
THE FORUM

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Method and Postmethod: Are They Really So Incompatible?

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■ TESOL methodology is said to have moved “beyond methods” (Richards, 1990, p. 35) to the “postmethod condition” (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, p. 27). Although “postmethod pedagogy” (Kumaravadivelu, 2001) has freed us as TESOL professionals from many of the constraints of the concept of method and invigorated our practices by providing new options to the classroom teacher, the postmethod condition has brought with it its own constraints on our thinking, not least of which is the claim that methods are dead. Contrary to this claim, some consider the term *method* to remain an apt description of what teachers do in classrooms. Block (2001) argues that

while method has been discredited at an *etic* level (that is, in the thinking and nomenclature of scholars) it certainly retains a great deal of vitality at the grassroots, *emic* level (that is, it is still part of the nomenclature of lay people and teachers). (p. 72)

The 36th Annual TESOL Convention (in 2002) reflected this dichotomy. At a session on teacher education, after the speakers had outlined their own exciting visions of postmethod pedagogy, an audience member pointedly asked, “Don’t the practices the speakers describe sound remarkably like methods?”

In this commentary, I argue that, whether postmethodologists like it or not, methods have not gone away, nor are they likely to. To clarify the

postmethodologist's target, I summarize the ways that method has been defined in language teaching. I discuss the arguments that postmethodologists have used against methods to show how they inflate the influence of methods to better knock them down. I then examine the roots of postmethodology in the larger area of postmodernism, arguing that postmethod, rather than being evidence of the maturation of teaching practices, is a further manifestation of the search for method and so is subject to the same criticisms. Postmethod, despite its disparagement of innovations called methods, can be seen as an attempt to unify these disparate elements into a more holistic, redefined communicative language teaching (CLT) through a dialectical process of building and deconstructing forces.

THREE DEFINITIONS OF METHOD

The fact that the term *methods* is used in a variety of ways in TESOL offers a challenge for anyone wishing to enter into the analysis or deconstruction of methods. At least three somewhat distinct meanings can be identified.

Definition 1: Smorgasbord of Ideas

Methods with a lowercase *m* means a grab bag of classroom practices. According to Oller in the second edition of *Methods That Work* (1993), methods include “programs, curricula, procedures, demonstrations, modes of presentation, research findings, tests, manners of interaction, materials, texts, films, videos, computers and more” (p. 3). But how can one fashion a coherent whole from such a “smorgasbord of ideas”—the subtitle of the first edition of *Methods That Work* (Oller & Richard-Amato, 1983)?

Definition 2: Prescription for Practice

Methods with an uppercase *M* seems to mean a fixed set of classroom practices that serve as a prescription and therefore do not allow variation. Brown (2000) defines method this way when he argues that “virtually all language teaching methods make the oversimplified assumption that what language teachers ‘do’ in the classroom can be conventionalized into a set of procedures that fits all contexts” (p. 170). For Kumaravadivelu (1994), a method “consists of a single set of theoretical principles derived from feeder disciplines and a single set of classroom procedures directed at classroom teachers” (p. 29). Richards and Rodgers (2001) add that methods are relatively fixed in time, leave little scope for individual interpretation, and are learned through training. This definition is pejorative and refers mainly to a small set of

1970s “designer/guru” methods, such as suggestopedia, community language learning, and the silent way. Defining methods like this leaves little alternative but to abandon the term altogether; hence the notion of going beyond methods to the postmethod condition.

