Postmethod Discourse and Practice

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The second language (L2) teaching profession has gone through a number of dramatic changes during the last two decades. A look at journal articles and topics included in teacher development books shows a broadening of scope in terms of the number and the depth of the topics addressed. Language teaching, one can conclude, has become more inclusive in the sense that more of the reality of the lives of students, and at times those of teachers, are taken on board as significant in affecting the outcomes of teaching and learning (Tudor, 2003). Topics such as World Englishes (Kachru, 1986, 2005), critical applied linguistics (Carlson, 2004; Pennycook 2001; Toolan, 2002), critical discourse analysis (Kumaravadivelu, 1999; Riggins, 1997), ethnography of communication (Harklau, 2005; Hymes, 1996), qualitative research (Davis, 1995; Richards, 2003), and linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992, 2003) have turned into common themes of discussion and research. The social/political consciousness one observes in the profession was certainly lacking during most of the 1980s. Language teaching, in a sense, has parted with its quest for metanarratives and grand theories and instead has become involved in “the messy practice of crossing boundaries” (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 30, emphasis in original).

A conceptual shift, however, which has not been completely appraised and appreciated, is the disappearance of method from academic discussions and the rise of the postmethod debate. The postmethod argument has academically put an end to method discussions and the search for the good method, although its practical counterpart, that is, methodology, is still a valid concept and very much alive for many teachers (Bell, 2007). Even communicative language teaching is treated as a part of history (although there are some exceptions; see, e.g., Savignon, 2001).
Instead, the postmethod discourse (Canagarajah, 2001; Kumaravadivelu, 1994, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2005) has laid down a number of principles according to which language teaching should proceed. These principles, which address aspects of practice (pedagogy of practicality), context (pedagogy of particularity) and empowerment (pedagogy of possibility), aim at providing a more comprehensive context for language teaching in terms of its social engagement and political accountability.

Missing from postmethod discussions, however, is how teachers would be prepared to perform their duties as postmethod practitioners because the postmethod view heavily emphasizes teacher qualifications. Teachers, in the postmethod paradigm, should be able to practice their profession with competence and confidence (Kumaravadivelu, 2001) and ensure that their practice results in social transformation and the improvement of society by taking into account the life histories of their students. Methods in the past provided frameworks for classroom practice by defining a view of learning and language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) and supplied teachers with guidelines as to what presumably worked and did not work in the class based on the objectives set down by the method. Now that the method is gone, the question is how teachers are going to develop the competence demanded of them in dealing with pedagogical and social responsibilities assigned to them.

This brief article argues that, in reality, the postmethod is qualitatively not much different from method because both of them ignore or misrepresent the realities of the classroom and, in turn, impose their own version of hypothetical reality. While method has ignored the reality of learning and language learners, postmethod has ignored the realities of teaching and language teachers. By making too many demands of teachers, the postmethod pedagogy has, in practice, turned a blind eye to the social, political, and cultural realities of language teaching contexts and the limits within which teachers operate.

To present a balanced argument, the first part of this article gives a brief account of what post method is, touches on some of its philosophical foundations, and acknowledges some of its contributions to current English-language-teaching (ELT) discourse. The second part deals with the features the postmethod discourse needs to take into account for it to move from the realm of ideas to that of practice.

THE POSTMETHOD ERA

The early undocumented roots of postmethod can be traced back to what the profession has called eclecticism; in other words, a primitive form of postmethod or, more accurately, beyond method (Richards, 1990) has
been around for a long time. Though frowned on and at times discouraged, eclecticism has been accepted as a practical solution to instances when a method has not been applicable, provided that it has been informed eclecticism (Rivers, 1968). However, a closer look at eclecticism reveals a sense of resistance (Canagarajah, 1999) on the part of practitioners who have viewed method as an imposed, impractical construct. The practice of adapting and adopting different techniques from different methods has testified to the fact that the contexts in which teachers find themselves are different from the ones postulated by methods, but the profession was slow to formally acknowledge this fact.

