The Best Method is that There Should Be No Specific Method: the 'post-methods era' in language teaching and learning

By

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Introduction

Language teachers, as Nunan (1991) puts it, have always been searching for the right method that can be valid for all learners in all teaching/learning situations and contexts. This impetus for finding a method that survives all weaknesses and criticisms has led to the development of many language teaching methods throughout the history of language teaching. Thus, some popular methods for language teaching were devised based on the weaknesses observed in the previously used ones. Each method has its own premises, principles, procedures, advantages, and disadvantages (Abdallah, 2011).

The 'post-methods' era simply refers to an era after methods, which is characterised by a movement away from prescribing specific methods. This era follows a period in the 1970s and 1980s when language teaching methodology was a topic of great interest and many different methods were promoted. This suggests that this period after methods, which some call the post-method era, is marked by the idea that no single method is inherently better than another and that different methods might be appropriate for different contexts.

Many scholars in language teaching and learning offer a historical overview of language teaching methodologies, followed by a discussion of the limitations of rigid methodological approaches and highlight a shift towards more context-specific and learner-centred approaches in language teaching and learning (i.e. post-methods era) (Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Wallace, 1991; Bartlett, 2000; Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001).

Therefore, my main argument here is that the best method is that there should be no specific method. In this post-method era – as Brown (2002) argues - there is no 'one-size-fits-all' method that will suit every individual learner and teacher. There are many personal factors (e.g., individual differences, motivations, and personal preferences) that inevitably interfere with the teaching-learning process. None of the adopted methods has yet proven to be, as I can phrase it, the 'panacea' for all the language learning illnesses and problems. Consequently, teachers have to be eclectic or selective by developing a fitness-for-purpose attitude according to which the goals/objectives at hand should guide how they teach, not the other way around (Abdallah, 2011).

Moving Beyond Methodologies

It is suggested that the field of language teaching has moved away from a reliance on prescriptive methods towards a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of language learning. For example, Richards and Rodgers (1986) note that there have been calls to abandon the search for a single "supermethod" and to instead focus on equipping teachers with "a repertoire of methods and skills that can be used selectively in different contexts". This reflects a move away from the idea that there is one "right" way to teach language, and towards an approach that values flexibility, adaptability, and a recognition of the diverse contexts in which language learning takes place (Richards, 2001).

Realistically speaking, each method has its own advantages and disadvantages; up till now, no method has been empirically proven the best for all language educators to blindly adopt without discussion. For example, the current great enthusiasm for (and wide adoption of) the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method in Egypt can be attributed to the failure of the previously adopted method (i.e. the Grammar-Translation Method) to meet the national language learning goals. It failed to develop a language learner who can communicate properly in English. This does not mean that the CLT will stay forever, especially in this ICT-dominated age that has been changing the nature of language and how it should be taught (Abdallah, 2011).

This shift is driven by several factors. One is the growing awareness of the limitations of traditional methods. For instance, while the Audiolingual Method was popular in the mid-twentieth century, it was later criticised for its behaviourist underpinnings and its inability to adequately address the complexities of meaningful communication (Carroll, 1965). Similarly, the Grammar-Translation Method, while still prevalent in some contexts, has been critiqued for its emphasis on explicit grammar instruction and its limited attention to developing communicative competence (Canagarajah, 1999).

Another factor driving the shift away from rigid methodologies is the increasing influence of fields like sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics, which have highlighted the importance of social and individual factors in language learning (Bartlett, 2000). This has led to a greater emphasis on learner-centred approaches that cater to individual needs and learning styles (Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001).

Key Characteristics of a Post-Methods Era

Many scholars point towards certain characteristics that are aligned with such a concept:

1-***Eclecticism and Principled Pragmatism***: Instead of subscribing to a single method, teachers are encouraged to draw on a range of methods and approaches, selecting and adapting them to suit the specific needs of their learners and the context of instruction (Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Wallace, 1991).

2-***Focus on the Learner***: There is a greater emphasis on understanding the learner's individual needs, learning styles, motivations, and goals, and tailoring instruction accordingly (Richards, 2001).

3-***Importance of Context***: Many sources stress the importance of considering the social and cultural context in which language learning takes place. This includes factors such as the learners' cultural backgrounds, their reasons for learning the language, and the setting in which the language will be used (Bartlett, 2000; Canagarajah, 1999).

4-***Authenticity and Real-World Use***: There is a move away from artificial language learning situations towards using authentic materials and engaging learners in tasks that reflect real-world language use (Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001).

5-***Teacher as a Reflective Practitioner***: The teacher's role is no longer seen as simply delivering a pre-determined method, but rather as a facilitator of learning who reflects on their own teaching practices and adapts them as needed (Wallace, 1991).

It is important to note that this shift away from rigid methodologies does not mean that anything goes. Rather, it calls for a more informed and principled approach to language teaching, where decisions about what and how to teach are based on a sound understanding of language learning principles, the specific needs of the learners, and the context of instruction (Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Richards, 2001).

The post-methods era is not merely a rejection of previous methodologies, but rather a synthesis of various theoretical perspectives on language acquisition

and learning. Kumaravadivelu (2001) proposes a "post-method pedagogy" that is based on three pedagogic parameters: particularity, practicality, and possibility. This framework emphasizes the need for context-sensitive language pedagogy, the bridging of theory and practice, and the empowerment of learners and teachers.

The sociocultural theory of learning, as proposed by Vygotsky and later developed by scholars like Lantolf (2000), has also significantly influenced the post-methods approach. This theory emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive development and language learning, aligning well with the post-methods focus on contextualized and collaborative learning experiences (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Practical Implications for Language Teachers

The shift towards a post-methods era has significant implications for language teachers:

1-*Informed Eclecticism*: Teachers are encouraged to develop a broad knowledge base of different methods and approaches, enabling them to make informed decisions about which techniques to use in specific contexts (Brown, 2002).

2-*Needs Analysis*: There is a greater emphasis on conducting thorough needs analyses to understand learners' goals, preferences, and learning styles, which then inform instructional decisions (Long, 2005).

3-*Materials Development*: Teachers are increasingly involved in adapting and creating materials that are relevant and meaningful to their specific learners, rather than relying solely on prescribed textbooks (Tomlinson, 2011).

4-*Action Research*: The post-methods era encourages teachers to engage in action research, systematically investigating their own teaching practices to improve student learning outcomes (Burns, 2010).

5-***Professional Development***: Continuous professional development becomes crucial as teachers need to stay informed about current research and best practices in language teaching (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

Challenges and Criticisms

While the post-methods era offers many advantages, it also presents challenges. Some critics argue that the lack of a clear methodology can be overwhelming for novice teachers who may benefit from more structured guidance (Akbari, 2008). Others point out that the emphasis on context-specificity can make it difficult to establish universal standards for language teaching and teacher education (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

Moreover, the implementation of post-methods approaches may be challenging in educational systems that are still heavily reliant on traditional methods and standardized testing (Canagarajah, 2016). This highlights the need for systemic changes in education policies and teacher training programmes to fully realize the potential of the post-methods era.

Conclusion

The post-methods era represents a significant shift in our understanding of language teaching and learning. By moving beyond rigid methodologies and embracing a more flexible, contextualized approach, it offers the potential for more effective and meaningful language instruction. However, it also demands a high level of expertise and adaptability from language teachers.

As we continue to navigate this era, ongoing research and dialogue among researchers, teacher educators, and practitioners will be crucial in refining our understanding of effective language teaching practices. The ultimate goal remains to create learning environments that best support language learners in their diverse contexts and with their individual needs.

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