"GOING BEYOND METHOD" TO NURTURE MEANINGFUL AND POWERFUL ENGLISH LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY

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Abstract: The development of English Language Education (ELE) worldwide has long been predominated with studies in pedagogical methods and their effectiveness in assisting teachers to accomplish particular desired instructional goals. Along with this development, the tenet of postmethod has long been controversially introduced and addressed in academic arena, particularly whether it goes hand-in-hand or replaces method. Moreover, since its application, if not rejected is intricate and challenging, further discursive studies to negotiate, advance, and contextualize what is offered in the notion of postmethod are necessary to enhance its merit for current local and specific practices. The present paper gives an overview of the limitations of methods in order to sustain the imperativeness of going beyond method without diminishing method. Its implication is primarily empowering in terms of the role of teacher for meaningful and powerful English language pedagogy.

Key words: English Language Methodology, Postmethod pedagogy, powerful teaching, the role of teacher

Introduction

A vignette:

“In danger”

“English is easy. It’s just that! Why is so difficult to teach you English?” Speaking to the students in class with feeling frustrated, our English teacher seemed could not find any other ways how to boost the students’ English mastery in his class. Our teacher said, “The key for English mastery is memorizing the vocab and the grammar. That’s it! No more!” The day, as usual, we learned grammar and vocabularies. Our teacher gave us a text and we had to learn the words and some grammar rules applied in the text. Then, we were asked to apply them in our own context in writing. But, I did not know what is “halloween” and how to apply many words in my situation. And, there were still many others for today. What about those learned at the previous weeks? I didn’t get them! What about next week? So many lessons! I was so confused and afraid of the future, feeling like I was so stupid. But now, I think I’ve just realized that, maybe, It was a bit unfair. I think I was only a victim. I was in danger.” (written by a student)
The vignette above illustrates a student expressing his unforgettable experience of a teacher’s teaching of English language. The feeling expressed by the student might signify a reality in which instructions implemented by the teacher imposed the student’s intrinsic learning.

Many pedagogical practices are greatly overwhelmed with mismatches between teacher and students, or between the materials and the students’ perception. This is the case that the use of a theoretically prescribed method provides useful helps for teachers to finish their administrative duties but poses impediment when catering for the students’ dispositions, preferences and needs of learning.

Similarly, a textbook-driven pedagogy may also provide instant helps and teaching resources for teachers that indulge them in such a way, but may be difficult to nurture encouraging and empowering environments for meaningful learning. Looking at the educational setting particularly those which demanded rote-learning orientation, the use of such method as content-driven one might be a desirable choice but might impose intrinsic learning. This is one of drawbacks of the use of any methods in the English Language Teaching.

The development of method

For long, the development of English Language Teaching is characterized by an intensive and invaluable quest of the most effective ways to teach English. The newer is expected to be the more effective one compared with the older and perhaps the conventional ones. As well-summarized in Richards and Rodgers (2001) and Knight (2001), in the 1840s, Grammar Translation Method was initiated having particular features with emphasis on forms and deductive approach. It was a dominant method in ELT for a long time but declined after being challenged by Reform Movement which led to studies in natural approaches to language learning (Ahmadian, 2014). Natural Method, later known as Direct Method, was then introduced to promote more inductive approaches.

The next development was signified with the influence of behaviorism which tried to reshape a more solid method. The result was Audio Lingualism which, by Kumaravadivelu (2006), is considered as a milestone in the history of foreign language teaching due to the systematic way and scientific framework underpinned it. Even though this was portrayed as a method that treated learners as an empty vessel, Knight (2001: 151) considers this as an unfair label. He finds that since the method puts communication as the goal of language learning, it might represent some positive aspects in it unless its’ behavioral stimulus-response propensity which then was criticized by Chomsky. Afterwards, Cognitive Code Learning emerged in response to Audio Lingualism that was claimed inadequate for effective foreign language teaching. According to Chomsky, foreign language teaching methodology involves psychological studies such as those of the use of innate language facility in the speakers’ mind, more than the learned habit.
(Knight, 2001). Here, the difference between language performance, a product of behaviorism treatment, and language competence was made (Mitchell and Myles, 2001) that is very influential to the development of ELT methodology until currently.

Within the ongoing search of the best ways to teach English, many methods rested on humanism ideology emerged. Among them are Suggestopedia, Total Physical Response, Silent Way, and Community Language Learning. In these student-centered methods, learner autonomy is promoted in unique ways. Suggestopedia, despite its’ lack in terms of linguistic theory, is underpinned by the need for creating conducive environment for learning through the use of musical relaxation which is one of crucial aspects frequently ignored in today’s ELT practices. Total Physical Response (TPR) sees meaning as the central issues linked to language learning and is manifest in physical response. Appeared in humanism era, nevertheless, this method undermines autonomous learning and is more appropriately used to children. In fact, this is a popular way employed as the initial activity in Communicative Language Teaching (Knight, 2001).

