

STEPPING ACROSS AND BEYOND METHODS: SOME PEDAGOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Language teaching methods have influenced the way thousands of teachers have taught languages across the world. These methods starting with GTM (Grammar Translation Method) have steadily evolved and it is CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) that has gained currency in recent times. But no method is fool-proof. The fact that some language experts are beginning to talk about postmethod era foreshadows the presumption that the infatuation with methods is over. This paper proposes to formulate some ground rules to frame a working model for language teachers retrieving the best elements from the conventional methods and integrating them with some recent ideas. This paper is not activity driven, rather it is concept driven. Yet some practical tips have been offered for language teachers to make teaching more effective in classroom situation.

Key words:- *Language, teaching, methods, postmethod pedagogy*

Introduction:

“Much that is being claimed as revolutionary in this century is merely a rethinking and renaming of early ideas and procedures (p. ix)” [5] concludes Kelly (1969) after investigating 25 centuries of language teaching. This observation gives rise to serious doubt in our mind about the usefulness of and excitement over the so called methods. According to Richards and Rogers (1986) as many as eleven methods are still in use in various parts of the world.

The question, then, pertinently arises: Are the methods all for nothing? There is perhaps no straight answer. But the very fact that the theorists and the language experts have been on constant search for an effective method substantiates that no fool-proof method has so far been devised. Moreover all methods considerably overlap each other. What is publicized as a new method is, more often than not, “fundamentally similar” (Rivers, 1991; p. 283) [15] or, in other words “a variant of existing methods” (Kumaravadevalu, 2003; p. 25) [7]. Thus the history of language teaching has been “cyclical history of methods” (Kumaravadevalu, 2006; p. 161) [8]. One remarkable aspect of this evolution of methods is the quick succession with which the switch from one method to another has taken place. Only in the 80’s Communicative Method gained currency and the disillusionment with it had been complete even before it was fully put into practice by the turn of the century.

This quick change of methods triggers a number of unpalatable questions. Are these methods products of the whims of some theorists? Are they governed by an impulse of creating sensation by showcasing new gimmicks? Is there any hidden agenda that underlies all these seemingly shoddy exercise in the name of methods?

One should not however fail to see that the excitement over methods has not been uncritically accepted. Of late an opinion has begun to crystallize among the ELT professionals that they have to break free of this unending cycle of methods. It is increasingly felt that by placing excessive reliance on methods, we have discounted other factors such as teacher cognition, learner perception, social needs, cultural contexts, economic imperatives etc.

What now looms large is a postmethod condition. Postmethod pedagogy seeks to develop in learners an insight into what they need to know and plan their own learning. Successful learners use a great variety of strategies and use

them in ways appropriate to language learning task. There is a growing consensus among ELT practitioners that local knowledge, insight, intuitive judgment into language teaching -- not theoretical ideas-- will help them confront challenges of everyday teaching more effectively. Even an echo of this sentiment is heard in the view of Brown (1991) who sought to 'lay to rest' (p.11) [2] the concept of method and to write a "requiem" (p. 17) [2] for its death.

Nevertheless, such wholesale rejection of methods is not without its perils. There remains the concern that ELT practitioners will fall back upon random and expedient use of whatever comes readily at hand (Kumaravadevalu, 2003; p. 169) [7]. To confront this challenge a talk is rife about postmethod pedagogy (Kumaravadevalu, 2003; p. 23) [7] the implication of which for the teachers is 'deriving a method of their own'. The post method pedagogy seeks to enable teachers to become better informed about the nature, strengths, and weaknesses of methods and approaches so they can use their own discretion, devise their own strategies and design their own lesson plans suitable for their own classroom situations. Hence besides accommodating recent ideas, postmethod pedagogy also draws inspiration from methods.

Review of methods

A review of existing methods will reveal some strengths and techniques of language teaching that could provide valuable clues to innovate language pedagogy.

