IN THE WAKE OF METHOD

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Abstract: Related with the teaching profession and the Tool Box of the Language teacher, we dedicate this study to the debate on the issue of - To have or not to have a Learning and Instruction English language Methodology. The paper is a synthesis of the preoccupations of the English language teaching profession with the space created by the disappearance of Methods. Because the Pedagogical Methodology is an important component of the teaching profession tools, we consider that such reflective discussions on the topic of Learning and Teaching Methods is very useful for all the Teachers – beginners or mentor level practicionners, or even for the Teachers Trainers. The paper presents and comments on the limits and the myths of Method, and the post-Method condition.

Key words: Method, post-Method condition, Learning and Instruction Methodology, CommunicativeTeaching, Eclecticism

1. Introduction

For more than a century, starting in the 1880s, the teaching of foreign languages was in search of the best Method[1], applicable to everybody by anybody, anywhere and at all times. More than 30 years after the launch of the most recent Methods of the 1980s, foreign language teaching seems unable to find enough psychological, linguistic and pedagogic resources in order to create new Methods. Some prophets of the field such as Kumaravadivelu [2000, p. 161] even state that it is very unlikely that any really new Method, completely different from the existing ones, will be designed in the near future. It seems, therefore, that the existing Methods offer enough principles and procedures which can be permuted and combined indefinitely.

The period of Methods came to an end targeted by continuous critiques concerning their nature and scope. Teachers have been warned [Allright 1991, Pennycook 1989, Prabhu 1990, Stern 1983, 1992] against the uncritical use of Methods and the concept of Method itself. Although some Methods were patented and are still popular in various places (e.g. The Silent Way in Japan), foreign language teachers seem to have reached the conclusion that recycling and reusing the same ideas belonging to one Method is counterproductive. Such an understanding of the situation has led to what Kumaravadivelu called the "postmethod condition" [Kumaravadivelu, 1994][2]. This situation is present in many places of the world and Romania is no exception. A questionnaire administered this autumn to 48 teachers of English in the region of Moldova, from very young to experienced, and teaching in all types of schools and conditions, reveals a situation comparable to that described in the most recent books on the postmethod condition.

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[1] The word *Method* (capitalised) is used here with the meaning given by Antony (1963), that of a practical illustration of an approach, of a systematic plan for language teaching based on axioms relating to the nature of language, language learning and teaching. This meaning is close to the definition given by Richards and Rodgers (1986), who consider that 'Method' is a term covering the specification and interrelationship between theory and practice. The word *method* is sometimes used to refer to teaching activities, procedures or techniques such as brainstorming, debating, demonstration, exercise, experiment, explanation and others.

[2] B. Kumaravadivelu is a professor of applied linguistics/TESOL at Saint José State University, California, USA.

The questionnaire was made up of 7 questions:

a) *What method(s) do you use in the classroom?*
b) *What is, in your opinion, the best method?*
c) *How much is your teaching influenced by the communicative approach?*
d) *Have you ever followed closely the principles and practices of one method?*
e) *Is your teaching eclectic?*
f) *What is, in your opinion, an eclectic style?*
g) *Where can you find support for the teaching style that you have adopted?*

2. Foreign language teaching Methods

Methods are accompanied not only by a certain ambiguity referring to their meaning (cf. the confusion of method, approach and procedures in Antony, 1963 and Richards & Rodgers, 1986) but also by constant erosion caused by both their inadequate application and the exaggerated claims of their designers.

Starting from the Greek word *methodos*, which encapsulates the "idea of a series of steps leading towards a conceived goal", *Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning* [2000, p. 617] defines Method as "a planned way of doing something". A Method is a theoretical construct based on the way in which experts understand the theories of language, learning and teaching. David Nunan speaks about "a unique set of procedures" that teachers follow in the classroom, based on a "set of beliefs about the nature of language and learning" [Nunan, 2003, p. 5].

In the *Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* [2002, p. 330], Richards and Schmidt explain that Methods are the results of various understandings of the nature of language, foreign language learning, of the different students' learning goals and objectives, types of curriculum, roles of teachers and students, materials, activities, techniques and procedures used. In other words, Methods reflect themselves in the syllabus, the design of materials and classroom techniques.

It is hard to say how many Methods of teaching foreign languages there are. Larsen-Freeman and Richards and Rodgers mention around twenty, including the Grammar-Translation Method, The Audio-Lingual method, Communicative Language Teaching, Community Language Learning, The Silent Way (De)Suggestopaedia, Total Physical Response, Task-based Learning, and others. The more recent Lexical Approach could be added to the list. This plethora of methods can be partly explained by how the Methods were created: they did not evolve gradually, by approximation and improvement of a previous Method, but appeared as a result of a pendulum swing from one extreme to the other, by an alleged rejection of the preceding Methods. In spite of these claims, there are considerable overlaps both in theory and practice among Methods: more often than not, the latter Method took over and combined principles and procedures from the preceding Methods.

