

POSTMETHOD PERSPECTIVES IN ELT AND MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT REVISITED: A CRITICAL APPROACH

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Abstract: This study makes the effort to revisit the postmethod perspectives by first looking, though briefly, at the core characteristics of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as well as the criticism leveled against the approach. Moreover, by posing the viewpoints of the pros and cons of the language teaching methods, it tries to illustrate whether the term ‘method’ is extinct or is still up and about. Later, it discusses autonomy as a rather newly-introduced feature in the realm of teaching/learning and thus as one of the representatives of the postmethod era. As to technology especially the internet and multimedia which are also regarded as the modern elements of instruction in the present world of education, the study puts forth some perspectives of the researchers in the field and then succinctly introduces authenticity—the concept which is now in close connection with technology. Furthermore, given the importance of electronic language instructional materials, the paper attempts to rather scrutinize their critical features. Finally, by inclusion of some closing questions at the end, the study tries to imply that humanizing language teaching/learning is the concept that is still in great need of attention in the present fast-growing world of technology.

Key Words: authenticity, autonomy, communicative language teaching, language instructional materials, postmethod

1. Introduction

1.1 A Brief Review Communicative Language Teaching

The essence of CLT is the engagement of learners interactively so as to allow them to develop their communicative competence. In discussing the formulation of CLT in the 21st century, Savignon (2007) refers to the inefficiency of both grammar-translation and audiolingual methods in preparing learners for the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning, accompanied by an enthusiasm for several alternative methods increasingly labeled communicative which resultantly paved the way for understanding what are and are not essential properties of CLT (see also Savignon, 1991, 2001). He furthers that in spite of its name, CLT is not exclusively concerned with face-to-face oral communication. The principles of CLT are equally applicable to reading and writing as well. According to her, the learners needs in a given context most often determine the CLT goals. CLT is not reliant on small-group or pair work. However, classroom group or pair work should not be considered an essential feature and may be virtually inappropriate in some contexts. And last but not least, CLT does not rule out a focus on metalinguistic awareness or knowledge of rules of syntax, discourse, and social appropriateness. As Duff (2012) contends:

Despite CLT’s origins in the teaching of European languages in Europe, the UK, and North America, its current reach is much more global, with educators worldwide recognizing the importance of a more functional and practical approach to language education. CLT is by no means a uniform ‘method,’ however. If anything, like the term *democracy*, CLT is being used to describe an increasingly diverse array of practices, principles, and contexts. (p. 12)

1.2 Critique

Although by the turn of the 21st century, CLT was still in vogue in the field of language teaching methodology, the extent to which the term is pertinent to an appropriate teaching method now seems to be highly under attack (Dornyei, 2013). As Dornyei observes, since the origin of CLT in the early 1970s, its proponents have developed a very wide range of variations being only loosely related to each other (see also Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Dornyei then reviews the pivotal features of CLT to explore the roots of the different interpretations and argues that in order for CLT to fulfill all the expectations attributed to it in the 21st century, the method needs to be revised according to the latest findings of *psycholinguistic* research. And he terms this revised approach 'Principled Communicative Approach' (PCA). And as Chastain (1988) concludes, the communicative syllabus is less appropriate for the beginners; the advanced-level students harvest better from the approach.

2. Is the concept of Method virtually knocked out?

2.1 The Pros

Seemingly, the inefficiency of each language teaching method in fulfilling the needs of all types of learners in achieving success in L2 has stimulated a number of scholars to announce the 'death of method' (Allwright, 2003). From among those researchers who have strongly repudiated the concept of 'method' and its potentials in the postmethod era, Kumaravadivelu conspicuously stands higher than others. He asserts that, rather than adhering to a certain set of procedures, postmethod teachers should adapt their approach consonant with local and contextual factors, while at the same time being guided by a number of macrostrategies that are "derived from the current theoretical, practical, and experiential knowledge base" (2006, p. 69). Two such macrostrategies that he refers to are *maximizing learning opportunities* and *promoting learner autonomy* in the L2 context. Also Allwright (2003) proposes an alternative to method called Exploratory Practice, predicated on the perspective that teachers can become their own researchers as well and not mere consumers of other researchers' knowledge (2003). More recently, the learners themselves have been considered as active partners in this developmental framework (Allwright & Hanks 2009). In line with what these researchers have identified, Pica (2000) also argues the postmethod condition as being typical of such transitions and adds that the recurring discontent with the notion of method and the practice-based model of teacher education has contributed to these new perspectives.

