

# Methods Are Not Dead!

Nima Shakouri

Roudbar Branch, Islamic Azad University

[Nima.shakouri2011@gmail.com](mailto:Nima.shakouri2011@gmail.com)

## Abstract

One of the strongest criticisms of the new methods was that they were typically “top-down”. Teachers had to accept one faith, the claims or theory underlying the method and apply them in their own practice. The term post-method as a pedagogy, in recent years, takes a Marxist view toward education, not as a replacement for the term method. It seems to be more a utopic view of effective teaching whether followed or not! As even today we see many teachers have top-down views toward teaching. The following paper is an attempt to open some lens for teachers to better appreciate the concept of post-method in order to judge the plausibility of it.

**Key words:** methods; post-methods; postmodernism; autonomy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The 20<sup>th</sup> century has witnessed the rise and fall of a variety of language teaching methods and approaches. Above all the advocated methods and approaches, the most groundbreaking method lasting so far appears to be CLT followed by TBLT. One of the strongest criticisms of the new methods was that most of them were top-down. That is, teachers had to accept a faith underlying a method and employ its principles in their practice in order to fulfill the philosophy of the method. Along the same line, good teaching was regarded as correct use of the method in context. Teachers are no longer viewed merely as skilled implementers of a teaching method but as creators of their own individual teaching methods, as classroom researchers, and curriculum and material developers. Gradually, the notion of methods came under criticism in the 1990s. Some spoke of the death of the methods and approaches, so the term '*post-method era*' was sometimes used. Prabhu (1990) contended that there is no best method. According to him, the philosophy of no method can be employed in a class. Henceforth, the majority of scholars were after an alternative to method instead of an alternative method. However, method has a magical hold on us; the obsession becomes stronger even after the so called demise of methods (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Philosophical perspectives

Frankly speaking, the argument of methodology submitted in the previous part directly rests on two well-known concepts of globalization and post-modernism. In effect, post-method condition is a newly born infant of globalization and its ultimate product postmodernism. Globalization phenomenon results in a pluralistic perspective in foreign language teaching. In fact, the shift from absolutism to pluralism denotes that methods are incommensurable: the philosophy of methods cannot be employed in different contexts. Besides, one who subscribes to the pluralistic perspective works on different methods and makes his/her own blend (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Put differently, a systematic reflection of postmodernism to language teaching can be a post-method condition. In fact, the last decades of the last century, however, witnessed a challenge to 'scientism' in the social sciences, a challenge associated with the advent of postmodernism, and its rejection of the idea of universalism.

To delve into the concept of post-method, let me provide a brief review of the philosophy behind it—i.e., post-modernism. Post-modernism is the philosophy which believes that truth does not exist or if exists it is unknowable. Truth is not an absolute sense, but is viewed as being relative to the culture. For example, when describing the American Creed, which includes the God-given rights of life, liberty and property, textbooks often imply that these rights may be “true” for Americans, but not for people in other countries as cultures

see things quite differently. This viewpoint reflects the pervasive influence of post-modernism in today's education system. Post-modernists believe that truth is defined by each individual culture. Truth is relative, not universal. Post-modernists suggest replacing truth with other terms such as constructs or perspectives. Truth by its nature is universal, but when it is going to be defined by one specific culture it loses its universality; hence, it is not apt to be called truth. That is, it is believed that the best we can do is describe how various groups see the world; however, we cannot presume to know what is true.

A key word to learn when trying to understand post-modern education is *constructivism*. In fact, constructivism is the main underlying learning theory in post-modern education. The basic idea is that all knowledge is invented or constructed in the minds of people. Knowledge is not discovered as modernists would claim. In other words, the ideas teachers teach and students learn do not correspond to "reality," they are merely human constructions. Knowledge, ideas and language are created by people, not because they are "true," but rather because they are useful.

Gene Edward Veith (1994), in his classic work *Postmodern Times*, says that post-modernism consists of the following positions or doctrines:

1. *Social constructivism*. Meaning is constructed by society, and truths do not exist objectively.
2. *Cultural determinism*: Individuals are wholly shaped by the cultural forces.
3. *The Rejection of individual identity*. People exist primarily as members of groups, and their identity is achieved in company.
4. *The Rejection of humanism*. There is no universal humanity since every culture constitutes its own reality. Traditional humanistic values are canons of exclusion, oppression, and crimes against the natural environment. Groups must empower themselves to assert their own values and to take their place with other planetary species.
5. *The Denial of the transcendent*. There are no absolutes. Even if there were, we would have no access to them since we are bound to our culture and imprisoned in our language.
6. *Power reductionism*. All institutions, all human relationships, all moral values, and all human creations—from works of art to religious ideologies—are all expressions of the primal will to power.
7. *The rejection of reason*. Reason and the impulse to objectify truth are illusory masks for cultural power. Authenticity and fulfillment come from submerging the self into a larger group, releasing one's natural impulses such as honest emotions and sexuality, cultivating subjectivity, and developing a radical openness to

existence by refusing to impose order on one's life.

