

# Teachers' Beliefs about Teacher Metamorphosis<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The advent of postmethod encouraged much debate over the concept amongst researchers from different approaches. One approach was the concept of *teacher metamorphosis*, which posits that teachers should perform different roles and hence, *teacher metamorphosis* is considered a possible remedy for certain criticisms of postmethod. Although this metamorphosis is a solution that seems tenable, there remain many questions regarding its practicality. Considering that those who are most directly connected with the concept are teachers, the present study investigates the practicalities of *teacher metamorphosis* from teachers' perspectives. To this end, ten teachers were selected and interviewed about their beliefs on *teacher metamorphosis*. Data analysis reveals that almost all the interviewed teachers agreed that there is a need for *teacher metamorphosis*, although they also agree that there are barriers including financial barriers, respect barriers, time-constraint barriers, and incentive barriers that encourage teachers to resist metamorphosis and that, therefore, needs further consideration.

## Resumen

El advenimiento del posmétodo ha provocado un gran debate sobre este concepto entre investigadores de diferentes enfoques. Uno de estos enfoque es el concepto de metamorfosis del maestro, que postula que los maestros deben desempeñar diferentes roles y, por lo tanto, la metamorfosis del maestro se considera un posible remedio para ciertas críticas al posmétodo. Aunque esta metamorfosis es una solución que parece sostenible, quedan muchas preguntas en cuanto a su viabilidad. Teniendo en cuenta que quienes están más directamente conectados con el concepto son los profesores, el presente estudio investiga los aspectos prácticos de la metamorfosis del profesor desde la perspectiva de los docentes. Para ello, se seleccionaron y entrevistaron a diez profesores sobre sus creencias sobre la metamorfosis docente. El análisis de datos revela que casi todos los docentes entrevistados estuvieron de acuerdo en que existe la necesidad de una metamorfosis docente, aunque también están de acuerdo en que existen obstáculos: barreras financieras, barreras de respeto, barreras de limitantes de tiempo y barreras de incentivos que animan a los docentes a resistir la metamorfosis y que, por lo tanto, necesita mayor consideración.

## Introduction

Although there has been an intense debate (e.g., Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2015; Richards & Rogers, 2014; Shehadeh, 2019; Thornbury, 2017) on various methods of English language teaching (ELT), there remains controversy over the relative usefulness, effectiveness, and practicality of these methods in different contexts. One approach to tackle these problems was *postmethod* (Kumaravadivelu, 1994), following other scholars (Pennycook, 1989; Prabhu, 1990; Richards, 1990) who had previously attacked the arena of methods. Indeed, Pennycook (1989) argued that the concept of *method* "reflects a particular view of the world and is articulated in the interests of unequal power relationships" (p. 589). In the same vein, Prabhu (1990) argued that there is no best method and the effectiveness of a given method should be evaluated based on the context in which it is used. What matters most is the need for teachers to learn "to operate with some personal conceptualization of how their teaching leads to desired learning—with a notion of causation that has a measure of credibility for them" (Prabhu, 1990, p. 172), or what he called the *teacher's sense of plausibility* or *principled pragmatism*. Chan and Henderson (2018) problematized the method era and claimed that "what is problematic in the methods era is the top-down and prescriptive nature of the approaches, with the underlying assumption that certain strategies successful in one context can be transferred to another context" (p. 2).

Other scholars, however, have tried to apply postmethod pedagogy to language teaching. For example, Stern (1992) designed a three-dimensional framework consisting of an intralingual/cross-lingual dimension, an analytic-experimental dimension, and an explicit-implicit dimension. A decade later, Allwright (2003) proposed the principle of exploratory practice, which is premised upon a philosophy that focuses on improving the quality of life rather than particular teaching techniques in the classroom and on understanding teaching as social rather than asocial. Nevertheless, the term *postmethod* was first articulated by Kumaravadivelu (1994) with three operating principles of *particularity*, *practicality*, and *possibility* (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). As the names of these principals suggest, *particularity* deals with the context-sensitiveness and location-specificity of pedagogy; *practicality* emphasizes that teachers should be

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encouraged to “theorize from their practice and to practice what they theorize” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 173); and *possibility* seeks sociopolitical consciousness, such as language identity and learner identity, and investigates the possibility of a classroom procedure. Kumaravadivelu (2001) also discussed ten macrostrategies of postmethod:

(1) maximize learning opportunities, (2) minimize perceptual mismatches, (3) facilitate negotiated interaction, (4) promote learner autonomy, (5) foster language awareness, (6) activate intuitive heuristics, (7) contextualized linguistic input, (8) integrate language skills (9) ensure social relevance, and (10) raise cultural consciousness (pp. 545-546).