The dissatisfaction with the method concept has also been induced by a general rejection of the notion that social change and improvement can be addressed through the strict application of the scientific method (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Kumaravadivelu (1994) explained that post-modernism has impinged on the TESOL from the 1990s when for the first time the concept of method was put into question. Hence, the ELT profession was overwhelmed with an attempt for the 'best' teaching method (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). This very change, Pennycook (1991) also asserts, has paved the way for a wider philosophical shift from a realist, universalist orientation to a relativist points of view in ELT curriculum.

Furthermore, a number of authors (e.g., Alwright, 2003; Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Pennycook, 1989; Richards & Rodgers, 2001) have leveled criticism against prescriptiveness feature of the methods because teachers seemingly fail to impose any opinion in what and how to teach. And this is equally true about the roles of teachers and learners. 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-mode construct which calls into question the traditional conceptualization of teachers as a channel of received knowledge (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, 2003); it poses 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). To this end, methodology, not though faced hostility all over, has been addressed rather with distrust.

2.2 The Cons

Nevertheless, and in spite of the claims of the postmethodists, the notion of method does not seem to have entirely vanished. Bell (2003) argues that the concept of method remains very relevant in ELT, and that post methodology, "rather than going beyond method, may be understood as a synthesis of various methods under the umbrella of CLT" (p. 64). Another way of understanding the situation, he says, is to see postmethod "in a potentially dialectical relationship with method . . . method imposes practices top-down; post method constructs practices bottom-up. Taken together, they may mediate the negative features of each viewpoint taken in isolation" (p. 64). Another evidence can be found in the on-line advertising for language courses where the term method occurs frequently, associated with adjectives such as *unique, effective, new* and *modern*. It seems that – in the public mind, at least – the method concept is up and around. This is a view supported by Bell (2003) who interviewed a number of teachers on the subject, and concluded: "Methods, however the term is defined, are not dead. Teachers seem to be aware of both the usefulness of methods and the need to go beyond them" (p.143). Some scholars, such as Larsen-Freeman (2000), have actively raised the concept of method as a useful heuristic device in teacher development, on the grounds that "methods serve as a foil for reflection that can aid teachers in bringing to conscious awareness the thinking that underlies their actions" (p. 4). And finally in Tosun's (2009) terms:

Whereas methods are not paid acceptance by the majority of post – method condition scholars, it would not be a wise approach to disregard them totally merely for providing a sound ground for the new bringing of the present occurrences. It is always quite possible that these current obsolete minor characters can be the major ones in the post – post method condition again. (p. 9)

3. Postmethod and Teacher Autonomy

The post-method era also represents teacher autonomy. In the post-method era the teacher is considered as a person who knows not only how to teach but how to act independently within the constraints of educational milieu. (Birjandi et al., 2006). These scholars enumerate different features for a post-method teacher one of which is *reflective approach* towards teaching. *Evaluating* the process of teaching, *initiating changes*, and *controlling* the effects of these changes are conceived as some other features of the postmethod condition. Also as Kumaravadivelu, (1994) stipulates, recent explorations in L2 pedagogy mark a shift away from the conventional concept of method toward a postmethod status that can potentially reconsider the relationship between theoreticians and teachers by empowering teachers with knowledge, skill, as well as *autonomy*. It follows that teachers can devise for themselves a coherent, systematic, and relevant alternative to method, inspired by *principled pragmatism* which "focuses on how classroom learning can be shaped and managed by teachers as a result of informed teaching and critical appraisal" (Birjandi et al, 2006).

Canagarajah (2004, cited in Kumaravadivelue, 2006) explains what might be called a 'critical turn' in methodology, "whose proponents seek to redress social, cultural and/or linguistic inequalities, and to favor the learner's agency and autonomy while, at the same time, wresting power, control, and authority away from the traditional stakeholders, such as examining bodies, publishers, education ministries and universities" (p. 187).

Kumaravadivelu (2006) further epitomizes the characteristics of the postmethod era in this way: teacher autonomy can be justified by believing that teachers have potentials not only what to teach but how to act autonomously within the academic and administrative constraints imposed by intuition, curricula, and textbooks. To him, autonomy, viewed from a narrow sense, seeks to stimulate learners learn how to learn—*academic autonomy*, whereas from the broad view, learners move still beyond that and achieve the capacity to learn to liberate as well—*liberating autonomy* (see also Felix, 2005). Kumaravadavilu (2006) further argues that if academic autonomy enables learners to be effective, *libratory autonomy* empowers them to be critical thinkers. Meaningful libratory autonomy, Kumaravadavilu further discusses in length, can be

addressed in language classroom through diverse procedures (see also Nunan, 2006).