Unlike TPR, Silent Way promotes self-expression and autonomous learning in the target language with focus on spoken language learning. This is a good model for teacher-student autonomy, while students are given opportunity to be responsible for their own learning, teacher facilitates and monitors the learning process indirectly. Community Language Learning is similar to Suggestopedia and Silent Way in that it is interested in the creation of convenient learning atmosphere for students’ learning. In this method, psychological counseling is a vital utilization that is manifest in student-teacher interactions. These are not limited in the area of information but also in terms of students’ feeling and dispositions.

**Limitations of the notion of method**

Nevertheless, the notion of method has become less popular due to the increasing number of dissatisfactions of its applications presented in academic arena. Along with this, the complex nature of language learning and instruction has deliberately been accepted leading to the rise of pragmatism.

In the initial development, eclecticism has become an impressive strategy since it suggests teachers to go beyond a method by elaborating more than one method or approach in order to suit the needs of learning which are usually heterogeneous. The development of eclecticism has promoted the importance of flexibility in pedagogy which affects on the increase of student autonomy in learning. Then, more holistic approaches have gradually become parameter for dynamic teaching. An example of that development is in the initiation of Communicative Language Teaching in the British language teaching context (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). More desired approaches for present pedagogies involve content-based instruction, task-based language teaching, participatory, Cooperative Learning, and Multiple Intelligences. These approaches share
similar emphasis around the pertinence of principles related to students’ dispositions and autonomy, what constitutes learning, and the nature of interaction to create effective student-centered pedagogical practices. A “new milestone” begins in the emergence of principled eclecticism (Kumaravadivelu, 2003a) or disciplined eclecticism (Knight, 2001) which offers more radical shift of paradigm.

After a long journey, English language teaching has come to the stage of profound reflection (Kumaravadivelu, 2003b). This encourages the increase of exploratory studies for the enhancement of knowledge on language, language learning and language instruction. The work edited by Candlin and Mercer (2001), for instance, has significantly contributed to the advancement of methodology in language teaching through awareness of the complexity of learning embedded in social contexts. The idea of fixed and prescribed ways in teaching is questioned since it tends to share common properties of pedagogical limitations with regards to the complexity. In common, the notion of approaches and methods is criticized in terms of top-down implications, the role of contextual factors, the need for curriculum development process, lack of research basis, and similarities of classroom practices (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

Firstly, the concept of method construes that a good teaching shall encourage teacher to accept the theory underlying the method and to apply its prescribed procedures in faith. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001) approaches tend to allow for varying interpretations in practice, while methods typically prescribe for teachers what and how to teach. In terms of the student role, the application of a method undermines student autonomy since students are to receive the method passively and submit themselves to exercises and activities in the applied method. However, any ways in modern English teaching, have to be flexible and adaptive to students’ need and interest. As well-noted in most studies of student-centered teaching, students bring different learning styles and preferences in the pedagogical interaction in the class which influences the process of language learning.

Secondly, the role of contextual factors is essential in foreign language teaching. On the basis of empirical evidence, Richards and Rodgers (2001) identify that in efforts to the application of methods, teachers sometimes ignore what is starting point in language program design namely careful consideration of contexts in which teaching and learning occurs. Even, when a teacher intends to consider the contexts such those as cultural, political, local institutional, and those constituted by teachers and learners, it is obvious that complexity of the contexts is too intricate to be figured out by using the concept of method. This complexity is also concerned with the ongoing process of curriculum development. A method or approach applied by a teacher may demand loyalty of pedagogical and assessment practices to the underpinning theories and therefore could hinder dialectical relationship among the curriculum constituents for dynamic transformation.
The concept of method has been identified lack of research basis. As what is identified by Richards and Rodgers (2001): (1) The majority of ELT books is written on the basis of assumptions rather than empirical evidence in second language acquisition, (2) it is rare that researchers who study language learning are willing to dispense prescriptions for teaching based on the results of the researches, and (3) empirical evidence in language learning researches basically does not support the simplistic theories and prescriptions found in approaches and methods.

Another criticism is in terms of its problematic nature of method (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Compelling evidence indicates that it is difficult for teacher to implement particular methods or approaches in ways that entirely represent the underpinning principles (Thornbury, 1996; Nunan, 1987). This difficulty causes either misleading implementation of an intended method or the implementation of definitely different practice than what was intended earlier. As revealed by Brown in Kumaravadivelu (2006), teachers using different methods tend to be distinctive at the early, but rather indistinguishable from each other at the later stage. Therefore, the deployment of method or approach is likely to follow a cycle of uniformity which is monotonous and less dynamic from time to time.