Definition 3: Organizing Principles

Richards and Rodgers (2001) write about methods as an umbrella term comprising approach, design, and procedure. This perspective has become influential through the use of their text, *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* (1986, 2001), in TESOL teacher education courses. According to Richards and Rodgers, “a method is theoretically related to an approach, is organizationally determined by a design, and is practically realized in procedure” (2001, p. 20). *Approach* is the underlying theory of language and language learning. *Design* is how those theories determine the objectives, syllabus, teaching/learning activities, teacher/learner roles, and the role of the instructional materials. *Procedures* are the techniques derived from a particular approach and design. However, Richards and Rodgers confound this definition and Definition 2 in the discussion of CLT, which “is best considered an approach rather than a method” (p. 172) in the sense of Definition 2. Approaches have core sets of principles but no specific set of prescriptions and classroom techniques. But if approach, according to Definition 3, is a subcomponent of method, then what constitutes an approach as something separate from a method in Richards and Rodgers’ framework? According to Brown (2000),

What they [Richards & Rodgers] would like us to call “method” [Definition 3] is more comfortably referred to as “methodology” in order to avoid confusion with what we will no doubt always think of as those separate entities (like Audiolingual or Suggestopedia) that are no longer at the center of our teaching philosophy. (p. 170)

Postmethod perspectives seem to focus on the smorgasbord and prescriptive senses of methods when they advocate abandoning methods in general. These perspectives ignore the evidence indicating that, despite its shortcomings, the concept of methods as prescription is still a salient one for classroom teachers (Block, 2001; Liu, 1995). They also ignore the idea that methods as organizing principles are important for understanding what TESOL professionals do.

THE POSTMETHOD KILLING OF METHODS

Writers like Brown (2002) and Pennycook (1989) quote Stern (1985), who laments the “century-old obsession” (p. 251) with the search for the

ultimate method. For Kumaravadivelu (2001), method “has had a magical hold on us” (p. 557). But scholars more than practitioners seem to be obsessed, and the obsession has become stronger even after the so-called demise of methods. Brown makes frequent references to the death of methods—“we lay to rest . . . methods” (p. 11), “recently interred methods” (p. 14), “requiem for methods” (p. 17)—as if there still lurks an unspeakable fear that methods, Dracula-like, might rise from the dead. Whereas theorists have been consumed with methods and which one is the best, many teachers appear to me to take whatever practical solutions are available. Indeed, postmethodologists have done such a wonderful job in killing off methods that one wonders if the methods bogeyman really existed.

The arguments used to defeat method can also be seen as evidence that teachers, at least, were never really in the thrall of methods. First, postmethodologists argue that Methods (prescriptions for practice) were really very limited in that they dealt only with the first lessons of mainly lower level courses. If this is true, and it certainly is, then why should one take too seriously their claims for universal applicability? In reality, these methods were never applied universally, and their lack of generalization and limited contextual application is immediately obvious to even novice methods students. Contrast these limited methods with CLT,¹ which, though never claiming universality, has arguably been the most widely applied of any method since grammar translation. Indeed, the degree of application may be a better guide to the so-called distinction between method and approach. If a method has limited realization, then one would expect little variation in its procedures, but if, like CLT, the method has such wide-scale application, variations in its realization would be normal.

Second, postmethodologists 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. Richards (1990) calls the designer methods ideal types. However, supporters of particular designer methods ascribe the failure to realize methods to a lack of understanding of their basic tenets. Oprandy (1999), who trained under Caleb Gattegno and Charles Curran, comments,

¹ I define CLT as a diverse set of principles that essentially stress the engagement of learners in authentic, meaningful, and fluent communication, usually through task-based activities that seek to maximize opportunities for the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning in integrated language skills contexts; and that facilitate inductive or discovery learning of the grammatical, pragmatic, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse rules of the language with the ultimate goal of developing communicative competence. Given the diversity of these principles, CLT usually supports a wide variety of classroom procedures (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Savignon, 2001).

I have cringed when teachers without such training take Cuisenaire rods or tape recorders into their classrooms and tell me they are “doing” Silent Way (or Counseling Learning) today. . . . They claim to be imitating something they really know nothing about. As a result, in time, despite the incredible richness of these approaches, they fall into unfair disrepute. (p. 52)

At the same time, L2 teaching professionals know that what is realized as method in the classroom emerges over time as a result of the interaction among the teacher, the students, and the materials and activities (Richards, 1990). This notion of the social construction of method in millions of different classrooms suggests that what is called method is often an a posteriori rationalization of many similar teaching practices rather than an a priori set of prescriptions emanating from one source. Even seemingly monolithic methods like grammar translation and the audiolingual method owe much of their apparent prescriptive coherence to the rationalizations of methods historians (Howatt, 1984; Pennycook, 1989). Given the immense difficulty of realizing a set of a priori methodological outcomes in the classroom, why on earth should we become so obsessed with such prescriptions?