As Kumaravadivelu (2001) maintains, 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 considered as "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). Akbari (2005) also asserts that:

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 liberatory move which gives teachers more autonomy and confidence in the decisions they make in their classes. (p. 5)

Furthermore, Brown (2007), in line with some other researchers, refers to the concept of *learner autonomy* as a feature of the postmethod condition through which the learners are expected to liberate themselves from the strict language teaching methodology and inflexible instructional materials imposed by the teacher-centered classroom.

4. Postmethod and Technology

According to Fakhraee Faruji (2011), language teaching and learning via Internet has remarkably increased across the past decades in many parts of the world. Richards (2006) acknowledges that globalization and the advancement of ICT have had a profound impact on the teaching of English as a second or foreign language. The Internet has emerged as an important teaching-learning tool as learners better understand the learning process when it is mediated by technology. To him, teachers should be provided with professional development opportunities to assist them in modeling effective use of the Internet as a tool for students' learning, including integrating Internet learning with regular classroom learning. Richards carries on to identify that Internet enjoys the capacity to provide *authentic* language learning contexts that are interactively rich and globally diverse. Richards adds that "The widespread use of software, local area networks (LANS) and the Internet has created enormous opportunities for learners to enhance their communicative abilities, both by individualizing practice and by tapping into a global community of other learners" (p. 107).

Bax (2003) puts forward the concept of CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) and contends that in taking advantage of the process, our goal should be to attain a state of 'normalization'. To him, normalization is pertinent to the stage in which technology becomes invisible and thus 'normalized'. He believes that CALL will be normalized when computers are not treated as primary indices of learning; they must take a secondary role in the process.

Also in trying to streamline the process of learning through technology, Felix (2005) identifies the common adjectives attributed to both education and educational institutions in the third millennium as "flexible, inclusive, collaborative, authentic, relevant, global and effective" (p. 177).

Furthermore, Felix (2003) puts forth the concept of language learning in this way: "Recently there has been considerable emphasis on constructive approaches in online learning. This is not surprising since the new technologies, offering synchronous and asynchronous communication environments lent themselves to process-oriented activities in authentic, real life settings" (p.178). The aforesaid explanations conspicuously project also the notion of authenticity in the postmethod situation, including authenticity of texts, tasks, learners' interpretation of the texts, and actual setting for learning (see for example, Breen, 1985) which are given birth to along with the development of technology.

5. Electronic Language Instructional Materials in the Postmethod Era

Around the turn of the century or likely earlier, technology has imposed its major influence on the way in which instructional materials are developed and delivered in any educational settings.

Evidently, media used for language instruction are of different types. Cassettes and video players represent the traditional form of the media whereas CD-Rom and the Internet are the modern, computer-based form of this technology. The for-

mer being representative of language instructional media over the past several decades, however, suffer from a serious demerit, that is, they fail to allow learners to control freely over the learning orientation. The latter, on the other hand, enjoying the capacity to induce interactivity between the learner and the computer, are thus highly controllable. The problem with the latter, however, is that they may not be readily accessible to any academic setting around the world.

Each of these media types—video, animation, audio, graphics, etc. — is effective by itself, but when combined, they can dramatically improve the effectiveness of learning situation. A study conducted by the British Audiovisual Association (cited in Jeffcoate, 1995) reveals that learners retain 10, 20, and 50 percent of what they *see*, *hear*, and both *see and hear* respectively. However, if *doing things* through multimedia direction is also added spontaneously, they are seen to approach 80 percent of retaining information.

The effectiveness of the multimedia has resulted in the birth of CALL, and a more recent technology termed MALL (mobile-assisted language learning). Jones (1990) expertly details the quality of digitized audio used in CALL applications and reports *sample rate per second* as the most important factor contributing to sound quality and concludes that "for most language learning programs, a rate of 11 kHz is recommended " (p. 34).

It is argued that the multimedia lessons should each be designed to include a statement of lesson objectives at its beginning, explaining what the learners are expected to know or do in the lesson. Lee and Owen (2000) suggest that the statement could be made in a visual text or in an audio format associated with relevant photos and/or graphics. These researchers also note that students learn more when smooth and effective transitions are made between the lessons. According to them, this can be accomplished visually with inclusion of a standard graphic or a summary as well as information about the following lesson.

