METHOD, POST-METHOD AND CYBER-METHOD

Chokri Smaoui

Faculty of Arts & Humanities, Sfax, Tunisia

Hejer Abidi

Faculty of Arts & Humanities, Sfax, Tunisia

ABSTRACT: *The present paper addresses the question of methods and approaches in foreign language teaching and how the pendulum has been swinging in various directions for more than a century now. The main thrust of the argument is that prescriptive methods and ready-made formulae can only be short-lived and can never cater for a multitude of variables such as local environment, learner level, the cultural dimension and learner preferences. The paper ends with a critical appraisal of what is dubbed here cyber-method, the different avenues that have been opened up in the teaching of foreign languages by the introduction of various technological possibilities.*

KEY WORDS: method; approach; post-method; cyber-method; blended learning; language teaching.

GENERAL CAVEATS

In any discussion about language pedagogy, it is important to bring into view a number of caveats. There is first the inextricable connection between teaching and learning, the former implying the latter. Although learning involves, among other things, autonomous learning and self-study, it is generally understood to involve an instructor. Thus, in second Language Acquisition (SLA), for instance, the major mode of language learning that is investigated is what is referred to in the literature as instructed SLA (see, e.g., Ellis 1997; Mitchell & Myles 2004). Clearly, the two are in a dialectical relationship.

The two areas of SLA and L2 language pedagogy are therefore also strongly linked. Ellis (2001) refers to the first of these as a field of technical knowledge and to the second as a branch of practical knowledge. Thus,

> Over the years, SLA has provided a substantial body of technical knowledge about how people learn a second language. This is reflected in the ever-growing set of technical terms used to label this knowledge: overgeneralization and transfer errors, order and sequence of acquisition, foreigner talk, input and intake, noticing, learning and communication strategies, the teachability hypothesis … this technical knowledge and the terms that label it constitute the goods that are carefully guarded by practitioners of SLA (p. 46).

Practical knowledge, on the other hand, "is implicit and intuitive. We are generally not aware of what we practically know. For example, I know how to tie my shoe laces but I have little awareness about the sequence of actions I must perform to do this and could certainly not describe them very well" (p. 46). Ellis also suggests that a number of poorly-understood procedures are deployed when performing certain actions, and therefore practical knowledge is generally fully expressible only through practice.

These two areas of knowledge can have interesting intersections, although they can diverge in other respects. This position is clearly articulated in the strong version of the SLA/Language pedagogy connection. Krashen, for instance (e.g. 1981; 1982; 1985) maintains that SLA theory should guide language pedagogy; to that end, he has proposed with Terrell a pedagogical proposal that he termed the Natural Approach (1983). In a similar fashion, Pica (e.g. 1994) argues that the researcher functions as a resource helping teachers solve the practical problems they have identified. Her starting point is not SLA itself but rather the questions that the teachers have asked her "both in the privacy of their classrooms and in the more public domain of professional meetings" (1994: 50). SLA can therefore provide answers to questions such as the role of explicit grammar instruction, the utility of drill and practice, and the question of errors.

It has to be born in mind, however, that not all researchers agree about the strong interconnectedness between SLA and language pedagogy. Indeed, the weak version of the connection stipulates that SLA is not of much help to pedagogy (Tarone et al. 1976; Hatch 1978; Lightbown 1985; Widdowson 1990). Lightbown, for one, argues that "SLA research does not tell teachers *what* to teach, and what it says about *how* to teach they have already figured out (1985, p. 182). Beretta (1993) argues for 'pure' theory building in SLA, which clearly shows that he sees no possibility for one feeding into the other. This is doubtlessly overstated, however, in view of the many insights that language pedagogy can have from psycholinguistics in general and SLA more specifically.