8. *Revolutionary critique of the existing order*. Modern society with its rationalism, order, and unitary view of truth needs to be replaced with a new world order. Scientific knowledge reflects an outdated modernism, though the new electronic technology holds great promise. Segmentation of society into its constituent groups will allow for a true cultural pluralism. The old order must be swept away, to be replaced by a new, as yet unclearly defined, mode of communal existence. (pp. 158-159)

Arguably, post-method pedagogy is derived on the local level from CLT and on the larger level from the ideas of post-modernist thinking. Accordingly, Best and Kellner (2001) hold:

Postmodernism is characterized by (a) the failure of the enlightenment period—the unconditional belief in the value of scientific progress for the common good—and the downgrading of absolute conceptions of truth as well as the growth of pragmatism; (b) the growth of intracommunal ethnic diversity; and (c) the ever-growing pace of social, economic, and technological change. (cited in Bell, 2003, p. 330)

## 2.2 Toward post-method: Plausibility, power and practice

Prabhu (1990) claims that comparing methods to find out which is best is fruitless as what take place in the classroom depends on teacher's beliefs and their subjective understanding of teaching in their particular contexts. Prabhu (1990) calls this the teachers' sense of plausibility—a personal conceptualization of how their teaching leads to desired learning. However, Bell (2003) claims, "By deconstructing methods, post-method pedagogy has tended to cut teachers off from their sense of plausibility, their passion and involvement" (p. 334). To believe in what we do entails knowing a set of principles prescribed before entering classroom; a set of beliefs we are committed to. Accordingly, Bell (2003) argues:

Although one effect of anti-methods has been to cut teachers off from their sense of commitment to a totalizing vision of what they do, post-methodology has given them the tools to deconstruct their totalizing tendencies and so counter the tendency toward overroutinization. (p. 334)

The movement from method to post-method is also considered as a shift in education. In the same line, the notion of methods, as Kumaravadivelu (1994) claims, came under criticism in the 1990s. Some spoke of the death of the methods and approaches, so the term '*post-method condition*' was sometimes used. The post-method condition

questions the legitimacy of the concept of the method. In a nutshell, the post method condition signifies three interrelated attributes. As Kumaravadivileu (2006) asserts:

1. Post-method pedagogy signifies a search for an alternative to method rather than an alternative method.
2. Secondly, it signifies teacher autonomy. It also promotes the ability of teachers to know how to develop a critical approach in order to self-observe, self-analyze, and self-evaluate their own teaching practice.
3. The third attribute of the post method condition, according to Kumaravadivileu (2006) is "Principled Pragmatism" and what Prabhu (1990) refers to as the teachers' sense of plausibility—the teacher's subjective understanding of what he can do.

Different from the conventional methods, the new pedagogy is said to be more flexible since it takes macro-strategies to shape micro-strategies. Thus, the post-method condition argues that language teachers are not to imprison themselves and their students in any method even in an eclectic approach. Nevertheless, for Kumaravadivileu (2001), method has a magical hold on us; the obsession becomes stronger even after the so-called demise of methods. Along the same lines, Brown (2001) also made frequent references to the death of methods—interred methods, and the requiem of methods. For post-methodologists, the concept of method becomes a bogeyman for the following reasons: (1) methods can't be realized in their purest form in the classroom; (2) methods never claim universality; (3) types of activities, techniques...are prescribed; and (4) the role of teacher is marginalized (Akbari, 2008).

What Kumaravadivileu (1994) called the 'post-method condition', is a result of 'the widespread dissatisfaction with the conventional concept of method' (p. 43). Rather than subscribe to a single set of procedures, post-method teachers adapt their approach in accordance with local, contextual factors, while at the same time being guided by a number of 'macro-strategies'. In fact, initial forms of post-method practice may be identified as 'principled eclecticism' in which teachers purposefully plan and adapt their classroom procedures by absorbing practices from a variety of methods and use for specific and appropriate purposes (Hall, 2011, p. 100). Elsewhere, Kumaravadivileu (2006) visualized post-method as a three-dimensional system consisting of three parameters:

- teachers act in a context-sensitive, location-specific manner, recognizing the social, linguistic, and cultural background of their learners (i.e., particularity);
- the superiority of theorists over teachers is broken, and teachers encouraged to theorize from their own

practices and put into practice their own theories (i.e., practicality); and

- as a catalyst for identity formation and social transformation, the socio-political consciousness of learners is addressed in the classroom (i.e., possibility).