The first reference to the term *postmethod*, nevertheless, goes back to Kumaravadivelu (1994). Kumaravadivelu (2006b), however, traces the roots of the method critique to scholars such as Pennycook (1989) and Prabhu (1990). Pennycook argued that any knowledge is of a political, interested nature in the sense that it represents and safeguards the views of only a certain social group. In other words, knowledge is not objective and any knowledge formulation (and here *method* can be viewed as a formulation of how English should be taught) “reflects a particular view of the world and is articulated in the interests of unequal power relationships” (pp. 589–590). Prabhu, following another line of argument, rejected the concept of method because it is the teacher who should make the crucial learning and teaching decisions about what works or does not work in his or her classroom based on his or her *sense of plausibility* or principled pragmatism (Kumaravadivelu, 2003b). Methods do not help teachers in this decision-making process because, by nature, methods are constructed in a general way to make them (vaguely) applicable to a wide range of contexts.

The postmethod discourse has tried to include these concerns in its formulation, and the view of teaching it proposes apparently encompasses both matters of practice and politics. Three principles, or pedagogies, summarize how postmethod defines L2 teaching: practicality, particularity, and possibility (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2005). The *pedagogy of practicality* aims at according equal importance to practitioners’ theory vis-à-vis those of theoreticians and seeks to empower teachers by encouraging them “to theorize from their practice and practice what they theorize” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b, p. 59), and the *pedagogy of particularity* is intended to sensitize practitioners to their students’ linguistic, social, and cultural background and needs. The *pedagogy of possibility* relates language teaching to the process of social transformation by tapping “the sociopolitical consciousness that students bring with them to the classroom” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b, p. 59). Here language teaching acknowledges the critical dimension of the profession.

Being linked to the principles of critical pedagogy is, in fact, one of the strengths of the postmethod debate. Critical pedagogy deals with the
questions of social justice and social transformation through education. By viewing education as an intrinsically political, power-related activity, supporters of critical pedagogy seek to expose its discriminatory foundations and take steps toward reforming it so that groups who are left out because of their gender, race, or social class are included and represented (Giroux, 1983). Critical pedagogy puts the classroom context into the wider social context with the belief that “what happens in the classroom should end up making a difference outside the classroom” (Banyham, 2006, p. 28). In language teaching, critical practice is “about connecting the word with the world. It is about recognizing language as ideology, not just system. It is about extending the educational space to the social, cultural, and political dynamics of language use” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b, p. 70).

Postmethod’s wider recognition of context and its critical dimension distinguish it from communicative language teaching (CLT). Bell (2003), for example, finds striking similarities between the principles and strategies of the postmethod debate and those of CLT; however, a close inspection of CLT reveals that when the term context is used, it is at the microlevel of who is talking to whom, where, and about what, but context in postmethod terminology includes aspects of the real sociopolitical lives of the people involved in the learning process. In addition, CLT does not have a critical appreciation of the classroom because for CLT, negotiation of meaning and interpersonal communication—or “competence in terms of social interaction” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b, p. 60)—are the two basic objectives envisaged by its proponents, and no effort is made to link L2 teaching practice to social change.

The fact that the postmethod recognizes the need for more inclusiveness and empowerment is a positive turn of events with the potential for many desirable outcomes. The problem is, ironically, that by trying to include more of the realities of learners and learning context in its formulation (in the form of pedagogies of particularity and possibility), the postmethod discourse has lost sight of the reality of teaching and teachers’ lives and has made the implementation of pedagogy of practicality (which is, in a sense, the practical culmination of the two other pedagogies) problematic, if not impossible. The following section lists a number of problems that must be dealt with if the postmethod view is to be more relevant to the pedagogical concerns of teachers.

**PROBLEMATIZING POSTMETHOD**

The realization of a postmethod pedagogy requires the existence of an appropriate teacher education infrastructure as well as an acknowledgement of the limits teachers face in their actual classroom lives.
Kumaravadivelu (2005) is aware of the challenges a postmethod pedagogy will pose for a compatible L2 teacher education program, and refers to two major sources of problems that must be addressed if the postmethod is going to be accepted as the dominant L2 teacher education framework: Pedagogical barriers and ideological barriers (pp. 215–223).