This affinity between SLA and language pedagogy notwithstanding, language teaching methodology has also been served by myriad disciplines including education, linguistics, curriculum design, materials development and language testing, to cite just a few. This evidently attests to its being deeply anchored in the applied linguistics science, a broad field that is characterized mostly by interdisciplinarity and concern with problems in the real world (Widdowson 2000). The interdisciplinary nature of language pedagogy has been clarified throughout the previous discussion. Its connection with real world concerns is beyond contest taking into account, for example, the huge numbers of people worldwide who go to language classes to learn at least one additional language. Thus learning additional languages is a practical concern for people. As a matter of fact, in our modern world bilingualism is the rule rather than the exception (Wei 2000). In short, language teaching has rightly been looked at as the traditional manifestation of applied linguistics.

Language teaching started being considered as a field of scholarship in its own right starting from the 20th century (Richards & Rodgers 2001). This, however, in no way undermines the efforts of language teaching specialists in the centuries before. Howatt (1984), for example, credited teachers

in the 16th and 17th centuries such as Bellot and Holyband with starting techniques and tasks like substitution tables, situated dialogues and oral proficiency exercises. As will be clarified below, this shows that the history of language teaching is to a large extent a recursive one, bearing in mind that many prior proposals come back later but only in a different shape.

Approaches and methods in foreign language teaching:

For a number of centuries now, researchers and language teachers have concerned themselves with finding the optimal formula for making the language learning experience worthy of attention. This long history of language teaching research has therefore gone through "changing winds and shifting sands" (Marckwardet 1972, p. 5). Our aim here is not to trace this long history, nor is it to select a number of methods and describe them in detail. It is rather to attempt an understanding of what mostly characterizes the most well-know methods and approaches of language teaching in the last one and a half centuries or so.

Some terminological distinctions are in order before we proceed any further. First, some researchers draw a distinction between 'method' and 'methodology'. For example, Knight (2001) suggests that 'method' refers to "any practical procedure for teaching a language" (p. 147), while methodology "implies the existence of a set of procedures related by an underlying rationale or theory of teaching and learning language" (p. 147). 'Methodology' in this sense stands for the overarching organizing principle under which different methods can be listed.

'Method' has also been contrasted to 'approach'. In Anthony (1963), for example, approach is "a set of assumptions dealing with the nature of language, learning, and teaching" (p. 65), while method is "an overall plan for systematic presentation of language based on a selected approach" (p.65). Anthony has also introduced the notion of 'technique', which he defines as "specific classroom activities consistent with a method, and therefore in harmony with an approach as well" (p. 65). This is clearly a hierarchical structure with 'approach' serving as the general philosophical level of a given method, and 'techniques' providing it with the nitty-gritty details of classroom reality.

Richards & Rodgers (2001) propose a different conceptualization, with the construct 'method' being divided into three elements: approach, design and procedure. 'Approach' has almost the same meaning as in Anthony; it basically relates to views about the nature of language and language learning. Design, on the other hand, is the 'level of method analysis' which comprises the general and specific objectives of the method, a syllabus model, types of learning and teaching activities, learner and teacher roles, and finally the role of instructional materials. Finally, 'procedure' is defined as "classroom techniques, practices and behaviors observed when the method is used" (2001, p. 32).

These models are no doubt helpful in guaranteeing some theoretical distinctions between the different components of a language teaching proposal. They are not without problems though. For example, the term 'approach', which Anthony and Richards & Rodgers claim to be related to the underlying philosophical level, is also used to refer to less prescriptive methods such as

Communicative Language Teaching and the Natural Approach. There is therefore more room for maneuver in approaches than in methods, as methods generally imply a certain level of rigid application and following the steps proposed sometimes even blindly. Some of the well-known methods in the history of foreign language teaching include the Grammar Translation Method, the Audiolingual Method and the Direct method.

What is worthy of note in any discussion of methods and approaches in language teaching is that they each presents itself as a much better alternative to the preceding one. Thus, for example, the Direct Method, which appeared in the end of the 19th century, was presented as an alternative to the Grammar Translation Method for the latter focused almost exclusively on written language, particularly the language of literature, on consciously memorizing grammatical rules and lexical items, and on translating from and into the target language (Knight 2001; Richards & Rodgers 2001), while the new proposal highlighted "the primacy of speech, the centrality of the connected text as the kernel of the teaching-learning process, and the absolute priority of an oral methodology in the classroom" (Howatt 1984, p. 171). Similarly, the Communicative Approach was marketed as the savior of those caught in the web of Audiolingualism which overemphasized drilling and repetition, modeled production and accuracy of language forms, while the new approach brought communicative competence to the fore and put the stress on conveying the message, negotiation of meaning and fluency rather than language correctness.