The concept of Method is familiar to all the teachers who answered the first question in our questionnaire. They mention several Methods that they use in teaching: the Communicative approach (41 teachers), the Grammar-Translation Method (39 teachers), the Audio-lingual Method (29 teachers), the Direct Method (22 teachers), Multiple Intelligences (20 teachers), Total Physical Response (16 teachers), the Task-based approach (14 teachers). Most of the teachers, either explicitly or implicitly, state that they do not follow one single Method. Four teachers do not mention any Method and claim they are eclectic. For instance, teacher (13) explains that what s/he uses depends on the students s/he is working with. In this teacher's opinion, young learners respond better to drills, which rely on behaviourist principles, while adolescents prefer "communicative" [teacher's quotation marks] activities as these learners' level of language proficiency allows them to get involved in open

discussions. S/he goes on to say that sometimes translation, grammar rules and vocabulary lists are necessary, and so is the use of the mother tongue, typical of the Grammar-Translation Method. Whatever technique s/he uses, s/he remains alert to the learning preferences and learning styles of her/his pupils, striving for balance in skills work and grammar building activities. Teacher (27) states that her/his methodological approach rests on the Communicative Approach, even if s/he does not fully observe the procedures and techniques which define it, as her/his activities are inspired by the characteristics and the interests of the pupils. Young learners, s/he says, work well within the more traditional approaches which put emphasis on language accuracy.

At this juncture, we can conclude that the Romanian teachers are familiar with the principles and techniques of most Methods and use them freely, in various combinations, to cater for the diversity of their pupils and their teaching contexts.

3. Myths inspired by Methods

The recognised Methods created what Kumaravadivelu [2006] calls "myths": professional beliefs based on an idealised image of the Methods. Among these myths, the American applied linguist mentions the following:

a) *The myth of a best Method*. For a long time, the teaching of foreign languages was in search of "the best Method", often ignoring the relative success of the previous Methods. However, the quality of a Method is difficult to analyse and evaluate systematically due to the complexity of the variables involved – from national to local linguistic policies to the students' needs and wants, the situational context, teacher and student individual variables, and others. As a result, the study of Methods itself cannot be considered a valid research activity, and consequently, it has never been proved that a certain Method is better than another.

The answers of the Romanian teachers show that most of them are aware that the best Method is just a myth. In answering the second question: *What is, in your opinion, the best method?* nine teachers say that they consider the Communicative Approach as being the best Method, nine speak of the advantages of the post-communicative approach, which allows them to adapt techniques and materials to the given context, thirteen mention an eclectic approach, which permits the adaptation of the techniques used to the characteristics of the students, the lesson's goals and type, and the materials used. Seventeen teachers answer that there is no best or ideal method. One of them even states that the best Method is a "chimera". However, in spite of the difficulties of analysis and evaluation, it seems that the Methods are still used as a source of inspiration in teaching.

b) *The myth of Method as an organising principle of teaching*. For a long time teachers believed that the Method is the very essence of learning and teaching as it affects the forms and functions of all the teaching components, from curriculum and syllabus design to materials design, learning strategies and testing techniques. For instance, the use of the "communicative approach" meant using a communicative syllabus, communicative tasks, communicative materials, communicative tests, and so on.

For a long time, the uncritical acceptance of a Method tended to obliterate important factors which have a crucial impact on learning and teaching, such as the teacher's expertise, the students' perception of their own wants and needs, the needs of the society, the cultural context, political demands, economic commands and institutional constraints, all tightly interrelated. Each of these factors shapes and reshapes the content and the characteristics of teaching and learning a foreign language; each has a significant impact upon the success or failure of any activity of teaching. Consequently, no Method can answer all the learning and teaching needs, nor can it fit all situations. Teacher (37) rightly emphasises that "no method is universally efficient, nor can it be versatile enough as to answer the specific needs of any group. It is unimportant whether or not we follow a method; what counts is the variety that caters for the age, social, economic, and emotional needs of the group of pupils."

c) *The myth of Method as a universal and ahistorical value*. The Methods ignore local teaching tradition and expertise; they are founded exclusively on the expertise accumulated in the source countries such as Great Britain, France or the USA. The implementation of a Method is a top–down process, from the theoretician to the practitioner. Although the proponents of various Methods claimed in turn that they have solutions applicable anywhere and at all times, in fact, all Methods are founded on theoretical principles which address ideal learning conditions and therefore remain aloof from unpredictable and fluid classroom realities, and cannot recommend specific solutions. In other words, the solutions offered by a Method are unique, targeted towards one (often idealised) public and follow the same goals, without taking into account that each pupil learns differently and for different reasons.