Pedagogical barriers deal 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, preselected, and presequenced body of knowledge from the teacher educator to the prospective teacher” (Kumaravadivelu, 2005, p. 216), and the ideological barrier refers to the politics of representation and what counts as valid knowledge. Through a process of marginalization and self-marginalization, teachers’ practical knowledge does not find the space and the scope to be regarded as visible, and consequently, fails to become part of the accepted knowledge of the discourse community. Kumaravadivelu, however, stops short of offering any viable, systematic solution as to how these barriers can be overcome and what mechanisms must be put in place to create the desirable context for teacher autonomy and growth based on a postmethod pedagogy. In other words, in spite of its emancipatory rhetoric, postmethod is more concerned with the philosophy and philosophical discussions of teaching rather than the actual practice of teaching itself. In its zeal for the transformation of learners’ lives (which is undoubtedly a valid educational objective), the postmethod has ignored the social and professional limitations teachers confront in their day-to-day negotiation of their identities and their practice.

What is missing, in fact, is a proper understanding of the limits within which teachers perform. That is, by assigning the extra roles of social reformer and cultural critic to teachers, the postmethod is taking language teaching beyond the realms of possibility and practice. The profession is totally aware of the fact that teachers operate within tight administrative frameworks; they must take into account textbooks and evaluations in the forms of tests. The restricting role of textbooks has received just a cursory acknowledgement in Kumaravadivelu’s (2003b; 2006a) writings and basically in the context of imperialist or global forces and not in the actual context of teachers’ practical lives. When Kumaravadivelu talks about textbooks it is mostly in relation to “social, economic, and political environment in which [teachers and students] operate” (2006a, p. 20) and no reference is made to the rigid framework that even locally produced books can impose on teachers’ actions. In addition, in none of his writings does Kumaravadivelu seriously tell teachers how to negotiate the administrative system that determines...
their standards of performance and their income because, it might be argued, he knows himself that such systems are at ministry levels and lie beyond the reach of many teachers. His use of a reflective model of teaching complemented by observer comments and students’ feedback (Kumaravadivelu, 2003b) only presents a generic solution to the teacher education problem, one that is neither specific to nor completely in line with ELT’s world of practice (Akbari, 2007). Kumaravadivelu’s (2003b) macrostrategies-mismatch observational scheme (p. 292) is only good for in-service teachers, and although he presents observational-reflective techniques for prospective teachers, he provides no systematic framework on how novices can be initiated into the discourse and practice of postmethod. The ideal classroom environment where teachers can exercise their free will, unfortunately, rarely exists in the reality of language classrooms. One can detect an irony here: In the past, little attention was paid to the social relevance and reality of L2 teaching and classroom environments, but now we have an excessive preoccupation with these constructs at the risk of ignoring the constraining realities of the classroom in terms of teachers’ responsibilities.

Teachers in many contexts are not different from factory workers in terms of their working hours; in many countries, a typical language teacher works for 8 hours per day, 5 or even 6 days per week. Most of these teachers are poorly paid and “putting bread on the table for my family,” as one such teacher put it, is their main priority. The financial and occupational constraints they work within do not leave them with the time or the willingness to act as iconoclasts and social transformers, roles that will jeopardize their often precarious means of subsistence. Even if they have the time and the commitment, teachers sometimes feel obliged to bypass some topics because they are deeply rooted in the culture and traditions of a community and questioning them will amount to sacrilege and blasphemy. Dealing with topics such as capital punishment, marriage, and honor killings can cost a teacher his or her career or freedom in some Arab or Muslim countries because of certain religious interpretations of such concepts.

Textbooks and tests create further constraints within which teachers operate. Even if teachers do not openly subscribe to a method, the textbooks they use provide them with a working plan that defines how languages are taught and learned. In other words, many teachers have laid their religion of method to rest and have adopted the practical philosophy of coursebooks because the practical philosophy is more tangible and convenient for classroom applications. Textbooks now take care of all the details of classroom life, and most of them come with teacher guides that include achievement tests and even all the examples teachers need in their classes. Many teachers feel happy with such an
arrangement because their workload does not leave them with any time for reflection and preparation, and textbooks (e.g., the New Interchange or Headway series) have laid down the framework (or the method?) within which they can operate. It seems, then, that the concept of method has not been replaced by the concept of postmethod but rather by an era of textbook-defined practice. What the majority of teachers teach and how they teach (the things that are supposedly taken care of by methods) are now determined by textbooks. In addition, almost all of these textbooks are sanitized and neutralized (Gray, 2001, p. 159) to make sure they do not lose their market potential, and in this process most of the topics of interest for a critical or postmethod pedagogy are removed, which limits teachers’ choices. Most of the topics one encounters in commercially prepared textbooks deal with harmless issues such as travel, shopping, holidays, and food recipes, leaving little room for social transformation and political-awareness raising.