By following these macrostrategies, one can claim to be employing postmethod pedagogy. Various scholars have recently examined the use of postmethod and investigated its effectiveness in different aspects of ELT (e.g., Azadi et al., 2020; Gökmen, 2018; Scholl, 2017; Wilmot, 2019; Zeng, 2018), which suggests that the topic still attracts attention from scholars.

Since the advent of postmethod, however, it has also received considerable criticism (e.g., Akbari, 2008; Tajeddin, 2005). Kamali (2014) identified three major criticisms leveled against postmethod: *teachers' over-responsibility*, *teachers' alibis*, and *teachers' one-sleeved straitjacket*. The first of these criticisms explains that, like factory workers, teachers (including language teachers) all over the world, but perhaps especially in the third world countries, are often their families' principal breadwinners; their major concern is, thus, meeting their families' daily expectations. Therefore, expecting teachers to fulfill additional roles, such as those of examiner and materials developer, on a minimal salary is both unfair and unrealistic. The second criticism, regarding *teachers' alibis*, argues that teachers are not only victims of postmethod but that they could employ it as an alibi to justify a lack of knowledge. Last but not least, Kumaravadivelu's macrostrategies such as *facilitate negotiated interaction*, *foster language awareness*, and *integrate language skills* are in complete contradiction with the guiding principle of postmethod as “an alternative to method” (Bell, 2003, p. 330). In short, the question proposed by critics of the components making up postmethod is “are they not ingredients of an alternative method per se?” (Kamali, 2014, p. 827).

Kamali (2014) responded to such criticisms from teachers' points of view by discussing three related concepts: *teacher metamorphosis*, *teacher education*, and *teacher freedom*. *Teacher metamorphosis* was conceived as the reimagining the teacher as a collection of roles that included materials developer, syllabus designer, examiner, and iconoclast. Kamali (2014) argued that this redefinition of the teacher is one of the best ways of solving the problems of postmethod pedagogy. However, only expert teachers would be able to reach the level of competence that Kamali called *metamorphosis*, compatible with the last stage of teacher professional growth defined by Fuller (1970), in which teachers can start concentrating on ways to improve students' learning outcomes. In this view, *teacher metamorphosis* is only realistic for a relative minority of teachers. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal for any teacher should be to reach this stage.

A great deal of attention has been paid to teachers' beliefs in recent decades. Gill and Fives (2015) note that “the importance of teachers' beliefs is evidenced by decades of research and continued exploration of this construct theoretically and practically” (p. 1). The same authors added that “in the moment-to-moment existence of practice, teachers frequently rely on beliefs, particularly those that underlie their intuition, automaticity, and habit, to meet the demands of practice” (p. 1). Ashton (2015) claimed that “in the last 20 years, research on teachers' beliefs, their relationships to students' motivation and learning, and the difficulty of changing those beliefs has increased dramatically” (p. 31). This increase in interest is a sign of growing recognition of the importance of teachers' beliefs in the effectiveness of a language program. Although there is also increasing controversy among scholars regarding the nature of the relationship between teachers' beliefs and teachers' practices (Buehl & Beck, 2015), Williams and Burden (1997) argue that teachers are highly influenced by their beliefs; that is, teachers' beliefs influence their consciousness, teaching attitudes, teaching methods, and teaching policies. Teachers' beliefs also influence teaching behaviors and learner development.

Accordingly, the present study sought to further investigate teachers' beliefs through a semi-structured interview, its design was guided by the research question: *What are teachers' beliefs about teacher metamorphosis?*

## Method

The present study was qualitative in nature and discourse analysis was employed to transcribe the interviews based on the principles proposed by Walsh (2011). The instrument was a semi-structured interview which was conducted with ten participating teachers from the same language institute in Iran. The participants consisted of four male and six female teachers, each of whom held an M.A. in applied linguistics and had from five to ten years of teaching experience. The participating teachers were all evaluated as having a minimum CEFR (Common European Framework) B2 level in English proficiency.