In an analogous fashion, and in explaining about the facilitating sequence of learning, Bruner (1969) proposed that instruction should proceed from direct experience ('Enactive') to iconic representation of experience ('Iconic') to symbolic representation ('Abstract'). In other words, learning proceeds easier when instruction is like the following sequence: actual experience → iconic representation → symbolic or abstract representation.

In delineating visual symbols in Dale's Cone of Experience, Kang and Yang (2001) refer to the three categories of 'realistic', 'analogic', and 'organizational'. Color photographs of objects, as these researchers explain, represent *realistic visuals* and thus should serve our purpose when designing the instructional materials for communication in order to heighten the effect. Heinich et al. (1999), however, assert that this is not always the case. They have conducted ample research to show that "under certain circumstances realism can actually interfere with communication and learning" (p. 72). This is due to the fact that the host of details found in realistic visuals may result in the likelihood of learner distraction by irrelevant elements. It follows that a proper selection of the visual elements in developing instructional materials should primarily be addressed (see also Stokes, 2006).

Analogic visuals are described by Heinich et al. (1999) as conveying the meaning of a concept or topic through showing something else and implying a similarity. An example is teaching about blood circulation flow by indicating water flowing in pipes. Since sound too is a critical component of language, we, as language instructors, should be mainly sensitive to the audio elements of instructional materials as well. Of the media used for the teaching of listening and speaking in the EFL classroom, audio is often referred to as the oldest one and is certainly the most convenient, the least costly, and thus the most widely accessible. Moreover, the emergence of digital high tech has brought about newer possibilities in the sound technology. As to the importance of pronunciation, we have always tried to provide our students with authentic pronunciation using conventional analog audio technologies such as cassette tapes, videos, and CDs for language teaching in the classroom. In fact, the use of such media has often acted as supplementary to language teachers' inefficiency in pronunciation, particularly for those who instruct in primary and junior high schools. This is due to the simple reason that our pronunciation severely affects the students' utterance when they are especially at their early phases of learning. This certainly has significant implications in the case of teaching and developing multimedia instructional materials as they should be in line with the needs of such practitioners and can facilitate their practices in the classroom environment.

Finally, and consonant with what was suggested before, it is not pointless to quote Felix's (2003) perspective regarding the world of language learning in the new millennium or the postmethod era: "Recently there has been considerable emphasis on constructive approaches in online learning. This is not surprising since the new technologies, offering synchronous and asynchronous communication environments lent themselves to process-oriented activities in authentic, real life settings" (p.178).

6. Concluding Remarks

Delineation of the future of methodology may become possible by taking a few lessons from the past. Brown (1998) believes that the field of language teaching and learning can, at the present time, be quite proud of the last 50 years of progress. To him these developments will certainly pave the way for future achievements in educational milieu. Brown then points to his study of 50 years of *Language Learning* and adds that he "was struck by the snowballing development of the field" (p. 520). He observes that perhaps the passage of time and the work of a host of researchers in the third millennium will reveal the current work to be only at its starting point of answering the deeper questions in the field. Finally, he reminds us that the "ultimate answers to linguistic processing may not always be found in empirical, data-driven, Cartesian methodology" (p. 521). In other words, theories too can bear their particular place in solving some critical problems in education. As Littlejohn (2000) puts, the following features of the western countries will also have a critical effect on the future of ELT. These are:

- a. A fragmented society with varying customs, habits, cultures, etc.
- b. The idea of globalization and decline of the national governments
- c. Rapid disappearance of older jobs and appearance of the new ones
- d. Market and its expansion
- e. Impact of the electronic media.

And in enumerating some of the features of a future curriculum in CLT resulting from the above mentioned characteristics, Littlejohn (2000) refers to the following:

- a. Coherence among themes, topics, and projects to bind lessons together and provide coherence for a deeper understanding
- b. Significant content or using something that is worth learning
- c. Decision making in the classroom as a way toward teacher/learner autonomy
- d. Use of students' intelligence, styles and strategies in learning
- e. Cultural understanding to identify the differences and thus vary instruction
- f. Critical language awareness

All of these perspectives, however, taken for granted, what about *humanizing* language learning? Can we achieve the important mode of humanizing learning through the application of electronic instructional materials? Or, is it sensible to sacrifice humanizing L2 learning at the expense of using multimedia? Can providing intelligent feedback through automated on-line, as Felix (2003) believes, contribute to appropriate learning and long-term retaining? Does injecting computerized feedback to the circulation of the less-motivated learners who are in great need to be in close contact with the proceedings of classroom, lead to effective language learning? The writer of this paper has a strong conviction that these are some critical questions the answers to which will certainly fill the relevant existing gap in the field of ELT.

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