Tests pose another challenge to what a teacher can do in his or her classroom and are among the most important constraining elements for a postmethod practitioner. In many contexts, teachers “are often responsible for implementing the testing policies of central agencies with no power and authority to resist” (Shohamy, 2004, p. 101). Tests are usually used as instruments of control and supervision, and teachers are viewed as bureaucrats or “servants of the system” (p. 106) who carry out the orders of the system or the authorities in charge. Many teachers “view tests not only as testing the language performance and proficiency level of their students but also as assessing or testing their own performances” (p. 107, emphasis added). In addition, tests also determine what knowledge is legitimate by assessing it, thereby making it worth acquiring; knowledge that is not assessed on the test is excluded and thereby determined to be illegitimate. Such impositions highly limit the scope within which teachers can exercise their postmethod rights and social transformation roles, especially when they are confronted with high stakes national tests. It is not surprising that teachers are asked to “become more aware, or socially responsible and socially reflexive about the uses of tests by pointing out such misuses to the public at large and by resisting the ‘one size fits all’ approach” (p. 108). Whether teachers are ever consulted about test formats or content and whether they are willing to sacrifice their means of income and risk their professional security are issues worthy of further contemplation on the part of proponents of the postmethod discourse.

Teachers’ abilities and differences are among the issues which are taken for granted in the postmethod debate. Numerous studies have shown most teachers are not necessarily among the academically gifted (see e.g., Guarino, Santibanez, & Daly, 2006) and certainly not all the
teachers have the time, resources, or the willingness to shoulder the responsibilities that ministries of (higher) education are normally entrusted with. The assumption of postmethod proponents is that all teachers by default are qualified or willing to conduct a postmethod class with all its social, cognitive, political, and cultural requirements. That assumption, however, is questionable because many teachers lack the required knowledge or skill to teach in the postmethod fashion. We should also remember that for many teachers, teaching is a job not a career (Johnston, 1997), and they are often not willing to participate in any professional development that would task them with extra responsibilities. Many expatriate teachers, for example, are wary of a critical orientation in their classes because they do not yet know the red lines and taboos; in addition, they do not know about learning and teaching traditions of their students in the new setting.

Postmethod literature, of course, includes references to the need for a transformation-oriented teacher education program, but, again, it seems to ignore teachers’ capabilities and potentials. Some basic questions must be addressed: Are all teachers versatile and qualified enough to act as materials developers, test designers, revolutionaries, political analysts, social workers, and brave iconoclasts to confront the system in which they work and transform their students’ lives? Have postmethod proponents ever asked teachers themselves whether they are willing to, or capable of, taking up these challenges? Does the profession need a new recruitment strategy by means of which only certain people with certain social or ideological tendencies would be allowed in postmethod classes? Can the profession find enough people to perform the list of duties drawn up for them by postmethod academics? And if such people are found, do they really become teachers, or do they find themselves better jobs because of their high qualifications? If postmethod is really a bottom-up movement, then it must stop abstract speculations and base its claims on empirical data gathered from teachers themselves and their world of practice.