While the field has for long been motivated by the search for a 'better' method or approach, language practitioners do not seem to refuse previous methods out of hand. Many of them will even be found to be mixing different aspects of various methods to come up with a recipe that can serve their purposes better. This practice has come to be known as eclecticism. It is selecting what the teacher judges to be the 'best' of a number of methods. Wali (2009) has this to say on eclecticism:

> …one of the premises of eclecticism is that teaching should serve learners not methods. Thus, teachers should feel free in choosing techniques and procedures inside the classroom. There is no ideal approach in language learning. Each one has its merits and demerits. There is no royalty to certain methods. Teachers should know that they have the right to choose the best methods and techniques in any method according to learners' needs and learning situation. Teachers can adopt a flexible method and technique so as to achieve their goals. They may choose whatever works best at a particular time in a particular situation (p. 40).

Although this kind of practice might be well-intentioned, it can be counter-productive if it is not carried out in a principled, or as Brown (2007) prefers to describe it, 'enlightened' way. Principled eclecticism implies that the language teacher has assimilated the aspects s/he deems relevant and appropriate, and has also managed to see how certain dimensions of method A can be realistically combined with other dimensions of method B. Besides, as Mwansa (2019) rightly argues, since learners are different and their ways of learning differ, eclecticism can be a flexible way to respond to their diversity.

The concept 'method' has thus clearly influenced the direction of foreign language teaching for many decades now and has fashioned the way the language lesson is conceived across the globe. However, at some point in its development it came to be seen as an excessively restricting concept that leaves little room for the teacher to be creative and to cater for so many variables during the lesson. This ultimately led to a revolution against method which culminated in the post-method condition.

The Post-method era:

As pointed out above, there has been growing uneasiness and dissatisfaction for decades now with the concept 'method' and the narrow perspective it offers language teachers ((Kumaravadivelu 1994; 2001; 2003; 2012; Stern 1983; Rivers 1991; Jarvis 1991; Nunan 1989). Kumaravadivelu (1994) issued a call to start looking for an *alternative to* method rather than other alternative methods. Similarly, Richards (2001) argued for abandoning the perennial search for a 'supermethod'. Researchers also started talking about the death of methods and the birth of a new era. Thus, Brown (2002) used at least three death metaphors to depict this disenchantment: 'We lay to rest … methods' (p. 11); 'recently interred methods' (p. 14); 'requiem for methods' (p. 17). Nunan (1989) went as far as proposing assigning the concept of method to the dustbin of history. In retrospect, however, this is revealed to be an extreme position, at least in view of the heavy reliance that we are still witnessing on a number of methods or at least aspects thereof. Other, less forceful arguments include Kumaravadivelu's suggestion that the concept of method has little theoretical validity and even less practical validity; Clarke's claim (1983: 109) that it is a label without substance; Pennycook's (1989: 597) assertion that it has diminished rather than enhanced our understanding of language teaching; and Jarvis' (1991: 295) contention that language teaching might be better understood and better executed if the concept of method were not to exist at all.

The concept 'method' was also criticized on grounds of inability to cater for all learner needs and preferences and also lack of innovation. Adamson (2004: 613), for example, stressed the fact that the complexity of classroom realities virtually renders invalid any 'one-size-fits-all' approach to method selection. Rivers (1991) argued that what look like new methods are frequently a variant of existing methods, presented with 'the fresh paint of a new terminology that camouflages their fundamental similarity', while Rowlinson (1997: 4) was of the opinion that very few methods are truly innovative.

