Akbari (2005) and Pica (2000) explicate the post method condition is typical of such transitions and is one of the concepts that echo the above-mentioned changes in language teaching. The recurring discontent with the notion of method and the technicist model of teacher education gave rise to postmethod (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). The top-down criticism leveled against the *bogeyman* of method entails its being too prescriptive in the sense that teachers don't seem to have any voice in what to teach and how to teach it. And this is equally true about the roles of teachers and learners (Crandall, 2000; Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Pennycook, 1989; Richards and Rodgers, 2002). In comparison with the traditional teacher education which "views teachers as passive recipients of transmitted knowledge rather than active participants in the construction of meaning … and which does not take into account the thinking or decision-making of teachers" (Crandall, 2000, p. 35), the postmethod condition is a practice-driven construct which calls into question the traditional conceptualization of teachers as a channel of received knowledge (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, 2003a); it raises serious questions regarding the traditional dichotomy between theorizers and practitioners with a view to empowering teachers whereby they can "theorize what they practice and practice what they theorize" (Kumaravadivelu, 2001; p. 545). In this era "it is teachers who have to act as mediators between theory and practice, between the domain of disciplinary research and pedagogy" (Widdowson, 1990, p. 22). As Kumaravadivelu (2001) holds all pedagogy is a politically-charged process in which particularity is embedded in active awareness of local conditions. Within the pedagogy of particularity as one of the constituents of the postmethod debate, teachers are entrusted with "observing their teaching acts, evaluating their outcomes, identifying problems, finding solutions, and trying them out to see once again what works and what does not" (p. 539). In fact, teacher autonomy is a key component of postmethod in a way that "it can be seen as defining the heart of postmethod pedagogy" (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, p. 548). To summarize, and borrowing on Akbari (2005):

> *The postmethod condition is a more democratic approach to language teaching profession since it assigns a voice to practitioners and respects the type of knowledge they possess. In addition, it is a libratory move which gives teachers more autonomy and confidence in the decisions they make in their classes (p. 5).*

In a nutshell, within this framework teachers play a pivotal role in language classes and the exponential increase and eagerness in taking teachers into account as the focal point of education is manifest in the strikingly increasing number of journal articles dealing with language teacher education (Clarke, 1994). Since postmethod problematizes the traditional concept of method, there is a need for alternatives that can help teachers materialize the objectives set by postmethod.

The postmethod pedagogy is characterized by leaving methods-only arguments to find effective strategies to teach in the most appropriate and effective way while considering the practicioner's views and roles in preparing and teaching language materials. Hence, according to the general perception of this era, instead of looking for which language teaching method is the best to follow, the language teacher must find the most effective strategies and techniques to enrich her or his teaching repertoire. This understanding of the individual journey of the language teacher has grown in contrast to the mainstream and widespread model of language teacher education programs which were characterized by imposing methodological concerns rather than inviting the individual language teacher to find her or his way to best teaching practices.

The postmethod pedagogy as proposed by Kumaravadivelu (2006) talks about three types of parameters or principles: *The Parameter of Particularity*, *The Parameter of Practicality* and *The Parameter of Possibility*.

As far as the parameter of particularity is concerned, post-method pedagogy emphasizes the key aspect of local context or what Kumaravadivelu calls "situational understanding" (p.171). From the perspective of this parameter, L2 policy makers and administrators will pay attention to local contingencies and, most probably, make do with whatever is amenable to teaching effectiveness.

With regard to the parameter of practicality, post-method pedagogy suggests that, rather than being overly concerned about what outside experts have to say regarding teaching efficacy, local teachers should themselves begin to seek avenues that will help them teach and their students learn in a most successful way. They are not supposed to follow in the footsteps of any teaching "gurus". In the words of Kumaravadivelu:

> *[t]he parameter of practicality, then, focuses on teachers' reflection and action, which are also based on their insights and intuition. Through prior and ongoing experience with learning and teaching, teachers gather an unexplained and sometimes explainable awareness of what constitutes good teaching (p.173).*

Parameter of possibility aims at providing a more comprehensive context for language teaching in terms of its social engagement and political accountability. From this perspective, post-method

pedagogy considers L2 teaching and learning not as grasping new linguistic and cultural knowledge but as a site of struggling between the old and new identities for teachers and learners alike. That is to say, L2 teaching is seen more as a tool to help learners come to grips with their own identity and as a vehicle to explore other peoples and cultures. This parameter of possibility enables L2 learners to adopt a critical mindset towards their L2 learning experiences. In other words, an L2 they are attempting to acquire will be not just a new linguistic experience but, more importantly, a new lens through which to appreciate the world out there and the world inside, hence the global and local becoming part and parcel of the whole L2 experience.

As Kumaravadivelu (2006) maintains, there seems to be a shift toward a post-method era that defines a new relationship between teachers and theorizers, which is pushing teachers towards the world of skills, knowledge, and autonomy. Through empowerment and pedagogical insights gained, teachers are able to theorize based on their practice and practice theories. As a result, some renewed attempts are being made to explore new educational patterns in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL).