These three principles take into account the teachers 'sense of plausibility' and critical concerns within ELT. But how reasonable is this in practice? What is evident throughout the above discussion is that post-method envisages teachers assuming an enhanced role, with the freedom and power to make informed decisions based on local and contextual expertise. Furthermore, as Dell (2003) reports post-methodologists argue that methods can never be realized in their purest form in the classroom according to the principles of their originator because methods are not derived from classroom practice.

### 2.3 Post-method learners

Kumaravadivileu (2001) tells us that "the postmethod learner is an autonomous learner" (p. 545). Elsewhere, he adds post-method pedagogy takes into account two views of learner autonomy, a narrow view and a broad view. A narrow view seeks to develop in learner a capacity to learn to learn, whereas the broad view goes beyond that to include a capacity to learn to liberate as well. Helping learners learn to learn involves developing in them the ability to take charge of one's own learning. Taking charges, according to Holec (1981) means to:

- (1) hold responsibility for determining the objectives;
- (2) select methods and techniques;
- (3) monitor their progress; and
- (4) evaluate what has been acquired. (cited in Kumaravadivileu, 2006, p. 176 )

While the narrow view of learner autonomy treats learning to learn a language as an end in itself, the broad view treats learning to learn a language as a means to an end, the end being learning to liberate. In other words, the former according to Kumaravadivileu (2006) stands for *academic autonomy*, while the latter, for *liberatory autonomy*. If academic autonomy enables learners to be effective learners, liberatory autonomy empowers them to be critical thinkers. Thus, meaningful liberatory autonomy can be promoted in language classroom by:

- 1) encouraging learners to assume the role of mini-ethnographers to investigate and understand how, for instance, language as ideology served vested interests.
- 2) asking them to reflect on their developing identities by writing diaries etc related to the social world

- 3) helping them in the formation of learning communities where they develop into unified, socially cohesive, mutually supportive groups seeking self-awareness and self improvements.
- 4) providing opportunities for them to explore the unlimited possibilities offered by online services and bringing back to the class their own topics for discussions, and their own perspectives on those topics. (Kumaravadivilu, 2006, p. 177)

#### 2.4 Post-method teacher

In recent lines of investigations in second language teaching, 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).

Meanwhile, practitioners came to this trend that teaching should be democratic. Education is more than training. It is a process-oriented, synergic, and adhocracy phenomenon. Knowledge does not belong to one person whose role is limited to a mere distributor (sender). Knowledge belongs to two: students and teacher. What is visible in the field of language teaching is a shift in the role of teacher from a mere disseminator to a learning facilitator, and students from a passive receiver to a critical thinker. In fact, teachers, in the post-method paradigm, should be able to practice their profession with competence and confidence and ensure that their practice results in social transformation and the improvement of society by taking into account the life histories of their students. Thus this autonomy which is granted to teacher is a challenge to conventional methods of teaching. Accordingly, as said earlier, this autonomy is based on principled pragmatism so that the teacher is given right to devise a systematic alternative to conventional method of language teaching. Thus, teacher, in this new paradigm, is strategic and reflective: exploring macro-strategies and designing micro-strategies. Post-method pedagogy recognizes the teacher's prior knowledge as well as their potential to know how to teach but also how to act autonomously within the academic constraints imposed by institutions, curricula, and textbooks. The teachers develop a reflective approach to their own teaching; also, the teacher's personal knowledge will eventually lead her to construct his theory of practice.

#### 2.5 Post-methods predicament

Kumaravadivelu (2006) is aware of the challenges a post-method will pose for education. This refers to two major sources of problems that must be addressed if the post-method is going to be accepted: *pedagogical barriers*

and *ideological barriers*. The former deals with entrenched models of teacher education that rely on a transmission view of knowledge and treat L2 teacher education as the process of transferring a set of predetermined body of knowledge from the teacher educator to the prospective teacher and the latter, ideological barriers, refers to the politics of representation and what counts as valid knowledge. Through the process of 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. Along the same vein, Akbari (2008) claimed that Kumaravadivelu didn't give any solutions to the abovementioned barriers. To him, Kumaravadivelu's concept of post-method is more a philosophical discussion of teaching rather than the actual practice of teaching itself.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The skepticism toward the concept of method and the search for an alternative to method would not guarantee the future of practice in the field of language teaching, as this search has not proved to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Hashemi, 2011, p. 137).