Methods	Principles	Teacher's Role
Grammar Translation Method (GMT)	It is possible to find native language equivalents, raising awareness about grammar	Teacher can compare and contrast between L1 and L2
The Direct Method	Using realia, demonstration, allowing self correction, Using language in context	Teacher acts as a facilitator
Audio-Lingual Method	Responding to verbal and non-verbal stimuli, comparison between native and target language	Like an orchestra leader-conducting, guiding and controlling the students' behaviour
The Silent Way	Silence is a tool. It fosters autonomy. Students learn from one another. Errors are important. Meaning is focused	The teacher helps only when students ask for it.
Community Language Learning	Fostering interaction among students	The teacher encourages student initiative and independence
Communicative Language Teaching	Creating situation to promote communication	Teacher is a facilitator
Content based Learning	Students are encouraged to think logically	The teacher guides students through tasks

B. Kumaravadevalu (2003) in his canonical book *Beyond Methods: Microstrategies for Language Teaching* has offered broad guiding principles to assist teachers in constructing their context-specific postmethod pedagogy. He advocates some important aspects not encompassed in traditional methods such as conceptualizing teaching acts, understanding postmethod pedagogy, maximizing learning opportunities, minimizing perceptual mismatches,

facilitating negotiated interaction, promoting learner autonomy, fostering language awareness, activating intuitive heuristics, contextualizing linguistic input, integrating language skills, ensuring social relevance, raising cultural awareness and monitoring teaching acts. [7]

Piecing together all the remarkable features of the existing methods as well as drawing some recent ideas from Kumaravadivelu, certain ground rules can be formulated to frame a working model for the new approach.

1. Forster language awareness:

Teaching explicit grammar modeled on GMT is no more recommended in language teaching. Grammar and vocabulary are rather taught through the function, situational context, and the roles of the interlocutors (Larsen, p. 121) [9]. Too much attention on forms and patterns rather retard the progress of the language learning. Explicit training in grammar could be useful in some cases. Basing on his knowledge of a sentence like '*I intend to come*' which is perfectly correct, a student may say or write '*I suggest to come*' which is unnatural or because he has seen or heard '*Please show me the way*', he can say or write '*Please explain me the cause*'. A good teacher should be able to see where a learner is likely to stumble.

A grammatically correct sentence may not always sound natural. Thus a sentence like '*there is a map on the wall*' is preferable to '*A map is on the wall*'. The learner has to be taught to avoid such grammatically correct but unnatural expressions. A tricky area for a non-native learner of English is "Idiomaticity" (Medgyes, 1994; p. 14) [10] or natural expression, a style that will not strike the listener or reader as being artificial or stiff. Most learner's dictionaries give serious consideration to inculcate among learners a sense of 'idiomaticity'. The following examples of idiomatic expressions are taken from the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary:

- a. I've done what I promised and I expect you to ***keep your side of the bargain*** (= do what you agreed in return)
- b. The report ***makes out a strong case*** (=gives good arguments) for spending more money on hospitals.
- c. Doctors said she is now ***out of danger*** (= not likely to die).

Good dictionaries anticipate learner's problems or errors and endeavor to address those. In the above examples the bold and *italicized* parts represent expressions which non-native learners need to learn carefully.

1.1 Teacher's role

Learner's dictionaries provide valuable tips for learners in the form of boxed items. They make learning more organized and easy. Language teachers should make it a point to explore those. The teacher must sensitize learners about standard and non-standard variety, acceptable pronunciation, gender-neutral terms, different ways of responding to a question, levels of formality and informality in using language etc. For teaching all these elements the teacher has to be amply resourceful. For example, the classroom teacher may give some real life examples to teach different styles such as frozen style, formal style, casual and intimate style etc. An example is cited here:

Frozen style: Those seeking an interview should make their way at once to the upper floor by way of the staircase.

Formal Style: Interview seekers should go up the stairs at once.

Casual: Time you all went upstairs now

Intimate: Up you go chaps. (Sayal, p. 59). [17]

Similarly, the teacher can show by citing genuine examples how register changes when one conveys similar information to one's wife, to colleague and to boss. The teacher's role is to inculcate a sense into learners how tone, tune and text changes with situation

Following table shows how language is governed by situation and purpose.

Strategy	Example
1. Initiation and explanation of purpose	“Excuse me, professor, but I wanted to talk to you about my grade.”
2. A complaint	“ My grade is too low”
3. A justification	“I come to every class, and I study hard. I just didn’t do well on one test”
4. A request	“Can I do an extra credit assignment to improve my grade?”