III.   Postmethod Implications for Teachers

After a lengthy debate on which method leads us to optimal learning in a foreign or second language, many ELT theoreticians and practitioners came to this conclusion that postmethod is a way out of the exisiting predicament. However, the realization of a a postmethod pedagogy requires the existence of an appropriate teacher education infrastructure as well as an acknowledgement of the limits teachers face in their actual classroom lives (Akbari, 2008). Therefore, when it comes to applicability, postmethod pedagogy carries lots of limitations and problem for teachers. Kumaravadivelu (2005) himself was quite cognizant of the challenges a postmethod pedagogy will bring about for a second language teacher education program, and refers to two major sources of problems that must be addressed if the postmethod is going to be accepted as the dominant L2 teacher education framework: Pedagogical barriers and ideological barriers (pp. 215–223).

Pedagogical barriers is concerned with some inveterate set of beliefs and models of teacher education which refer to "a set of predetermined, preselected, and presequenced body of knowledge from the teacher educator to the prospective teacher" (Kumaravadivelu, 2005, p. 216), and the *ideological barrier* refers to the mentality of teachers and what they consider as valid and ideal knowledge. As Akbari (2008) puts it "through a process of marginalization and self marginalization, teachers' practical knowledge does not find the space and the scope to be regarded as visible, and consequently, fails to become part of the accepted knowledge of the discourse community. Though Kumaravadivelu broached the obstacles and potential problems for a postmethod pedagogy, he failed to offer any solutions to such problems. In other words, in spite of all the theoretical benefits put forth for the postmethod, when it comes to practice it fails to take the actual practice of language teaching into account. That said, the postmethod has neglected the social and professional limitations teachers confront in their day-to-day negotiation of their identities and their practice (Akbari, 2008).

The big problem is that, in postmethod pedagogy, the teacher is assigned a much broader role which can be a social, cultural, academic, political and professional one, but in practice the teacher is not given much elbowroom to perform freely and to make his or her own decision. The ELT community is totally aware of the fact that teachers operate within tight administrative frameworks; they must take into account textbooks and tests and facilities as well. The textbook itself can restrict the teacher and pose impedance to its broader freedom within postmethod framework. The textbook limitation has been significantly neglected in Kumaravadivelu's writings. The textbooks accompanied by the stringent methodologies may hinder the teacher's actions in the classroom. In addition, the institutes and administrative organizations may be potentially another stumbling block for a postmethod teacher. Therefore, what Kumaravadivelu has in mind is an ideal classroom environment which does not exist in reality. Another limitation which was properly mentioned by Akbari (2008), is the high work load and teaching hours practiced by some teachers in some countries and some contexts. Due to financial and occupational constraints, some teachers are too busy to devote adequate time and energy to have reflection or let say draw upon their own "sense of plausibility" to overcome the language classroom problems in an era which there is not any method anymore.

The problem of textbooks and institute work plan create further constraints within which teachers operate. Even if teachers do not openly subscribe to a method, the textbooks they use provide them with a working plan that defines how languages are taught and learned. In fact, the textbooks provide every thing for the teachers and they usually have teacher guides that this can provide teachers with no extra space to act freely in a seemingly postmethod era.

Tests as educational instruments per se pose another challenge to what a teacher can do in his or her classroom and are among the most important restricting factors for a postmethod practitioner. In many circumstances due to the tests backwash and the dominant 'teaching to the test' trend, most teachers are obliged to just prepare students for a specific exam or test. Therefore, in these circumstances, the tests implicitly and explicitly will determine the legitimacy or illegitimacy of a particular approach or method and by implication constrain the teachers' autonomy in having freedom to deliver the specific type of knowledge.

And finally the post-method pedagogy sees the teacher's role as having autonomy and freedom of will in their daily teaching performances in language classrooms. What we need to reconsider is the very term "teacher autonomy." As Kumaravadivelu (2006) puts it, teacher autonomy has to do with the challenge that L2 teachers will no longer need to be unduly concerned whether their teaching practices are in congruence with what outside "experts" prescribe. Rather, they will be given autonomy to rely on their experiences as L2 learners and teachers in deciding teaching and learning activities. This very fact require that a teacher be a critical and a reflective practitioner. Much care should be taken into account that teachers are not the same in their abilities. Not every single teacher is competent and confident enough to be autonomous and draw upon his or her 'sense of plausibility'. And certainly not all the teachers have the time, resources, or the willingness to shoulder the cumbersome responsibilities put upon a postmethod teacher. As

Akbari (2008) put it "the assumption of postmethod proponents is that all teachers by default are qualified or willing to conduct a postmethod class with all its social, cognitive, political, and cultural requirements. That assumption, however, is questionable because many teachers lack the required knowledge or skill to teach in the postmethod fashion".

Apart from all the practical flaws and inadequacies mentioned for the postmethod pedagogy, one usually referred criticism leveled against postmethod is that Postmethod pedagogy for some is not but the same as CLT movement (Bygate, Skehan, and Swain, 2001). Bygate et al. argue that "communicative language teaching was explicitly a post-method approach to language teaching in which principles underlying the use of different classroom procedures were of paramount importance, rather than a package of teaching materials" (Bygate et al., 2001, p. 2).

IV. **Conclusion**

Apart from the superficial appeal that a postmethod pedagogy has to offer for teachers suffering from limitations of methods, the postmethod pedagogy is not a proper solution to the current ELT classroom. It not only solves the problem, but it also adds to the problem that poor teachers encounter. ELT teachers are not that much competent and confident to operate optimally as a postmethod teacher which has nothing to draw upon but his or her viable experience. In addition, ELT teacher education program is not supportive enough to train postmethod teachers. In conclusion, it can be said that theoretically and especially practically postmethod pedagogy has created many problems for today's English teachers.

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