Going beyond method

“After swearing by a succession of fashionable language teaching methods and dangling them before a bewildered flock of believers, we seem to have suddenly slipped into a period of robust reflection.”
(Kumaravadivelu, 1994: 27)

The decline of method is a subsequent reality of the extensive, reflective and evaluative studies conducted by scholars, at least some of the prominent, from 1989 to 1994 (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). Dissatisfactions of the concept of method were immediately addressed leading to critical views towards method and approach. This is called Postmethod Condition, which according to Kumaravadivelu (1994), is characterized by a search for an alternative to method rather than an alternative method, teacher autonomy, and principled pragmatism. Historically, this vision can be traced back to postmodernism movements that brought and legitimated constructivism as one of transformative responses to the modernism which upheld objectivism ideology manifest in top-down, transmission-oriented, and means-end pedagogy (Ahmadian, 2014). Thus, to generalize issues, conventional method-oriented teaching could represent modernism influence while postmethod is a product of postmodernism, as implied in Kumaravadivelu (2003a; 2006).
Closing in on the Postmethod Condition, the first aspect namely the idea of “alternative to method” has become controversial. Some scholars are in a strong position to against the notion of method (e.g. Allwright, Kumaravadivelu) while other believes that there is a dialectic relationship between method and post-method (e.g. Bell, 2003). Bell asserts that post-method pedagogy is “a further manifestation of the search for method and so is subject to the same criticisms” (2003b: 326). In this debate, Bell’s position is more relevant to the whole context of the search for more effective ways to teach foreign language. To argue, dichotomous perspective between the two represents provocative and unwise way of thinking. Even though the majority of the constituent of postmethod pedagogy signifies inevitable developments or changes toward excellence in English Language Education methodology, one cannot deny the contributory evidence of methods regardless of the constraints result from them (ibid). On the other hand, fanaticism in method could mean rejection of the reality that English Language Education has undergone invaluable journey and found the centrality of teacher agency.

In the second, postmethod condition promotes teacher autonomy through the empowerment of the capacity to theorize from practice and to practice what have been theorized (Kumaravadivelu, 1994; 2003b; 2006). This is aimed to enable practicing teachers in their attempt to develop an appropriate pedagogy based on their local knowledge and local understanding. This condition recognizes the teachers’ potential to know how to teach, to develop critical approach in exploring their own practices, and to act autonomously within the academic and administrative constraints imposed by institutions, curricula, and textbooks.

The last attribute is principled eclecticism. Kumaravadivelu (1994) argues that principled eclecticism is different from eclecticism in that the later is constrained by the conventional concept of method. By referring to Widdowson’s works, he asserts that principled pragmatism focuses on how classroom learning can be shaped and managed by teachers as a result of informed teaching and critical appraisal. Informed teaching and critical appraisal are basically an open-ended and bottom-up concept where teachers are actively engaged in conceptualizing teaching on the basis of their sense of plausibility (Prabhu, 1990).

**Post-method pedagogy**
The notion of postmethod basically signifies an emerging shift of paradigm in English Language Education. The pedagogical mindset that commonly relies on the quest and the use of the best method is challenged with considerations to encourage the exploration of frameworks that are believed to work in specific context of teaching and learning. In light of method, theorizers construct knowledge-oriented theories of pedagogy in order to centralize pedagogic decision-making. While in postmethod pedagogy, teachers as practitioners are encouraged to construct theories of practice to enable them to generate
location-specific and classroom-oriented innovations. In short, the conventional method-based pedagogy that is top-down in nature, is negotiated with teacher-generated pedagogy that is bottom-up. Therefore, the concept of postmethod intends to bring teachers into a strategic position, not only as the users of a method but also as the theorizers and the users of their own “method”.

The adoption of postmethod pedagogy requires teachers to learn the framework underpinned it. Some frameworks associated to postmethod pedagogy are those suggested by Stern (1983), Allwright (1993), and Kumaravadivelu (1994). However, the present paper focuses on Kumaravadivelu’s Macrostrategies (1994; 2003b; 2006). He illustrates his frameworks by using the metaphor of “pedagogic wheel” that integrates and refigures the relationship between the periphery and the central, between the principle and the practice, between the global and the local, and between generalities and particularistic. In this concept, there is no need to dichotomize between the two, since in practice, they connect iteratively to each other and manifest in the teachers’ decisions. This framework is also known as a three-dimensional system.