Four Strategies for complaining (adapted from Murphy and Neu 1996, 199-203)

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English has devoted a whole section sensitizing learners on register. The duty of a language teacher is to explore those.

2. Focus on meaning:

Chomsky argued that language is not a matter of habit formation but rather of rule formation. That means language learning is concerned with using “thinking process or cognition” (Larsen, p. 51) [9]. Learners not only respond to “stimuli” but also “mobilize inner resources” (Larsen 52) [9] which means they develop their own “perception, awareness, cognition, imagination, intuition, creativity etc.” (Larsen, p. 52) [9]. As such the teacher should allow students to closely read a text and discover the nature of language. Gattegno maintains that learning includes learner’s “personal responsibility” (Larsen, p. 62) [9].

2.1 Teacher’s role

Teacher can provide a relevant text and help learners infer the meaning. Teacher can help learners read between and beyond the lines. For example, if it is a news item, the teacher can draw attention of the learners to the hidden agenda, if there be any. Some texts lend them to more than one interpretation. The teacher can bring those points to students’ notice. The duty of the students is to use their already acquired knowledge to engage themselves in exploring the text. Context helps learners learn meaning intuitively; learning unrelated sentences does not. A rule can be given as a learning tip not as the main teaching point.

3. Do not speak all the time:

In a traditional classroom the teacher is the “authority in the classroom” (Larsen, p.19) [9]. Most of the interaction is from the teacher to the students. The students as passive recipients do whatever they are asked to do. But current approach insists that pupils should be at the centre and the most active part of the classroom. Though it is true that students need lots of exposure to listening, too much talk can bore students which can be rather counterproductive. A good teacher knows where and when to stop and that is the key aspect of student-centred teaching. It removes the teacher from the centre of attention so s/he can listen to and work with students.

3.1 Teacher’s role:

In a 60-minute class the teacher may explain teaching points for about 30 minutes, engage students in language activities for 20 minutes and 10 minutes can be allotted for clarifying points and conducting question answer session. But more than the duration of the teacher-talk what is important is the quality of teacher-talk. Interactive,

relevant and illuminating teacher-talk is what a lively class is all about. Creative teachers use teaching aids or realia like pictures, images, videos etc. In interactive and participatory teaching a teacher has to be more resourceful, active, wise and intelligent. In the absence of any of these traits s/he won't be able to deliver a successful lesson.

4. Elicit student response

Even the best students will find their minds wandering occasionally in the classroom when a teacher is explaining an important point. If they know that anyone could be called upon at any time to contribute to the discussion, they would be on guard. It helps the teacher realize if the students are listening or find out what the students already know. By starting with easy questions and working your way towards more difficult ones, you will be able to boost their confidence and realize the limits of their knowledge once their answers start to become incomplete or wrong. Finding out what students do know and don't know will help the teacher spend lesson time on the most important things and help him plan future lessons with that in mind. Elicitation can also mean more students' talking time. The fact that students are responding to almost everything you ask would mean that they are speaking more often than they would be if they are just listening to an explanation by the teacher.

4.1 Teacher's role:

This effect of a teaching point can be increased if the teacher can get some students commenting on what other students say. Eliciting can be made more fruitful by choosing questions carefully e.g. by using wh-questions rather than yes/no questions. Sometimes the teacher can raise some controversial issues to provoke multiple response from students.

5. Do not correct errors always:

Errors reflect what is learnt and what is missed. As such, errors are important. They indicate "where things are unclear" (Larsen, p. 60) [9]. In The Audio-Lingual Method it was considered important to prevent learners from making errors in the belief that errors lead to the formation of bad habits. That means when errors occur they should be immediately corrected by the teacher. But contemporary pedagogy suggests that immediate error correction does more harm than help. When a child struggles to express himself in a foreign language, the teacher should by all means encourage him by providing helpful cues. Error correction, on the other hand, creates a threatening environment. A young learner needs emotionally supportive environment to overcome hesitation. Finding fault with language can seriously dampen the spirit of a learner to the effect that he may withdraw himself and decide never to reply to queries in future.