A further dismissive argument against prescriptive Methods is that little of interest remains in them, but this argument ignores the huge influence that the core philosophies of community language learning, silent way, and suggestopedia have had on language teaching. Teachers, like Stevick (1998), who have closely studied these designer methods, find that their core philosophies—the emphasis on socioaffective factors, student validation, self-realization and autonomy, peer support and interaction, and problem solving—still play a fundamental role in the classroom. Indeed, the development of CLT has in part been driven by the co-option of the humanistic, student-centered principles of designer methods. And it is not hard to find in the principles and strategies of postmethod theorists the very core elements of the 1970s designer methods. Kumaravadivelu (2001) tells us that “the postmethod learner is an autonomous learner” (p. 545), and Brown’s (2002) 12 principles of accepted assumptions about second language acquisition include language ego, self-confidence, and risk taking, all concerns that Curran, Gattegno, and Georgi Lozanov addressed in their methods. Just as proponents of designer methods often doubted that teachers left to their own devices would teach systematically, postmethodologists fear teachers will slavishly follow whatever method they have been trained in. The obsessions of both sets of theorists underestimate the intellectual autonomy and discernment of the practitioner.

Whereas the concept of method has been attacked for its positivist and progressivist view of the linear development of TESOL practices (Pennycook, 1989), the charge can equally be made against postmethod pedagogy. Brown (2000) comments,

The profession has at last reached the level of maturity [italics added] where we recognize the complexity of language learners in multiple worldwide contexts demands an eclectic blend of tasks, each tailored for a particular group of learners studying for particular purposes in a given amount of time. (p. 172)

This “maturity” is contrasted with the quackery of methods: “We have emerged well beyond the dark ages of language teaching when a handful of prepackaged elixirs filled up a small shelf of options” (Brown, 2002, p. 17). But yesterday’s quackery has a habit of becoming today’s convention. Brown’s (2002) postmethodology, in suitable metaphorical reaction to quackery, envisages teachers as “operating” like medical doctors:

Our approach . . . is the cumulative body of knowledge and principles that enables teachers, as “technicians” in the classroom, to diagnose the needs of students, to treat students with successful pedagogical techniques, and to assess the outcomes of those treatments. (p. 11)

Such positivist and progressivist views of the linear accumulations of knowledge contrast with Pennycook’s (1989) view that change in language teaching is better seen as “a reordering of the same basic options, and . . . [a reflection of] the social, cultural, political, and philosophical environment” (p. 600). The emergence of postmethod pedagogy may have more to do with larger social forces than with pedagogical maturity.

POSTMETHOD AND POSTMODERNISM

One of the great myths of postmethodology is that whereas it readily identifies *interested knowledge* (Pennycook, 1989) in the concept of method, postmethod pedagogy seeks the higher ground by claiming to be an alternative to method and so to interested knowledge. But, arguably, postmethod pedagogy is derived on the local level from CLT and on the larger level from the ideas of postmodernist thinking. 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 (Best & Kellner, 2001). The implication for education has been a strengthening of progressive approaches, especially the influence of John Dewey and the emphases on learner centeredness; vocationalism; student autonomy; problem solving, experimentation, and critical thinking in the framework of group and project work; and subject integration within an overall multicultural context (Winch & Gingell, 1999), notions shared by postmethod pedagogy.

For example, Kumaradivelu’s (2001) notion of “particularity” (p.

538) can be connected to the notion of context sensitivity within the larger current of contemporary thought. Particularity “seeks to facilitate the advancement of a context-sensitive, location-specific pedagogy that is based on a true understanding of local linguistic, sociocultural, and political particularities” (p. 537). Similarly in art and architecture, the notion of *site specificity* seeks to invoke form out of what is given rather than impose form. The land art of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is perhaps the most famous example of site specificity (Menand, 2002). Oprandy (1999) sees striking parallels between student-centered approaches in language teaching and the urban planning approach of Jane Jacobs, with its rejection of the grand plans of the city planners and emphasis on people-centered, bottom-up planning.