The most outspoken critic of the concept 'method' is undoubtedly Kumaravadivelu (e.g. 1994; 2001; 2003; 2006). His major argument is that the time has come where a paradigm shift is strongly needed and there is vital need to change direction. As he put it, "As long as we are caught up in the web of method, we will continue to get entangled in an unending search for an unavailable solution, an awareness that such a search drives us to continually recycle and repackage the same old ideas and an awareness that nothing short of breaking the cycle can salvage the situation" (1994, p. 28). For Kumaravadivelu, this awareness has been essential in the creation of what he refers to as 'the post-method condition'.

Kumaravadivelu argues that a number of myths about method need to be dispelled. The first myth is to the effect that there is a best method out there ready and waiting to be discovered. The fact of the matter is that this is like a chimera; as soon as one gets closer to it, s/he realizes that things long awaited-for disappear. The second myth is that method constitutes the organizing principle for language teaching. The third is that method has a universal and ahistorical value. This idea can be very easily discarded taking into account the big differences in learners and learning contexts. The next myth is summarized in the statement that theorists conceive knowledge, and teachers consume knowledge. According to Kumaravadivelu, teachers need to be empowered and to get beyond the state of passively consuming other people's proposals. Finally, the last myth is that method is neutral, and has no ideological motivation.

Kumaravadivelu (1994) defines the post-method condition as

> A state of affairs that compels us to refigure the relationship between the theorizers and the practitioners of method. As conceptualizers of philosophical underpinnings governing language pedagogy, theorizers have traditionally occupied the power center of language pedagogy while the practitioners of classroom teaching have been relegated to the disempowered periphery. If the conventional concept of method entitles theorizers to construct knowledge-oriented theories of pedagogy, the post-method condition empowers practitioners to construct classroom-oriented theories of practice. If the concept of method authorizes theorizers to centralize pedagogic decision making, the post-method condition enables practitioners to generate location-specific, classroom-oriented innovative practices (p. 29).

Kumaravadivelu (2001) argues that the post-method condition is characterized by a number of pedagogic parameters and pedagogic indicators. The first of pedagogic parameters is *the parameter of particularity*, which stipulates that any post-method 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" (2001, p.538). *The parameter of practicality* states that teachers should theorize from practice and practice what they theorize. In this sense, teachers are not obliged to wait for theorists to tell them how to act. They had better come up with their own conclusions after the long periods of practice they will have gone through. The last parameter is that of *possibility*, which is based on countering the pedagogy of power and dominance (which itself aims at creating and sustaining social inequalities). This is in line with critical pedagogy, which seeks to go beyond passive reception and blind application of imposed proposals.

Pedagogic indicators, on the other hand, are defined as "those functions and features that are considered to reflect the role played by key participants in the L2 learning and teaching operations governing pedagogy' (2003, p.176). These key participants are the post-method learner, the post-method teacher, and the post-method teacher educator. The first of these is said to have a meaningful role in pedagogic decision-making. The second is depicted as an autonomous teacher, one who will

not be dependent upon theorizers for guidance in language pedagogy. The third category, namely the post-method teacher educator, has to steer clear from the information-oriented model and turn to the enquiry-oriented perspective where decisions about L2 pedagogy spring from the reality of the classroom.

Kumaravadivelu (e.g. 1994) proposes a strategic framework for L2 teaching consisting of macro-strategies and micro-strategies. Macro-strategies are "broad guidelines based on which teachers can generate their location-specific, need-based micro-strategies or classroom procedures" (1994, p. 32), while micro-strategies are classroom procedures that are designed to realize the objectives of a particular macro-strategy. The ten macro-strategies that Kumaravadivelu proposes are as follows: Maximize learning opportunities; Facilitate negotiated interaction; Minimize perceptual mismatches; Activate intuitive heuristics; Foster language awareness; Contextualize linguistic input; Integrate language skills; Promote learner autonomy; Raise cultural consciousness; and finally, Ensure social relevance. Space does not allow full treatment of these strategies, but suffice it to say that most of them are in the direction of catering for the local context of learners and the cultural specificities of their learning, in addition to self-sustained learning and focus on language form in certain situations.