5.1 Teacher's role:

Correction should be done "in an unobtrusive way" (Larsen, p. 108) [9]. The teacher can take note of all the mistakes committed by the individual students. The best way to correct error is to deflect attention from the individual learner to the whole class and treat the error as a point of collective learning.

6. Foster interaction among students:

Language is fundamentally social (Holliday, 1994) [4]. Students can learn from one another inside and outside the class. When students are encouraged to work as a team, more meaningful learning happens. In a traditional classroom silence was understood as an ideal atmosphere for teaching and learning. The days of such teacher-centred authoritarian style of teaching have ended. Now there is a general agreement among language experts that working together improves thinking and understanding. Cooperative learning represents interactive and collaborative learning which promotes cooperation other than competition among learners. To enhance interaction the teacher can engage them in kind of activities that bring students close to each other. We must realize that unless we allow students to speak a lot inside the class, they will never learn to speak. Knowing language rules does not guarantee that one will be able to use it (Widdowson, 1978) [19] if he or she does not attain communicative competence.

6.1 Teacher's role:

The teacher can divide the class into small groups; each containing not more than six students and engage them in group discussion. The teacher can assign a task to each group and boost mutual collaboration. The teacher can move from group to group and help students solve the problem all by themselves and interfere as little as possible. Teacher's role is that of an observer and a facilitator. A resourceful teacher can engage students in vocabulary games or in funny activities so that the students can be free from learning anxiety and learn from each other.

7. Promote learner autonomy

Learner autonomy is defined by Henri Holec as "the ability to take charge of their one's own learning" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003; p.133) [7]. Brian Page aptly sums it up "Learners must no longer sit there and expect to be taught; teachers must no longer stand up there teaching all the time. Teachers have to learn to let go and learners have to learn to take hold" (1992, p.84) [13]. In broad sense when learners become autonomous they understand the purpose of their learning and readily accept the responsibility for their learning which means actively approach the learning task at hand, take risks, discover learning potential, develop critical thinking and decision making and be aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Moreover autonomy allows them to plan and execute learning activities well with a view to "maximizing chances for success" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003; p.131) [7].

7.1 Teacher's role:

Now the question is how teachers can play instrumental role in encouraging learner autonomy. In a language class teachers can share their own wealth of experience about acquiring command of the language which is not usually passed on to learners, make learners aware of wide range of strategies, create an atmosphere where they can experiment with language learning, enable learners to form their own views and counsel individual learners (Ellis and Sinclair 1989; p. 10)

8. Develop interpersonal skill

Interpersonal skill is the skill that we need when we communicate and interact with other people. It includes both verbal and non-verbal communication, listening skill, problem solving, decision making, controlling emotion, acknowledging other's qualities, negotiating meaning etc. Social competence may not automatically come with linguistic skill. Special instruction is needed for enhancing it, but it is neglected in most cases. Interpersonal skill also involves non-verbal communication. Common forms of nonverbal communication include body language and facial cues, hand gestures, eye contact, clothing, hairstyle, fashion, personal grooming, etc. Body postures and movements are indicators of self-confidence, energy, fatigue or status. (Mishra, p.118) [11]. The use of social skills involves use of language for both academic and social purposes. In this way language can be extended to the real world. Through repeated practices the learners are prepared for real life situations. Socio-cultural rules specify ways of using language appropriately in a given situation: they are concerned with dialect, style, register, degree of politeness and so on. Many researches show that in interpersonal communication only 7% is communicated through verbal communication, 38% through vocal and 55% through visual channels like body language, postures, facial expression etc (Mishra, p. 117) [11]. The attitude, intention and beliefs are all conveyed through nonverbal communication. As such nonverbal communication influences classroom atmosphere, students' moods, perception, learning and eventually attitude towards knowledge. Nonverbal elements of speech are known as paralanguage. These elements are pitch, intonation, stress, voice quality, speech style, speed etc. Knowledge of nonverbal communication will have a significant effect on students' personality, taste, temperament and sophistication.

