

A Postmethod Pedagogy: Challenges, Opportunities and Empowerment

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A Sample Activity

I will show you a photograph that may be shocking! Make sure you are sitting down.

Answer the three questions with your neighbors as exactly as possible.

But first, let's try and guess what we will see!

Key Words

Here are some words related to the photograph:

Reptile	Soap
Boy	Slimy
Wet	Long
Danger	Brush
Bath	Bucket

What do you think we will see?



Ciao!

What is *Method*?

Possible definitions:

- a) “a fixed set of classroom practices that serve as a prescription” (Bell, 2003)
- b) “a single set of theoretical principles derived from feeder disciplines and a single set of classroom procedures directed at classroom teachers” (Kumaravadivelu, 1994)
- c) “a specific instructional design or system...It is relatively fixed in time, and there is generally little scope for individual interpretation” (Richards and Rodgers, 2001)

For example...

- The Designer Methods (1950s-1980s)
 - Situational Language Teaching
 - Audiolingualism
 - The Silent Way
 - Total Physical Response
 - Suggestopedia

Methods: Pluses and minuses

- Pluses
 - Easy to implement in the classroom
 - (supposedly) based on reliable principles and sound research
 - Some methods do work for some learners
- Minuses
 - Create a wall between researcher and teacher
 - Allow for little variation
 - Ignore local particularities

What is *Approach*?

- Possible definitions:
 - “A set of beliefs and principles that can be used as the basis for teaching a language” (Richards and Rodgers, 2001)
 - A “rationale for language learning and teaching” (Brown, 2007)
 - “The theoretical principles governing language learning and language teaching” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006)

For example...

- Language learning approaches (1980s-1990s)
 - Communicative Language Teaching
 - Competency-Based Language Teaching
 - Content-Based Instruction (CLIL)
 - Cooperative Learning
 - Neurolinguistic Programming
 - Task-Based Language Teaching

Approaches: Pluses and minuses

- Pluses
 - Based on concrete language learning principles, but can still be adapted and modified by the teacher
 - Easily revised as we learn more
 - Tend to value the development of communicative competency in learners
- Minuses
 - Still lack contextual awareness
 - Wall between researcher and teacher is not completely removed (but should it be?)
 - So large as to be difficult to define

Are methods “dead”?

- In a 2007 study, David Bell interviewed and examined the writings of a diverse group of ELT teachers and found (in part) the following:
 - Many teachers see little distinction between *method* and *approach*.
 - The term *method* is used most often to describe a teacher’s particular eclectic teaching style.
 - Most do not believe that *methods* are dead, but maintain that one-size-fits-all assumptions have little use.

Where does this leave us?

*If method is dead,
And approach is insufficient...*

The *Postmethod Condition*

Suggests that:

- There is no single set of classroom assumptions and activities which work for every teacher and every group of students.
- Prescribed methods are culturally biased and ignore local knowledge.
- The researcher cannot know what is best for all learners.

But what does this mean for the teacher?

From *pre-packaging* to *self-actualization*

- Whether or not we are aware, the diversity of the environments within which we teach affects our classroom practices
 - Teachers have unique styles, personalities and interests
 - Learners have their own goals and assumptions
 - Institutions have constraints and requirements
 - A society has its own historical and political relationship with the target language

A Postmethod Pedagogy

A framework beyond the basics of *method* and *approach*:

- The teacher is also the researcher via practices of reflection and observation.
- Local conditions, cultures, attitudes and assumptions are vital.
- No single method, approach or theory of language learning dominates.
- A pedagogy is based on a series of universal macrostrategies (Kumaravadivelu 2006).

(Some of) Kumaravadivelu's Macrostrategies

- Facilitate negotiated interaction
 - Learners engage in meaningful language use
- Minimize perceptual mismatches
 - Reduce teacher/student miscommunication
- Integrate language skills
 - Creative speaking, listening, reading and writing
- Promote learner autonomy
 - Encouraging self-learning
- Raise cultural consciousness
 - Development intercultural communication skills

From *macro* to *micro*

- Using these macrostrategies as a foundation, the teacher then applies her own set of classroom applications, or, *microstrategies*.
 - Classroom procedures which are judiciously selected, shaped, employed, reflected on and subsequently modified by the teacher.

For Example

- Macrostrategy:

Facilitate negotiated interaction

- Microstrategy:

Students watch a television commercial and answer in small groups the following questions:

- 1) What is the commercial selling and to whom?
- 2) What marketing strategies does the commercial use?
- 3) Is this an effective commercial? Why or why not?
- 4) Is the commercial honest about its product? How do you know?

For Example

- Macrostrategy:

Integrate Skills

- Microstrategy:

Students complete the following steps in a writing lesson:

- 1) Read a text and discuss it during class in small groups
- 2) Plan and write an opinion paragraph based on the text
- 3) Share paragraph with classmates and solicit written and oral feedback

Remember our snake activity?

1. I gave clear instructions (I hope!)
 - Minimize perceptual mismatches
2. You made predictions about the photograph based on key vocabulary.
 - Promote learner autonomy
 - Facilitate negotiated interaction
3. You used a critical thinking approach to observe, analyze and then judge the photograph.
 - Integrate language skills
 - Raise cultural consciousness

Criticisms and challenges

- The *Postmethod* discussion has marginalized the exploration of effective and useful methods.
- Not all teachers have the time and expertise required to develop their own *Postmethod* framework (Akbari 2008).
- Teacher training programs would require a radical shift in focus to accommodate the new paradigm (Kumaravadivelu 2006).
- Too much emphasis is placed context and not enough on practice.

My advice for teachers in Russia

- Hold to principles which are important to you
- Trust your intuition and rely on your experience
- Never stop learning
- Value the input of specialists, but be your own guide
- Collaborate with your colleagues
- Observe the lessons of other teachers and invite observers into your lessons
- Solicit anonymous feedback from students
- Be both idealistic and practical
- Look objectively at your own teaching practices
- Don't be afraid of change!

Thank you!

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For related alternatives to this framework, see:

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