Clearly, we have not arrived at the postmethod condition through pedagogical maturity. As Winch and Gingell (1999) suggest, “The question of whether we live in a post-modern era may not . . . be a matter of entirely disinterested debate among educational policymakers, but may instead provide a new backdrop to old debates” (p. 178). If *postmethod* is substituted for “post-modern,” and *applied linguists* for “educational policymakers,” one can see that postmethodology is one further manifestation of the search for method, certainly an alternative to method as it is narrowly defined in the second sense—prescriptions for practice—but at the same time an alternative method as defined in the sense of organizing principles. In the same way that Pennycook (1989) notes that “the construction of the Method concept in language teaching has been a typical example of the attempt to validate current forms of knowledge at the expense of past forms” (p. 608), so, too, postmethod pedagogy seeks validation through the defeat of Methods.

Postmethod and CLT

Nunan (1991) argues that “the way to overcome the pendulum effect [in language teaching] is to derive appropriate classroom practices from empirical evidence on the nature of language learning and use and from insights into what makes learners tick” (p. 1). So within the broader framework of principled pragmatism, postmethodology theorists outline universal principles or strategies. Brown’s (2002) “principled approach” lists 12 “relatively widely accepted theoretical assumptions” (p. 12) about L2 learning and teaching. Richards’ (1990) notion of effective teaching is based in part on the best practices approach of developing methodological principles from the study of classroom practices and processes used by effective teachers. Kumaravadelu (1994) outlines a framework of 10 macrostrategies based on “current theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical insights” (p. 27). According to Kumaravadelu (1994), “a macrostrategy is a broad guideline, based on which teachers can gener-

ate their own situation-specific, need-based microstrategies or classroom techniques. . . . macrostrategies are theory neutral as well as method neutral” (p. 32). Yet many of Kumaravadivelu’s macrostrategies—negotiated interaction, integrated language skills, learner autonomy, and so on—look remarkably like CLT.

Let us compare these postmethodological frameworks with Jacobs and Farrell’s (2001) analysis of the paradigm shift in L2 teaching in the past 40 years. They have no qualms about calling the prevailing paradigm CLT. They go on to discuss the major changes in the paradigm: learner autonomy, cooperative learning, curricular integration, focus on meaning, diversity, thinking skills, alternative assessment, and teachers as colearners. The paradigm shift, of which these changes are part, is seen as an element in a larger shift from positivism to postpositivism and from behaviorism to cognitivism. Jacobs and Farrell argue that although the paradigm shift in L2 education began many years ago, it still has been only partially implemented because of the attempt to understand and implement each of these changes separately rather than holistically. Indeed, Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell (1997) note that the “need for guiding principles [in CLT] is, in fact, not inconsistent with the postmethod perspective” (p. 149). Postmethod pedagogy can therefore be seen as both an attempt to understand the paradigm shift that L2 education has gone through in the past 40 years and an attempt to unify practices in a more holistic way. The 1970s designer methods can be seen as piecemeal attempts to usher in the new paradigm shift. Postmethodology, therefore, rather than going beyond method, may be understood as a synthesis of various methods under the umbrella of CLT, or what Liu (1995) calls a “method redefining condition” (p. 176).