The central part of the wheel is the three parameters of particularity, practicality, and possibility. The parameter of particularity sustains the idea that a language teaching has to be relevant and meaningful to the learners. In order to be so, pedagogy has to be “sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular institutional context embedded in a particular sociocultural milieu” (Kumaravadivelu, 2001; 538). It means that postmethod pedagogy is local (see the vignette earlier). Essentially linked to this is the parameter of practicality. This can be achieved by encouraging and empowering teachers to theorize their practice and practice what they theorize. The aim is to create a teacher-generated theory of practice which, to the local, is more practical and engaging as it is generated from practice than theorists’ theory of practice. In this, teachers need to invest more on developing their critical and reflective capability to feed their exploratory pedagogy. The third parameter is possibility. Postmethod pedagogy shall be sensitive to either sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts of learning or the individual identity of its participants. More than any other educational enterprise, English language pedagogy sustains social inequality and provides a continual quest for subjectivity and self-identity (Kumaravadivelu, 2001).

Another element of postmethod pedagogy, according to Kumaravadivelu (2003b) is Macrostrategic Framework consisting of macrostrategies and microstrategies. The first functions as a broad guideline to help teachers generate their situation-specific and need-based microstrategies in the classroom. Therefore, macrostrategies, as what is suggested by Kumaravadivelu (1994; 2003b; 2006), are made operational in the classroom through microstrategies. Even though it is possible for teachers to use studies that attempt to develop microstrategic framework based on Kumaravadivelu’s work or others’, it is
important to note that the framework shall not be regarded as a fixed package of instructional design. Otherwise, since the core desire of postmethod is to encourage the development of social and professional capacity of teachers in order to be able to nurture meaningful, dynamic, and powerful bottom-up pedagogical practices, “the ultimate worth of such a framework is to be found in how well it strikes a balance between giving teachers the guidance they need and want and the independence they deserve and desire” (Kumaravadivelu, 1994:43). It means that, in postmethod pedagogy, teachers have to be strategic and contextual in terms of either self-development or instructional actions for empowering learning. Kumaravadivelu (ibid) adds that strategic teachers spend a considerable amount of time and effort to develop themselves including to:

1. reflect on specific needs, wants, situations, and processes of learning and teaching,
2. stretch their knowledge, skill, and attitude to stay informed and involved,
3. extend macrostrategies to meet the challenges of changing contexts of teaching,
4. design appropriate microstrategies to maximise learning potential in the classroom, and
5. monitor their ability to react to myriad situations in meaningful ways.

These actions are difficult and complex to execute in classroom situations, nevertheless, inevitable for meaningful and powerful English language pedagogies. Closing in on what are presented in the literature and researches of ELT, at least there are three models of pedagogy may represent the reality of pedagogy adopted by teachers: textbook-driven, method-driven and teacher-generated pedagogy. The first is characterized by teachers’ dependence on the use of predetermined textbook. In this pedagogy, teachers and learners are less autonomous since instructional decisions and actions, as well as the learning actions are controlled by a package of textbooks, usually a series of commercial books. The second signifies pedagogical reality in which teachers apply particular method or approach in fidelity. Textbooks and other resources are treated as a springboard and are only used when relevant with the intention and underpinning theories of the method or approach applied. While the last, teacher-generated pedagogy is a postmethod pedagogy—the pedagogy of particularity, practicality and possibility, in which teachers are guided by a holistic framework, inter alia, Kumaravadivelu’s macrostrategic framework, in order to nurture teacher autonomy to generate local-based, bottom-up teaching.

**Conclusion**
This paper has attempted to portray the development of English Language Education Methodology, from method, beyond method, to postmethod era.
The idea of “no best method”, “the death of method”, “beyond method”, and “postmethod” is not new. However, more importantly is to note that the reality of diversity and complexity of English Language Teaching demands the tenet of pedagogy which is dynamic and empowering. Thus it is necessary to sustain how solutions and anticipations have been identified, studied, and practiced. As rightly stated by Candlin and Mercer (2001:3), "Many learners don’t learn languages in classrooms. They learn them more or less well or badly, on the street, in the community, and in the workplace.” This is to imply that English teaching and learning is far from the notion of method and simplifying the process of teaching and learning and what counts for them might impose its social and individual meaning of the participants, especially the learners. It is necessary to be aware that a dynamic pedagogy might be difficult to nurture when teachers are staying in the box of method since it tends to restrict them from being autonomous as what is revealed in many studies. Nevertheless, “an approach or a predetermined method with its associated activities, principles, and techniques may be an essential starting point for an inexperienced teacher, but it should be seen only as that since in most cases, novice teachers are far from fulfilling postmethod promises” (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p.251).

References