Teachers’ professional development also can compromise teachers’ ability to be reflective practitioners in the sense promoted by postmethod discourse. According to Fuller (1970; see also Conway & Clark, 2003), teachers go through three stages in their professional growth, each stage being characterized by a shift of emphasis as to what the teacher regards as important. Stage 1 emphasizes the self. During this stage, teachers want to present an ideal image of themselves as practitioners, and they want to be liked by their students. Their practice at this stage is highly influenced by images of an ideal teacher they have had in the past. Stage 2 emphasizes classroom control and management. At this stage, the ideal teacher image will be challenged by the reality of the
classroom, and teachers become concerned with survival and strategies for integrating themselves into their professional context (i.e., school). Stages 1 and 2 could take a sizeable portion of a teacher’s professional development during his or her career. It is only in Stage 3 that teachers develop the required confidence to dispense with classroom popularity issues and begin to concentrate on ways to improve students’ learning outcomes. Teachers at this stage are capable of developing their own teaching strategies and moving toward formulating their own philosophies of teaching and learning. In other words, teachers’ development is a journey outward during which they are basically concerned about the self (Stage 1), then move to a concern with the task (Stage 2), and end up with a concern about students and teaching outcomes (Stage 3). Practicing a postmethod pedagogy will only become possible at the third stage, when survival and approval issues are no longer of concern and when teachers have developed the necessary self-confidence to resist administrative and financial pressures.

CONCLUSION

The problems that political ideologies and the academic world could not solve—problems of injustice, marginalization and representation, voice and inclusion, effective design and delivery of instructional materials—are now assigned to the lone postmethod practitioner. Most of these problems also afflict the academic community of L2 teaching; instances of injustice exist, for example, in the form of recruitment policies and research grant allocations. Our academic discourse community is still grappling with the unjust superiority afforded the native speaker over the nonnative and the male over the female in our profession; the profession has not yet been able to counter the destructive effects of standardized tests, and in the real world of practice, many teachers learn about the content and the format of even locally produced tests only on the day of exam. Tests are not designed by teachers themselves but by testing departments of language centers or institutes. Many members of our community have not yet heard about the postmethod and have no regard for social and critical implications of education; the urgently needed first step, it seems, is to raise the awareness of academia. However, the academic world has the luxury of theorizing, while language teachers have to deal with the day-to-day necessity of meeting pacing-schedule deadlines and worrying about the pass/fail of their students at the end of the course as a measure of their teaching efficiency.

Postmethod must become more responsible and practical to be able to win the trust of practitioners. By responsible I mean it needs to come
up with a teacher education system which is capable, in practice, of overcoming the limitations within which teachers work. It must be able to provide guidance as to how inflexible, top-down administrative systems can be convinced to grant teachers the autonomy that postmethod demands of and accords to them.

It must also become more practical in adopting the language of practice, not academic discourse, as its point of departure. This observation goes back to a comment made by a reviewer of an earlier draft of this article, making a distinction between method and methodology. Method, it was argued, is the extinct theoretical framework the postmethod has replaced, but methodology is what teachers do in their classes, and it is very much alive. As a result, teachers in Bell’s (2007) study have been wrong in concluding that method is alive because they have conflated the distinction between the two concepts. But is this dichotomy part of the discourse of practitioners? And does such a distinction really hold valid for them? And even if this distinction does exist in the world of practice, isn’t a teacher’s methodology highly influenced and shaped by the method in which he or she was trained?

To come up with a postmethod pedagogy that is an accurate reflection of what takes place in language teaching classes, an important assumption must be made and accepted. Our profession must come to the realization that no grand theory or overarching idea can capture the local narrative of all L2 classes across time and space, and postmethod must get its inspirations not from postmodern philosophy or academic discussions per se, but also from the reflections of teachers and their practical wisdom. In other words, postmethod must get into language classes, adopt an ethnographic perspective of classroom life and reality, and then, based on those observations and interpretations, define or redefine its principles and pedagogies. Postmethod, in fact, must be able to help teachers theorize their practices by including their voices in its tenets, not speaking on their behalf from a purely theoretical perspective.

For the postmethod pedagogy to take hold, change should begin with the academic discourse community which lays the foundations for teacher education and certification, norms of practice, standardization of language tests, as well as teacher hiring and firing policies. In other words, change should be multilateral because the requirements for a postmethod pedagogy are too demanding to be fulfilled by teachers acting as rebels against their discourse community or their community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which has the power to isolate them if it does not find their discourse or practice palatable. If teachers are going to be given a voice, they should also be given an audience to listen to their voices, and as long as our academic discourse community ignores
practitioners’ plight, continues to make impossible demands, and refuses to replace idealism with realism, the postmethod will remain just a topic for lectures and argumentative academic articles like the present one.

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REFERENCES