

The Role of Teacher in the Postmethod Era

by

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Abstract

In the postmethod era, the role of teachers is seen as central, changing from information-oriented to inquiry-oriented. They are considered not only as practitioners, but also as self-directed theorizers who construct their own theory of practice. Effective postmethod teachers are able to analyze their classroom procedure to see what works and what doesn't so that they can assess their instruction effectively to bring the necessary changes for achieving the desired goal. Their teaching goal is not just transmitting a set of preselected and presequenced body of knowledge, but their own beliefs and knowledge are considered as an integral part of their teaching process. This kind of process is surely a reflective not a mechanical one. In this article, first the concept of method is defined and then the shift from method to postmethod is discussed briefly. It will be followed by different approaches to postmethod pedagogy. Finally, the role of teacher, teacher educator and prospective teacher are elaborated in detail.

The Role of Teacher in the Post Method Era

Different methods have assigned different roles to teachers over time. For instance, in Audiolingual method, the teacher was seen as an orchestra conductor, or in Community Language Learning the role is that of a counselor. As Harmer (2001) articulates it is extremely difficult to come to conclusions about which method is most appropriate for our own teaching situation. Consequently, teachers confront a range of roles prescribed by different methods. In what follows first the term method is defined and then the shift to postmethod era is discussed. Next, different approaches to postmethod pedagogy are elaborated. Finally, the role of the teacher in this era comes under scrutiny.

Shift from Method to Post-method

Anthony (1963, as cited in Brown, 2002) makes a distinction between approach, method, and technique. According to Anthony, an approach is a set of assumptions dealing with the nature of language, learning, and teaching. Method is an overall plan for presentation of teaching materials based on a selected approach. It follows that techniques are particular classroom activities consistent with a method. Anthony's framework is hierarchical.

However, there were some disagreements over Anthony's framework. For Richards and Rodgers (1986), method is used as an umbrella term comprising approach, design and procedure. Similarly, Prabhu (1990) considers method as classroom activities and their underlying theories.

Defining the concept of method, Bell (2003) makes a distinction between method (with a lowercase m) and Method (with an uppercase M). The former refers to classroom practices, while the latter means "a fixed set of classroom practices that serve as a prescription and therefore do not allow variation" (p. 326).

According to Kumaravadivelu (2006a) the "term *method* is used indiscriminately to refer to what theorists propose and to what teachers practice" (p. 60).

Pennycook (1989) argues that methods represent interested knowledge and they serve the dominant power structures in society, leading to "a de-skilling of the role of teacher, and grater institutional control over classroom practice" (p. 610). Brown (2002) states that methods are too prescriptive and at times indistinguishable from each other in some aspects. In addition, they are not verified by empirical validation. Duo to these reasons Brown asserts that the "concept of separate methods in no longer a central issue in language teaching practice" (p. 10).

According to Kumaravadivelu (2006b), the concept of method carries the following myths:

1. There is a best method out there ready and waiting to be discovered.
2. Method constitutes the organizing principle for language teaching.
3. Method has a universal and ahistorical value.
4. Theorists conceive knowledge, and teachers consume knowledge.
5. Method is neutral, and has no ideological motivation.

Duo to the mentioned pitfalls, there was a shift from method to post-method era.

Postmethod Approaches

Kumaravadivelu (2006a, b) highlights three postmethod frameworks. The first framework is that of Stern (1983). His framework has three dimensions: (a) the L1-L2 dimension (b) the analytic-experiential dimension, and (c) the explicit-implicit dimension. Each dimension forms a continuum. Stern advocates an integrated curricular

agenda and his multidimensional framework is both theory neutral and method neutral which looks beyond the concept of method.

Allwright's Exploratory Practice (EP) is the second framework which is based on three fundamental tenets: "(a) the quality of life in the language classroom is much more important than instructional efficiency, (b) ensuring our understanding of the quality of classroom life is far more essential than developing ever 'improved' teaching methods, and (c) understanding such a quality of life is a social, not an asocial matter" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006a, p. 68).

To practice the exploratory practice, the teacher has to first identify a puzzle. Reflecting and monitoring the problem, the teacher takes direct action. Finally, the teacher shares his/her exploration with others. "The central focus of EP is local practice" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006a, p. 68).

Kumaravadivelu's (2001, 2006a, b) macrostrategic framework is the third framework. His framework is shaped by three parameters of particularity, practicality, and possibility.

The parameter of particularity states that any postmethod pedagogy "must 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, p. 538). In the same line, Howatt and Widdowson (2004) add that teachers should not consider local contexts as constraints to be overcome but conditions to be satisfied. This is what they call a shift to localization.