The researcher conducted the semi-structured interview to identify the participating teachers' beliefs about the relatively new issue of *teacher metamorphosis*, as well as the most important features of *teacher metamorphosis* based on the participants' perspectives. A definition of *teacher metamorphosis* (Kamali, 2014) was provided to the participants at the beginning of each interview and they were allowed to ask questions about it. The pre-planned questions of the semi-structured interview dealt with postmethod pedagogy, *teacher metamorphosis*, and features, such as being an examiner, materials developer, and iconoclast. The interview questions also considered the practicality and possibility of *teacher metamorphosis* in the context in which the study was conducted. To comply with the standard ethical norms associated with this type of research, each participant was shown the transcript of their interview, once these were complete, and signed an informed consent letter agreeing to permit the researcher anonymous use of what they had said in their interviews.

## Results and discussion

### Beliefs about teacher metamorphosis identified through the interviews

After a close analysis of the data recorded in the interview transcripts, five features of beliefs about *teacher metamorphosis* were revealed: *there is a need for teacher metamorphosis*, *a good teacher is an examiner*, *a good teacher is a materials developer*, *teacher metamorphosis requires some infrastructure*, and *I don't think I can undergo teacher metamorphosis*.

#### *There is a need for teacher metamorphosis*

First, all ten participating teachers believed that there was a need for *teacher metamorphosis*. They believed that improvement in teachers' professional lives would not be possible without *teacher metamorphosis*. Extract 1 shows how one participating teacher expressed this; because of the demands of a competitive world, teachers should try to come out of their cocoons and metamorphose into better versions of themselves.

#### Extract 1

*In this competitive world, teaching is becoming a challenging task since we need to compete [with] our colleagues to gain [a] higher salary. For this to happen, we should, erm...we need to be...not only be...a teacher, but examiner...syllabus designer...sorry, material developer, and others.*

The ideas expressed in Extract 1 align also with those outlined in Fuller's (1970) and Maslow's (1970) professional development stages.

#### *A good teacher is an examiner*

One feature of *teacher metamorphosis* is the change from being a teacher to being an examiner. In the interviews, six of the ten participating teachers asserted that being an examiner is one of the language teacher's important duties. Extract 2 clearly shows how the quoted teacher argues that, for a teacher to be a good teacher, they need to be a good examiner, because the teacher's "sense of plausibility" (Prabhu, 1990, p. 172) is the best source of decisions concerning classroom events such as tests.

#### Extract 2

*I guess testing is a part of teaching ...eh...I mean, if...if there is a good test, teaching will be better. So, it is very important to have a good test and the good idea is a test which is made by the teacher because...I think the teacher is the best person to know erm what the problems of students are to make questions from those parts....I mean, he knows students' Achilles heel, you know what I mean, and can prescribe the best medicine.*

In particular, the statement in Extract 2: "I mean he [the teacher] knows students' Achilles heel[s] and can prescribe the best medicine" aligns with Kumaravadivelu's (1994) first postmethod macrostrategy, *maximize*

*learning opportunities*, even though the metaphor of medicine and prescription is not entirely appropriate to the tenets of postmethod.

#### *A good teacher is a materials developer*

The other feature mentioned as necessary by eight out of the ten participating teachers is that it is necessary for metamorphosed teachers to be materials developers; that is, an expert teacher can develop materials for their own classroom. In Extract 3, the teacher rightly emphasizes that when a teacher changes into a good materials developer, the learners feel more important; that is, the teacher can reduce affective filters (Krashen, 1982) within the classroom, thereby helping learners feel more comfortable.

#### Extract 3

*It happened to me a lot of times that I thought the book...I mean, the coursebook is not...erm, enough for my students, and they need more than the book. You know...when I brought the supplementary material, students felt more satisfied. You know it can be because they think this material is just for them, and they like their teacher more because they...they think he thinks about them, and they are important for him.*

Moreover, Extract 3 also aligns with the principle of particularity by which Kumaravadivelu (2001) argues that “any postmethod 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 social milieu” (p. 538). The final sentence in Extract 3 particularly embodies the principle of particularity from the learners’ point of view.