However, in spite of the fact that the post-method condition is appealing and provides for teacher and learner flexibility, there are a number of limitations that can plague it. First, if it is possible and legitimate for an experimented teacher to be left to his / her own devices, how is that possible for a beginning teacher? The chances are that this novice teacher will need guidance, which might be offered by those methods and approaches. S/he can use them as general guidelines to be able to grapple with a few teaching practices. Second, aren't the macro-strategies that Kumaravadivelu proposes 'methods in disguise'? In other words, although Kumaravadivelu talks about broad guidelines, in a way he is reproducing what method theorists are assigning to teachers, albeit in a less rigid way. Finally, many of the ideas that feature in the macro-strategies are familiar from the methods and approaches that Kumaravadivelu harshly criticizes. For example, facilitating negotiated interaction and activating intuitive heuristics are well-known principles from CLT, while fostering language awareness is a distinctive feature of form-focused instruction which, although it is basically a theory of SLA, it has clear ramifications in second language pedagogy.

Cyber-method:

With technology nowadays being at the centre of people's lives, the field of L2 pedagogy has not been exempted from the so many benefits it can bring teachers and learners alike. As Chapelle (2003, p. 1) succinctly put it, "the bond between technology and language use in the modern world should prompt all language professionals to reflect on the ways in which technology is changing the profession of English language teaching in particular and applied linguistics as a whole" . The wide range of possibilities that are offered today by technology in the teaching of foreign languages is what we refer to in this article as cyber-method. It is in line with Chapelle's (2005) definition of CALL as "the broad range of activities associated with technology and language learning" (p. 743).

For some time now, researchers have been referring to the relative integration of technology in language lessons, both online and off-line, as blended learning (Sharma & Barrett 2007; Dudeney & Hockly 2007; Whittaker 2013). Sharma & Barrett (2007) offer the following definition of blended learning: "Blended learning refers to a language course which combines a face to face (F2F) classroom component with an appropriate use of technology. The term technology covers a wide range of recent technologies, such as the Internet, CD-ROMs and interactive whiteboards" (p. 137). To Sharma & Barrett's list of recent technologies, we can add wikis, blogs and the various mobile applications that are now in use and that have provided teachers with a multitude of possibilities for creating novel tasks that learners generally like, bearing in mind that the new generations are now sometimes referred to as digital natives. It has to be noted in passing, however, that technology in the language classroom did not start with the advent of computers. Tape recorders, videotapes and DVDs, overhead projectors, and most importantly language labs at one point were adjunct tools to the language teacher. Later, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) took on that reinforcing role (cf. also computer-mediated communication (CMC) and technology-mediated language learning (TMILL); see, e.g. Brown 2007).

Interestingly, using a computer enables students to use and develop "higher-level thinking skills to share problems". Hobbs (2006, p. 16) contends that in addition to online resources that a computer can bring (magazines, articles, blogs, etc), students become actively involved in creating their own messages using their own electronic and digital media. Unlike the traditional role of the teacher such as that of a lecturer, technology lends itself to a new role for him/her; a challenging one. For this, technology tools help solve problems (Olson, 1994, cited in Frei et al. 2007 p. 11). Frei et al. summarize the role of a teacher in a number of tasks in this new cyber context: a coach, a designer, a thought-provoking counselor, a tool provider, a lesson modifier depending on high or low abilities, etc (2007, p. 11).

Frei et al. further suggest that technology should be added as an instruction to the full schedule by creating multimedia presentations, online debate about topics, engaging students in discussions with other students from different schools or districts such as those relating to works of literature via mail or chat rooms (2007, p. 49). In the same connection, they give some practical details like word processing programs which are about text format ability. These might be helpful for students with difficulties in the task of writing. Many students may prefer keyboarding their thoughts (2007, p. 59). Other practical programs include desktop publishing (creating programs of key academic concepts) (2007, p. 62), spreadsheet programs (organize data and convert it into graphs) (2007, p. 69). However, the teacher must have the ability to evaluate internet resources and equip students to see beyond the words of the Web Page like developing critical thinking skills so as to have students who are information literate (2007, p. 90). In their turn, Osguthorpe & Graham (2003) cite six reasons why blended learning is useful: pedagogical richness; access to knowledge; social interaction; personal agency (i.e. learner control and choice); cost effectiveness; and ease of revision.