8.1 Teacher's role:

Teacher can foster cooperation among students thus cultivating social skills. The social skills are acquired through such activities as acknowledging each other's contribution by clapping, complimenting, cheering, or by giving a nod, a smile or a pat on the back, asking each other to contribute. The teacher may engage students in group discussion, debate, extempore speech etc. The teacher may create situations in a classroom where students will be required to agree, disagree, argue, apologize, express joy, sorrow, express refusal or regrets. He may train students to introduce themselves formally or teach some techniques about how to tackle difficult questions in a viva-voce etc.

9. Raise cultural awareness

“Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in English language” says Raymond Williams (1976 p. 87) [20]. Since language is spoken by social beings, it is overwhelmingly influenced by the culture of the language. Culture is pervasive in a language – in its structure, in its expressions, in its intonation, in its stops and pauses and even in its silences. Failure to assimilate culture can sometimes result in communication breakdown and embarrassment. Teachers need to sensitize students to use language in “culturally appropriate ways” (Kumaravadivelu 2003, 268) [7]. Culture is a debatable word and is to be broadly understood as an informed understanding of “the rich diversity of world views” (Kumaravadivelu 2003, 269) [7]. Cultural knowledge has to be imparted in a careful manner so that no culture seems to be either superior or inferior to the other (Kramsch 1993, p.238). Teachers have to play the role of “transformative intellectuals” (Kumaravadivelu 2003, p. 274) [7] and bring wide range of cultural issues as topics for discussion.

9.1 Teacher’s role:

For example, the teacher can talk about how different cultural communities require different levels of formality in addressing people and cultural hindrances one is likely to encounter in a native situation. In this context, mention can be made of John Naisbitt’s (2004) book *Speaking Globally: Effective Presentations Across International and Cultural Boundaries* which is packed with practical tips for businessmen. The teacher may carefully choose texts dealing with topics like kissing, wedding, funeral, table manners etc. to sensitize students about cultural differences as well as dispel cultural misunderstandings and miscommunication (Kumaravadivelu 2003, p. 274) [7]. At language level choosing improper words, even stressing or emphasizing on wrong words could lead to misunderstanding. So the teacher has to address this potential source of misunderstanding.

10. Enhance pragmatic competence

Pragmatic competence or the ability to use language appropriately in a variety of contexts is a critical skill to acquire for a second language learner. So language teaching must necessarily include a focus on developing students’ pragmatic competence. Different language and culture can lead to miscommunication and pragmatic errors for L2 learners. Röver (2005) suggests that developing pragmatic competence may be especially difficult for students in an English as a foreign language (EFL) environment [16]. There is no denying that potential problem in the development of pragmatic competence is the sheer number of speech acts. The large number of language functions and speech acts makes the teaching of specific acts an unattainable goal. It is impossible to teach all the functions and speech acts in English and equally prohibitive is the task of teaching the large number of language contexts and purposes. It is impossible to prepare students for every context, or even all of the most common situations they encounter. However we need to make our learners aware of the intentions, of how language works, how people behave etc. Take, for example, the following extract from a dialogue between two friends.

F1: John probably doesn’t have a girlfriend now-a-days.

F2: But, he goes to town every weekend.

The message conveyed through this short dialogue could be missed by a L2 learner of English who generally tries to extract a meaning from the given words. Taken literally, the conversation will yield no meaning. It needs some amount of reasoning capacity and interpretative ability (in this case a combination of cultural and cognitive ability) to grasp the meaning. Meanings are like tips of icebergs; messages on the other hand, are like those huge portions of icebergs that are submerged under the waters of the ocean. How failure of pragmatic competence can result in embarrassment is brought home through the following anecdote:

Nick: As a nonnative speaker I am not as free as native speakers to use language creatively and idiomatically. For instance yesterday I said something to a group of teachers and one of them commented <You can say that again!> Humorously, I said <Ok, I’ll say it again> and repeated myself more emphatically. Embarrassingly, she said, < No, actually I meant that I agreed with you>. The assumption was, of course, that the meaning of the idiom had been lost on me (Prodromou, 312) [14].