#### *Teacher metamorphosis requires some infrastructure*

Another belief that emerged from the analysis of the participating teachers’ interviews was related to the educational system, in that all ten teachers agreed that being a postmethod teacher requires some infrastructure, as exemplified in Extract 4.

#### Extract 4

*Actually, the teachers are not the only responsible ones for this to happen. I think other members of [the] educational system like, erm...policymakers,...managers, ...supervisors, and the ones like them are even more responsible for it. When a teacher is not asked...I mean is not allowed to design a material or to design a test, how we can expect them to metamorphose, or to be a postmethod teacher.*

Extract 4 lucidly illustrates the vital role that society plays in *teacher metamorphosis*, in that a complete bond within the community of practice is needed. Policymakers, managers, and supervisors are all members of this community and need to pave the way for this delicate issue to enter the heart of *methodologia* (Waters, 2009). Nevertheless, there is a risk that this belief could encourage teachers to blame others for their own deficiencies.

#### *I don't think I can undergo teacher metamorphosis*

The final belief identified from the analysis of interviews with participating teachers is very personal and suggests that seven out of the ten interviewed teachers lack the confidence for metamorphosis, as exemplified in Extract 5.

#### Extract 5

*Although I believe it is very important to change to a...material developer, examiner, and...and the things that [a] teacher needs for metamorphosis, as you said, [but] I think it is very hard to happen and...to be honest, I think I can't do that, because it needs a lot of time and...I have to spend a lot of time on it and, as I said, I have a lot of classes, and I don't have enough time for it.*

It is very important to find the sources of any lack of confidence or irresponsibility in teachers. As Extract 5 shows, a lack of time is the quoted teacher’s alibi for not undertaking the indicated changes, which aligns with Akbari’s (2008) argument that teachers who are not paid enough and who have a lot to do cannot be expected to become postmethod teachers or undergo the process of *teacher metamorphosis*.

#### The obstacles in the way

The analysis of the participating teachers’ interviews identified several obstacles perceived as obstructing *teacher metamorphosis* in Iran from the teachers’ points of view: *I do not have enough time for teacher*

*metamorphosis, we are not trained for teacher metamorphosis, I do not have enough incentives for teacher metamorphosis, we are not paid enough, nobody cares if we metamorphose or not/teaching is a business like any other, we are not sufficiently respected, and I teach because I cannot do anything else.*

*I do not have enough time for teacher metamorphosis*

Time constraints can be understood as one of the greatest barriers to any human development and, not surprisingly, the interviewed teachers likewise saw it as a significant obstacle to *teacher metamorphosis*. Indeed, all ten participating teachers agreed about the problems that time imposed on them, although this is also a problem related to financial issues, as Extract 6 shows.

Extract 6

*You know, actually...teaching eight to ten classes per day doesn't leave any time for me to...erm, prepare...prepare myself for the classes, and now you say to be an examiner and material developer too. I think it's impossible.*

Extract 6 emphasizes how time constraints can create problems for teachers to engage in *teacher metamorphosis*. This is a problem that demands a solution, however—and one that calls for efforts on the part of every member of the educational milieu. Policymakers should consider raising teachers' salaries, supervisors should allocate fewer classes to each teacher, and teachers should take time for professional development.

*We are not trained for teacher metamorphosis*

Another hindrance to *teacher metamorphosis* in language classrooms from teachers' points of view concerns training. Nine out of ten of the participating teachers cogently argued that the training sessions provided by the institutes at which they have worked since they started their careers as teachers, effectively make them followers of the methods that policy-makers impose on them.

Extract 7

*It is very good to do metamorphosis, but...in TTC classes, the trainer always told us to do what they wanted us to do and...and not to deviate from them. Any creativity was rejected by them and even...we were punished for doing them. By punishment, I mean not giving us good mark[s] or criticizing us in front of others. So, when it is so, I don't...erm, I don't want to change myself, especially to an iconoclast because I have to be innovative for defining that word. And it is not praised by my trainers in TTC courses and...not even by my supervisors and managers.*

As can be seen from Extract 7, a substantial obstacle to *teacher metamorphosis* is found in pre-service training programs in which student teachers are instructed in rigid techniques for teaching. Kumaravadivelu (2012) very precisely diagnosed this problem and prescribed a new vision of teacher education termed KARDS, and consisting of five steps—knowing, analyzing, recognizing, doing, and seeing—each of which is composed of different components suitable for addressing the problem of overly dogmatic teacher training.