The contribution of technology to education in general and L2 pedagogy more specifically has been further reinforced in these times of COVID-19. As a matter of fact, a high percentage of educational institutions have turned to online teaching in order to guarantee the safety of learners and teachers. This has taken various forms, but perhaps most importantly through platforms such as Moodle, Zoom, Google Meet and Teams.

Baggio and Beldarrain (2011) maintain that the way people communicate is shaped and reshaped by technological advancements and in order to get this done activities are blended. Online learning, for example, might rely on what is called "pajama effect" which stands for the ability to connect via digitally-mediated communications through work, play and learning at a time. Additionally, the authors argue that cyber learning facilitates credential mandatory compliance training and professional development. Teachers engaged in online learning can remove barriers and make online learning not only less isolating but also more engaging.(2011, pp. 166-187).

In spite of all these benefits, however, we need to be aware of the pitfalls. First, technology can never replace the human being, in our case the foreign language teacher. For, technology is a facilitator; it can help in bringing forth more motivating tasks, in making grammar teaching, for instance, more appealing, and in benefiting from the various multi-modal tools that are on offer. The teacher, however, and by implication the learners, are the real orchestrators of all those means. Sharma & Barrett (2007), in this connection, rightly advise us to "separate the role of the teacher and the role of technology" (p. 13) as these two are complementary rather than interchangeable. There is next the fear that technology turns into an obsession rather than an adjunct. This is in line with Chapelle's (2003) view that the technologist's perspective is pushed to its limits in suggesting that technology amounts to everything. The point to make here is that technology is a means rather than an end in itself, and it can be conceived of as one possibility among others, a very important possibility though, in promoting a better L2 pedagogy. We certainly endorse this argument while at the same time being aware that the critical analyst's perspective is very limiting; it is the view where the skeptic "does not accept the idea that the development and use of technology constitutes the natural evolution of society, but instead questions the underlying assumptions that technology is inevitable, positive, and culturally neutral" (Chapelle 2003, p. 6). In short, we need to strike a balance between the centrality of human agents (most importantly teachers and learners) and the requirements of technological tools.

Finally, there is the risk that, rather than nurturing creativity and imagination in the language teacher and learner, heavy reliance on technological devices and programs would kill that creativity. There is certainly the temptation to copy and paste activities in their original form, which will not cater for the specificities of the context, level, etc. Tekinarslan (2008), for example, in a study he conducted with Turkish students where the task was to make use of a classroom blog, found that a great percentage of the subjects had simply copied and pasted content available on the Internet into their blog responses. The benefits of technology in the language classroom, therefore, should not be compromised by some practices that can make it counterproductive rather than useful.

CONCLUSION

This paper has critically looked at the three concepts of 'method', 'post-method' and 'cyber-method'. It was shown that the method concept has been found to be too narrow and restricting in scope as it left little room for language teachers to bypass the requirements set by theorists. It was also seen how the post-method concept, although liberating in many of the claims it puts forward, is also a calque of some method dimensions, such as in the macro-strategies proposed by Kumaravadivelu, which were found (some of them at least) to be echoes of recommendations recorded in previous methods and approaches. Finally, we pointed out that cyber-method, notwithstanding the great horizons it has opened for language teachers, can be counterproductive if no judicious use is made of it and if language practitioners lose sight of the human (and humanist, for that matter) dimension which is, and will forever remain, the raison d'être of all forms of education.

It would seem, ultimately, that language pedagogy escapes any form of theorizing. This should not be very surprising in view of the great dynamism characterizing the people involved in this operation and the subject of investigation, i.e. language learning and teaching. The variables involved are numerous, with the result that any attempt at moulding the mechanisms and principles that govern this operation will be doomed to fail. Smaoui (2017) issued a call to optimize language teaching, to the effect that the teaching operation has to take 'local exigencies' into account and also to strongly consider what Kumaravadivelu calls 'the pedagogy of possibility' (2001) and what Widdowson (1990) dubs the 'pragmatics of pedagogy'. It is the belief that the teaching act is born afresh at every single undertaking.

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