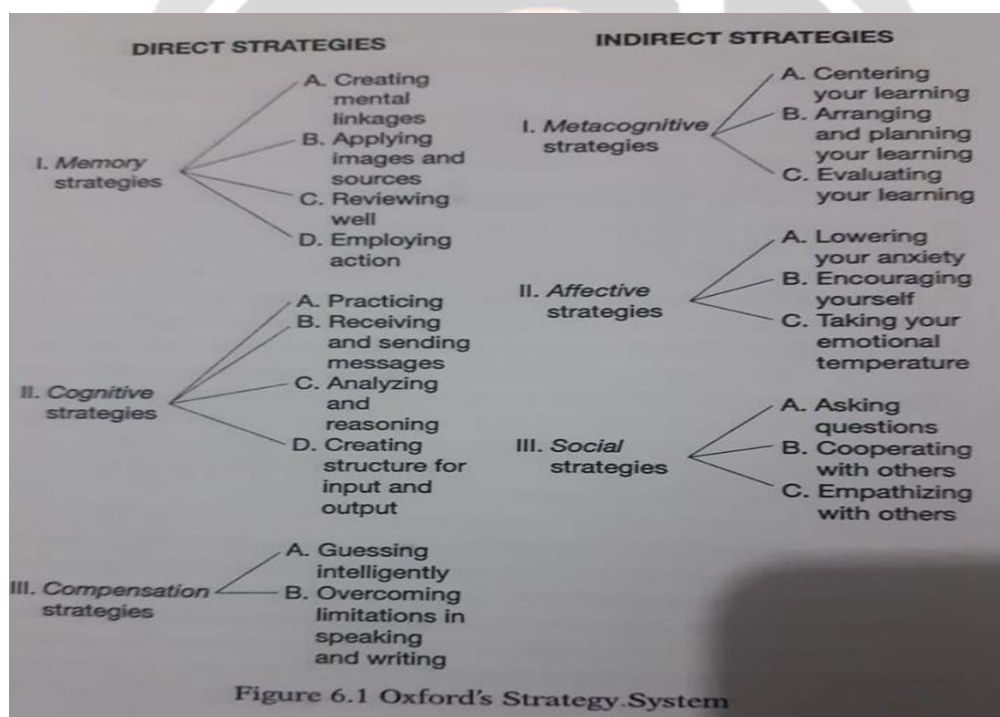
This anecdote amply justifies the need for teaching pragmatic competence.

10.1 Teacher's role

Teachers can use intelligent jokes, posters, advertisements with hidden meaning, news items with hidden agenda, sentences where meanings are implied etc. Figures of speech such as pun, euphemism, irony, sarcasm, satire etc. also contribute to acquiring pragmatic competence. Teachers can use both non-literary and literary texts to teach pragmatic competence. Literature can be used as a resource for this if the teachers can deobsess themselves from plot, story, characterization and look at these elements of literature in relation to the working of English as a language.

11. Teach strategic competence

There is research evidence to show that possessing high degree of language aptitude and motivation may not always yield the best result but success in language learning also involves "students own active and creative participation in the language learning process through the application of individual learning techniques" (Schmitt, p. 178) [18]. Training students in all kinds of strategies such as cognitive, meta-cognitive, affective and social will make learning easier and enjoyable.



Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 136)

11.1 Teacher's role:

While some strategies are to be mastered by learners such as cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies, teachers can help with vocabulary learning, listening, speaking and reading. Particularly communication strategies can be taught by the teacher through demonstration and role playing. For example, the teacher can engage students in a dialogue or himself engage with students and show, say, how to use 'circumlocution' when one cannot remember the target word, or use 'approximation' when the real word is unknown, or use empty words like *thing*, *stuff* etc. when specific words are lacking or coin words, for that matter. He can also help students adopt interactional strategies such as asking for repetition, clarification, confirmation etc. (Schmitt, p. 180) [18].

Conclusion:

Teaching is a dynamic activity which keeps changing with time. Language teaching is no exception. Hence there is no last word about language pedagogy. But taking lessons from the past if we can combine our experience and intuition with current concepts, certainly we will be able to acquire an informed understanding of an effective approach to language teaching. It is time to break free of a constricting set of methods, devise innovative ways of teaching, considering learners' needs and make language learning a tool for overall growth and development of learners.

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