The second parameter, practicality, relates to the relationship between theory and practice. Kumaravadivelu recognizes the theory/practice dichotomy as harmful. In this regard, he cites O'Hanlon (1993) distinction between professional theories and personal theories. The former are those theories that are generated by experts. The latter are theories that are developed by teachers "by interpreting and applying professional theories in practical situations" (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, p. 540). He adds that professional theories are often valued, while personal theories are often overlooked. Rejecting the demarcation between theorists' theory and teachers' theory, Kumaravadivelu emphasizes that postmethod teacher should be able to "theorize from their practice and practice what they theorize" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b, p. 173). In the same line, Ur (1996) points out that postmethod has changed the relationship between the teachers as practitioners and the theorizers.

The third parameter, possibility, is related to relations of power and dominance. It refers to sociopolitical awareness. There are numerous variables such as race, gender, class and the like which directly or indirectly influence the classroom input and interaction. The parameter of possibility also taps language learner identity.

Apart from these three parameters of particularity, practicality and possibility, Kumaravadivelu's framework includes macrostrategies and microstrategies. Macrostrategies which are derived from theoretical, practical and pedagogical knowledge are said to be both theory neutral and method neutral. They (1) maximize learning opportunities, (2) facilitate negotiated interaction, (3) minimize perceptual mismatches,

(4) activate intuitive heuristics, (5) foster language awareness, (6) contextualize linguistic input, (7) integrate language skills, (8) promote learner autonomy, (9) ensure social relevance, and (10) raise cultural consciousness. Kumaravadivelu (2003, 2006a, b) states that taking these macrostrategies as guidelines, teachers can design their own microstrategies which match their classroom context. To put it another way, macrostrategies are operationalized through microstrategies which are classroom procedures.

Apart from these three frameworks which were highlighted by Kumaravadivelu, Brown (2002) refers to twelve principles that can guide language teachers in the postmethod era. They are (1) Automaticity, (2) meaningful learning, (3) the anticipation of reward, (4) intrinsic motivation, (5) strategic investment, (6) language ego, (7) self-confidence, (8) risk taking, (9) the language –culture connection, (11) interlanguage, and (12) communicative competence. He calls his approach ‘a principled approach’ and declares that neither are these principles exhaustive, nor are they of the same weight in our approach to language teaching. All the frameworks presented here emphasize the limitations of methods. Furthermore, they make explicit that postmethod pedagogy has to be constructed by teachers themselves by taking into account their classroom context and particularities (Kumaravadivelu, 2006a).

Teacher's Role

To actualize postmethod pedagogy, teachers play an important role. The postmethod teacher is supposed to be autonomous. This autonomy is so central that Kumaravadivelu (2001) refers to it as “the heart of postmethod pedagogy” (p. 548).

Postmethod teachers should trust their prior knowledge and their potential to develop a reflective approach to their teaching. According to Bartlett (1990) reflection means more than thinking. It focuses on the day-to-day classroom teaching as well as the institutional structure. He believes that reflective teaching is not an easy process. “It involves a major shift in emphasis in our thinking and acting” (p. 213) adopting a critical attitude to ourselves as teachers and challenging our personal beliefs about teaching. Murphy (2001, p. 499) adds that reflective teaching introduces “way for teachers to look inward, both within themselves and within the courses they offer, to access information and inspiration about their efforts in language classroom”.

Action research is considered as an important tool in the reflective process. The word action refers to “taking practical action to resolve classroom problems” (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 171). Every teacher can conduct action research in his or her classroom. The steps which have to be taken to include a cycle of identifying a problem or issue, collecting information about the problem, devising a strategy to deal with the problem, trying out the strategy, and finally observing its effects (Richards & Farrel, 2005). By doing so, “teachers can develop a deeper understanding of many issues in teaching and learning as well as acquire useful classroom investigation skills” (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 171).

The kind of action research which is encouraged in postmethod does not involve sophisticated experimental studies. It seems that Kumaravadivelu (2001) prefers to use the term ‘teacher research’ to make a distinction between action research which is based on professional theories and that one which is based on personal theories. He recommends the following steps for teachers’ inquiry:

- Using investigative methods such as questionnaires, surveys, and interviews to gather learner profiles that include information about learning strategies and styles, personal identities and investments, psychological attitudes and anxieties, and sociopolitical concerns and conflicts
- Identifying researchable questions that emerge from learner profiles and classroom observation—questions of interest to learners, teachers, or both that range from classroom management to pedagogic pointers to sociopolitical problems
- Clustering the identified researchable questions in terms of themes and patterns, and deciding which ones can be explored individually and which ones collectively with learners, peers, or both
- Exploring which of the resources learners bring with them can be profitably exploited for learning, teaching, and research purposes, including learners’ sociocultural and linguistic knowledge (e.g., exploring how often and under what conditions the much-ignored and much-neglected common L1 can be used as an effective means of learning and teaching even though the mandated methods and materials might proscribe its use)
- Finding out to what extent, in carrying out their investigative activities, they can engage in an electronic, Internet-based dialogue with local and distant peers and scholars who may have similar concerns and get useful feedback on their problems and projects
- Developing interpretive strategies to observe, analyze, and evaluate their own teaching acts by using a suitable classroom observation framework that is based on a recognition of the potential mismatch between teacher intention and learner interpretation
- Determining what basic assumptions about language, learning, and teaching are implied in their original pedagogic formulations, what existing assumptions need to be modified in light of research findings, and what changes in pedagogic formulations are warranted by such modifications (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, pp. 550-551)

To put it another way, it is worth mentioning that reflective teaching and action research should not be done for implementing or be on the basis of professional theories. In that case, there would be little room for self-conceptualization and self-construction of pedagogic knowledge. Reflective teaching and action research are worthwhile if they

result in a shift of responsibility for change or improvement from outsiders to teachers themselves where teachers set their own agendas (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b; Richards & Farrel, 2005).

According to Kumaravadivelu (2001; 2006b), the postmethod teacher is a self-directed individual who can construct his own theory of practice. He keeps his “eyes, ears, and mind open in the classroom to see what works and what doesn’t, with what group(s) of learners, for what reason” (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, p. 550). In addition, he assesses his instruction effectively to bring the necessary changes for achieving the desired goals.

Commenting on the teacher’s role, Prabhu (1990) asserts that teachers have to possess a ‘sense of plausibility’ to enhance the teaching process. The sense of plausibility results from various factors such as teachers’ experience in the past as a learner, their earlier experience of teaching, their experience during teacher training courses and the like. This sense of plausibility varies from one teacher to another. Prabhu adds that teaching is productive only when the teacher’s sense of plausibility is engaged and the teacher is involved in the teaching operation. Prabhu believes that “an engagement of the teacher’s sense of plausibility is a major condition for classroom rapport” (p. 173). Furthermore, this sense does not have anything to do with a good or bad method. He goes further and asserts that if teachers follow some methods, their sense of plausibility can easily become frozen. Consequently, their teaching turns to be ‘mechanical’ than ‘real’.

Now the question is that how teachers can get prepared to be an effective postmethod teacher. In most teacher training courses, what happens is that there is a teacher educator who tries to transmit a set of preselected and presequenced body of knowledge to prospective teachers. According to Kumaravadivelu (2001; 2006b) this is mainly a top-down approach in which the best way to teach is suggested, teaching behaviors are modeled, and prospective teachers’ mastery of discrete pedagogic behaviors is evaluated. Kumaravadivelu call this position a hopeless one and asserts that student teachers should not be seen as clean slates.

Prospective teachers embarking on formal teacher education programs bring with them their notion of what constitutes good teaching and what does not, largely based on their prior educational experience as learners and in some cases, as teachers. Their minds are anything but atheoretical clean slates. (p. 552)

Therefore, he believes that prospective teachers’ voices and visions should be recognized and their knowledge and experience should be legitimized through dialogue and interaction between the teacher educator and student teachers. In other words, student teachers’ value, beliefs and knowledge should be considered as an integral part of the learning process. This kind of process is surely a reflective not a mechanical one. Kumaravadivelu (2001) refers to the role of the postmethod teacher educator as follows:

- Helping student teachers recognize the inequalities of the current teacher education programs that treat teacher educator as producers of knowledge and student teachers as consumers of knowledge.

- Enabling student teachers to articulate their beliefs, assumptions and knowledge about language learning and teaching and share them with other prospective teachers in class
- Encouraging student teachers to think critically to relate their personal knowledge to the professional knowledge they are being exposed to
- Creating situations for student teachers to acquire basic skills and helping them to hypothesize principles for their practice; that is, teaching them how to construct a theory from their practice
- Conducting research with rather on their student teachers
- Pointing out the strength and the weaknesses of the professional knowledge and helping them how to localize this knowledge according to their learning/teaching context

These suggestions transform an information-oriented system into an inquiry-oriented one emphasizing pedagogic exploration.

Richards and Rodgers (2001) claim that applying procedures and techniques developed by others may be an essential starting point for inexperienced teachers. However, as teachers gain more experience, they had better try to develop an individual approach, reflecting their beliefs, principles and experiences.

To sum up, the role of teacher is crucial in any postmethod pedagogy. Teachers are considered not only as practitioners, but as researchers, theorizing from their practice and practicing what they theorize.

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