The Dialectic of Method and Postmethod

A second way of looking at postmethod is to see it in a potentially dialectical relationship with method. Roughly speaking, method imposes practices top-down; postmethod constructs practices bottom-up. Taken together, they may mediate the negative features of each viewpoint taken in isolation. For its part, postmethod has quite rightly warned of the dangers of notions of one-size-fits-all in methods. Yet in the rush to bury methods, postmethod pedagogy has obscured the positive aspects of method. Even in the narrow sense of Definition 2, methods can be seen as vehicles for innovation and challenge to the status quo. What has often driven applied linguistics in the past has been the attempt to refute the claims of the gurus, who have often turned out to be ahead of the research: Silent way teachers do not need wait-time research to confirm what they intuitively know about the power of silence. As vehicles for change, let us hope that Methods never stop challenging our practices,

however irritating and arrogant their claims may sound. Rodgers' (2000) predictions of methods in the new millennium suggest that one need not fear their demise. Rodgers gives "the millennial candidates identifying labels in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek style [strategopedia, total functional response, full-frontal communicativity] perhaps reminiscent of yesteryear's method labels" (p. 2). Let us add Li Yang's crazy English shouting Method (Spaeth, 1999), surely a suitably outrageous method for the new millennium in the tradition of the 1970s mountebanks, which also fulfill some of the requirements of postmethod context sensitivity. And intuitively, as teachers, we know that there is something interesting here. That ultimately is the thrill of Methods in Definition 2: They offer unique insights, however piecemeal and limited they may be.

Furthermore, by highlighting the pernicious effects of the totalizing tendency of methods, postmethod pedagogy has obscured the beneficial effects if not the inevitability of a unified view of what teachers do. Prabhu (1990) has described the negative effect as one of "overroutinization" (p. 173) and the positive effect in terms of "real" (p. 174) teaching. "Real" teaching requires a sense of involvement on the part of the teacher, what Prabhu calls "a teacher's sense of plausibility" (p. 172). Methods have the "power to influence—to invoke, activate, interact with, alter in some way, and generally keep alive—differing teachers' differing senses of plausibility, thus helping to promote and enlarge the occurrence of 'real' teaching" (p. 175). As has been pointed out many times, it is not the method that is the crucial variable in successful pedagogy but the teacher's passion for whatever method is embraced and the way that passion is passed on to the learners (Block, 2001). By deconstructing methods, postmethod pedagogy has tended to cut teachers off from their sense of plausibility, their passion and involvement, what Grundy (1999) has described as going from "model to muddle" (p. 54). To believe in what we as teachers are doing inevitably requires us to have a set of prescriptions when we arrive in the classroom, a set of beliefs we are committed to. As one teacher notes, "Learning will take place when students believe in 'teachers.' And when will students do that? Regrettably, only when teachers believe in themselves" (Walker, 1999, p. 231).

Although one effect of antimethods has been to cut teachers off from their sense of commitment to a totalizing vision of what they do, postmethodology has given them the tools to deconstruct their totalizing tendencies and so counter the tendency toward overroutinization. In terms of Richards and Rodgers' (2001) organizing framework, postmethod strategies and principles can be understood as articulating the design features—teaching and learning activities, teacher/learner roles, and the role of the instructional materials—of the current paradigm of CLT. What is so refreshing about these design features is that they contain within them the tools—learner autonomy, context sensitivity, teacher/

student reflection—to construct and deconstruct the method that inevitably emerges from the procedures derived from them.

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, methods are not dead, nor will they ever be. As Shome (1998) argues with reference to the term *postcolonial*, “the prefix ‘post’ . . . does not mean a final closure, nor does it announce the ‘end’ of that which it is appended; rather it suggests a thinking through and beyond the problematics of that which it is appended” (as cited in Talib, 2002, p. 19). Likewise, postmethod need not imply the end of methods but rather an understanding of the limitations of the notion of method and a desire to transcend those limitations. I have suggested that the transcendence of methods in terms of postmethod can be seen as a process of thinking through and pulling together the diverse, piecemeal attempts in the 1970s and 1980s to articulate the paradigm shift toward CLT. The current paradigm should not be understood as maturation but rather as a construction of the prevailing socioeconomic, cultural, and ideological forces. As those forces shift, so will methods. And one element in those shifting forces is the way that method and postmethod can also be seen as inevitable and necessary dialectical forces: the one imposing methodological coherence, the other deconstructing the totalizing tendency of method from the perspective of local exigencies. In other words, method and postmethod together can liberate our practices.

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