One of the criticisms addressed to post-method is that a teachers' theories emanated from his/her practice is taken for granted. Furthermore, his/her scope of abilities and authority in making decision is accepted unquestionably. However, claiming that teachers are totally free and able to employ their own blend in the class seems to be far-fetched dream as they are several factors get involved in his/her decisions.

What Kumaravadivelu (2006) termed as principled pragmatism and Prabhu (1990) as sense of plausibility for a novice teacher is far from reality. For a novice teacher who is not that much familiar with this profession, teaching must be considered as a skill that can be learned in discrete items from lesson planning to how to ask questions. When these skills have been learned, the teacher is qualified to teach. However, we should not ignore teaching and learning as social processes where the students are active co-constructors of knowledge with their teachers. The teacher is more of a facilitator and fellow learner alongside the students.

Furthermore, infrastructures of context are also involved in the evolution and prescription of method; thus it is not a personal choice. In fact, the total context must not be separated from classroom context. In a traditional context, like China whose tradition is highly influenced by Confucian Doctrine that is hierarchical in nature, having a sense of plausibility on the part of teacher is hardly imaginable. Accordingly, Hall (2011) claims, "Teachers are not completely free to pick and choose how they teach; they are bound in by social convention, learners'

expectations, school policies about how to teach and what methodology to follow" (p. 101). Further, what seems to be lateralized is the overemphasis on the role of teacher at the expense of losing the significance of materials, activities and even the role of students is not that much, in comparison with teachers', prioritized. The truth hidden in the infrastructure of the classroom is ignored. Along the same line, Akbari (2008) strongly holds that post-method asks too much of teachers, ignoring and misunderstanding the realities of the classroom and projecting a hypothetical reality that does not acknowledge the social, political and cultural reality of teachers' and learners' everyday lives. To Akbari (2008), the death of method often leads not to a post method era but to the replacement of methods by textbook-defined practice. Accordingly, Thornbury (2009), too, contends that the concept of method is not only alive and well, but has been reincarnated in the form of course books, such that it would be valid to talk about the *Soars and Soars Method*, or the *Cunningham and Moor Method*, since it is coursebook series like *Headway* and *Cutting Edge* that – more than any other factor – determine and define current teaching practice.

More recently, Bell (2007) reports that in the minds of teachers, methods are not dead. Bell (2007) explains that teachers show awareness of how useful methods are. He concludes that "post-method need not imply the end of the methods but rather an understanding of the limitations of the notion of method..." (p. 143). Accordingly, Hashemi (2011) asserts, it should now be clear that some scholars are not willing to forget about the concept of method and that the concept of post-method exists with a paradoxical nature. Paradoxically, method will live as long as practice will. How could any practice be method-free? (Hashemi, 2011). Moreover, informing the demise of methods in realm of language teaching is not plausible. In spite of the claims of the post-methodists, the notion of *method* does not seem to have gone away completely. In fact, it seems to be doggedly persistent, even if the term itself is often replaced by its synonyms (Thornbury, 2009). Pennycook (1989), also, argued that methods are never disinterested, but serve the dominant power structures in society, leading to a de-skilling of the role of teachers, and greater institutional control over classroom practice.

In spite of the changing status of methods and approaches in language teaching, the study of past and present teaching methods continues to form a significant component in teacher preparation programs because as Richards and Rodgers (2001) list: (1) methods provides teachers with a view of how language teaching has evolved as a field; 2) teachers can adapt methods and approaches as sources of well-used practice rather than prescriptions to suit their own teaching contexts and needs; and 3) they can provide teachers (especially novice teachers) with basic teaching skills with which they can expand their own

teaching repertoire. Furthermore, Larsen-Freeman (2000) posits that a study of methods is invaluable to teacher education in that methods serve as a foil for reflection that can aid teachers in bringing to conscious awareness the thinking that underlies their actions. In fact, by becoming clear on where they stand, teachers can choose to teach differently from the way they were taught. Elsewhere, she states that the knowledge of methods is a part of the knowledge base of teaching with which teachers expand their repertoire of techniques and join a community of practice that challenges teachers' concepts of how teaching leads to learning. Admittedly, due to lack of consensus in understanding some basic concepts in language teaching over the past few decades, language researchers tend to move away from the study of methods; and teachers tend to downplay the role of their teaching methods (Liu, 2004 p. 138).

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