While the great majority of the respondents say that they seldom follow just one Method, teacher (17) stresses that "there must be harmony between the interests and the characteristics of the group of students and the procedures used". S/he goes on to say that s/he could never follow a Method "slavishly", as s/he has to adapt her/his techniques to the demands of the classroom, and this requires versatility every day and in the long run.

d) *The theory – practice dichotomy*. This dichotomy suggests a division of labour between theoreticians and practitioners, not unlike the one between producers and consumers. It has created a class of theoreticians and one of practitioners between which the dialogue is limited and not always based on mutual respect. On the one side, theoreticians believe that practitioners should follow sheepishly the principles and practices of the Methods; on the other, most of the practitioners are aware that the Methods cannot be applied without reserve and show their dissatisfaction or disagreement by means of the activities they actually organise in the classroom. Research developed during the last three decades [Kumaravadivelu 1993, Nunan 1987] has shown what practitioners actually do in the classroom: they either do not follow the principles and techniques of one Method and in fact use procedures characteristic of several Methods, or they say they use several Methods when they actually use the same set of mixed procedures, or they design and use sequences of activities which are not really associated to any particular Method. Thus the practitioners seem to say that one Method is not enough in their daily activity and that it takes intuition, experience and knowledge to decide what works and what does not. Therefore, there are big differences between what theoreticians recommend and what practitioners actually do in the classroom.

Unsurprisingly, question (d) in the questionnaire, regarding the extent to which the teachers have followed only one Method produced 42 negative answers; most respondents explain that a teaching problem should always be seen from several perspectives, and some that they are instinctively hostile to the uniqueness of a Method.

e) *The ideological neutrality of Method*. The awareness of the existence of a range of variables that affect foreign language learning has created disillusionment with Method. Moreover, post-modernism has rejected the existence of universal objective knowledge. In this context, Pennycook [1989, p. 610] speaks about the Methods which are never "disinterested" but serve the dominant power structures. On the other hand, foreign language didactics is the carrier of an ideological load [Canagarajah 2002, Pennycook 1989, Pyhillipson 1992, Ricento 2000] as any Method "reflects a particular view of the world and is articulated in the interests of unequal power relationships" [Pennycook, 1989, pp. 589-590].

The Methods have had a major role in maintaining the gendered division of the workforce and a hierarchy in which men conceptualize and women put into practice [*idem*, pp. 610 – 611]. Another ideological aspect of the Method is the division of foreign language teachers into native and non-native, often accompanied by privileges offered to the first, although they do not share their students' mother tongue.

Furthermore, we cannot speak of the ideological neutrality of Method as long as any language is laden with ideology. The concept of language ideology is often reflected in the linguistic perceptions and practices which are shaped and reshaped by institutional forces, historical processes and groups of interest. According to the French sociolinguist Bourdieu *(Language and Symbolic Power)*, language carries symbolic powers, is anchored in social experience, and promotes and protects political and

economic interests. Moreover, language-associated ideologies are the expression of social divisions [Kroskrity 2000].

The confusion, fluidity, beliefs, and eventually, the disillusion related to Methods have contributed to the gradual erosion and the distinctive use of Methods.

4. The post-Method condition and its options

Many voices [e.g. Stern 1983, Allwright 1991] mention "the death of the method" and point out to the relative inadequacy of Methods. Allwright [*idem*] brings six arguments against Method: a) it is built on difference where resemblance can be more important, as classroom techniques may be common to several Methods; b) it does not address teaching difficulties such as different learning styles or the students' wants and needs; c) it may divert the teachers' energy from classroom task design; d) it involves brand loyalty, which may lead to pointless rivalry; e) it breeds complacency as it may convey the impression that answers have been found to all major methodological concerns; f) the Method offers a false impression of coherence which may inhibit the teachers' self-development.

David Brown [2002] uses figures of speech suggesting death such as "laying to rest", "requiem", and "interred methods" to draw attention to the fact that the Method has lost its significance and cannot be used as a viable construction in teaching foreign languages. In 1994, Kumaravadivelu identified the "postmethod condition", which is a result of the "dissatisfaction connected to the traditional concept of method" [p. 43]. Prabhu [1990] argued at about the same time that there is no unique Method and that practitioners create their own teaching styles based on "plausibility".

In spite of all this, the Method has not disappeared completely, even if it is sometimes invoked by synonyms. David Block explains [2001, p. 72] how the collective mind keeps the notion at 'emic' level (as part of the term inventory used by the public at large), although it may have been discredited at 'etic' level (the level of thinking and scientific dictionaries). However, the concept of a unique and prescriptive Method, as illustrated by the Direct Method, which is still used in the Berlitz schools, seems to have disappeared from most classrooms. Witnessing the life cycle of Methods coming to an end, the practitioners have understood that to follow only one Method is to endlessly recycle and repackage the same ideas, caught between the world of the Methods they studied (and are sometimes imposed on them) and that of the methodology which they can create themselves, using their intuition and experience.

Asked what Method they use, all the 48 respondents say that they are eclectic: four of them answer that they do not follow any Method, and have an eclectic style. Fourty-four explain that they are eclectic as they choose from various sources, techniques and procedures which are associated with several Methods. To conclude, our respondents unanimously admit that they have an eclectic style, although four of them directly or indirectly confess that they are not quite sure what this involves. Some add, like the subjects of Akbari's study, that they follow a textbook and the teaching instructions offered by the textbook authors in the Teacher's book [Akbari, 2008]. In the latter situation, ironically, the teachers accept limits that are not fundamentally different from those imposed by a Method!

The respondents to our questionnaire also indicate that they use not only textbooks but many other sources of supplementary materials: the Internet (45), grammar exercises books that they buy from international publishers (39), professional networks (37), conferences (18), training courses (7), and methodology books (5).

Once more, with no exception, the respondents say that their teaching is inspired by the principles of communicative teaching, using techniques ranging from oral drills to communicative tasks. Starting from these, they develop their own "method", which they call eclectic, which combines principles and

techniques originating in various sources to form a teaching style which produces best results in the given context.

Here are a few answers to question (f): *What is, in your opinion, an eclectic style?*

- "A combination of several teaching styles and methods." (11)
- "Combining aspects from several teaching methods that have proved to be efficient in particular situations." (19)
- "Selecting what is most valuable in each method and using this in the classroom, in accordance with the pupils' level of proficiency, age, interests and the objectives I'm following." (23)
- "An eclectic style refers to the teacher's flexibility and the variety of activities used. The more varied the range of activities is, the more engaging and efficient the lesson becomes, allowing the pupils to learn what matches their learning style." (25)
- "As far as I'm concerned, combining those types of activities and applying those principles (originating in different methods) which prove to be the most efficient for my pupils (…)." (38)

Unfortunately, sometimes this eclecticism can degenerate in a methodology without orientation, unsystematic and uncritical, practised by teachers with precarious or poor professional training, incapable of creating an informed eclecticism and who only compile a package of techniques originating in various Methods that do not make sense together. As Widdowson [1990, p. 50] suggests, "if by eclecticism is meant the random and expedient use of whatever technique comes most readily to hand, then it has no merit whatever". Stern [1992, p. 11] also points out some of the problems of eclecticism:

> *The weakness of the eclectic position is that it offers no criteria according to which we can determine which the best theory is, nor does it provide any principles by which to include or exclude features that form part of existing theories and practices. The choice is left to the individual's intuitive judgement and is, therefore, too broad and too vague to be satisfactory as a theory in its own right.*

This is to say that eclecticism is still dependent on Method.

The post-Method condition obliges practitioners to be pragmatic and think of the reconfiguration of the relationship between themselves and the theoreticians, while remaining autonomous. Starting from pragmatic considerations, practitioners have the freedom of creating their own teaching alternatives, independent of Methods, innovative, specific, coherent and relevant in the given context. Starting from their own pedagogical beliefs, present day practices and theories, foreign language teachers can generalise the conclusions they draw from their own practice and can put into practice the theory that they master. The post-Method condition can thus increase the practitioners' autonomy through reflection on their own practice, through constant re-evaluation of the curricular, material and institutional limits, though innovation, monitoring and analysis of the results of innovation. They can create an alternative to Method and thus become not only analysts but also strategists. This condition can reform the character and the content of foreign language teaching, teacher training and pedagogic research.

5. Conclusions

The post-Method condition is a time of raised awareness when the practitioners analyse the risks of using Methods uncritically and experiment with their innovative use. This period brings with it the need to involve teachers in designing their own frameworks, open but coherent, inspired by both

theoretical and empirical knowledge. The biggest advantage of such a framework could be the balance between theoretical support and the autonomy the practitioners need.

Considering all these aspects, we can conclude that Methods have remained influential in spite of their limited theoretical and practical validity, their ambiguous meaning and their condemnable demands. The teachers' reticent attitude to Methods, documented in the answers received to our questionnaire, is a consequence of the quasi-general dissatisfaction with the concept of Method, a distinguishing trait of the post-Method condition. What teachers expect now is a revision of the character and content of classroom teaching, based on a reconsideration of pedagogic and ideological perspectives. The relationship between theory and practice has to be (re)considered, too, and starting from this reconsideration, post-Method didactics need to gradually take shape.

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