*I do not have enough incentives for teacher metamorphosis*

Motivation, according to the interviewed teachers, is considered one of the most important factors that can have either a facilitative or debilitating effect on *teacher metamorphosis* in language classrooms. Eight out of the ten interviewed teachers considered motivation as the greatest obstacle, as Extract 8 explains.

Extract 8

*I just want to be relaxed in my workplace, and I don't want to improve. I was a teacher, I am a teacher, and I will be [a] teacher for...for the entire life. So, it doesn't make...erm...any difference if I do...erm...can design tests or be different from other teachers.*

Most research on motivation in second-language learning has focused on learner motivation (e.g., Dornyei, 1997; Williams & Burden, 1997). However, second-language teacher motivation still needs more attention, as Extract 11 shows the importance of teacher motivation for any kind of development.

*We are not paid enough*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the interviewed teachers saw financial issues as one of the greatest impediments to *teacher metamorphosis*. Scholars such as Akbari (2008) have also argued that financial barriers are some of the most serious obstacles to professionalism in teaching. As Kumaravadivelu (2006) rightly argues, there are two major barriers to the application of postmethod pedagogy: the pedagogical and ideological.

However, as can be inferred from Extract 9, there is also a financial barrier, and four out of ten interviewed teachers considered this an important obstacle.

Extract 9

*To be a postmethod teacher and...erm, doing the metamorphosis, we need to be paid enough. When I don't have enough money to buy my...erm...necessary things for my family, I should take more classes, and it means I don't have enough time for my...preparation for my classes, let alone design test[s] or design tasks.*

As can be inferred from Extract 9, financial issues play an important role in hindering teacher metamorphosis. As the quoted teacher implies, it is not reasonable to ask teachers to metamorphose when they are not paid enough to be a teacher, let alone take on additional professional roles, such as those of examiner, material developer, and iconoclast.

*Nobody cares if we metamorphose or not, teaching is a business like any other*

This obstacle emphasizes the important role that supervisors and managers play in teacher metamorphosis. Three of the ten interviewed teachers opined that nobody cares about what they do; therefore, they make no efforts to change. Extract 10 explores the vital part that supervisors and managers play in this respect.

Extract 10

*Well, I have a question: Why should I teach differently? When...erm, when I'm never observed, and it doesn't make any difference if I teach this way or that way...if I'm prepared or not, why so I should teach differently or, as you said, change...what? Metamorphose.*

Extract 10 is extremely thought-provoking since it raises a point that demands much care and consideration from ELT policy-makers. Some may believe that steps toward professionalism are appropriate only for supervisors and managers, as only these can assess their employees' quality. However, Extract 8 also shows that supervision that provides appropriate praise and constructive criticism to teachers can be an invaluable incentive for them.

*We are not sufficiently respected*

Perhaps surprisingly, an issue mentioned by two of the ten participating teachers was the delicate issue of respect. Indeed, they argued that the financial issue was less important than that of respect, as shown in Extract 11.

Extract 11

*Yes, yes, money is very important but, for me, I like respect more. For example...when I go to my manager or supervisors' room, I want them...or I EXPECT them to stand up or at least gives [sic] me the impression that I'm important. When I get this kind of respect, I do everything for them...and I even help myself to be a...erm, better teacher because, in this way, I can help them. But I think we don't get enough respect in our workplace as a teacher.*

Extract 11 clearly demonstrates what respect can bring to society and aligns with the points that Kumaravadivelu (2005) raised regarding ideological barriers. Signs of respect can vary in different cultures, and when the teacher of Extract 11 said *I expect them to stand up*, it is in the context of a cultural expectation that one stands for elders or social superiors. When a teacher does not receive sufficient respect for the job they perform, or they feel unimportant, they cannot be expected to metamorphose.

*I teach because I cannot do anything else*

This issue of indifference should be dealt with cautiously. In the words of Elie Wiesel (1986), "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference." (p. 2) Therefore, great care is needed with this controversial issue—which could end a teachers' professional life. Two out of ten interviewed teachers believed indifference represented an impediment to teacher metamorphosis, as exemplified in Extract 12.

Extract 12

*It doesn't matter if...I can metamorphose or anything you call it in this profession. I do teaching because I cannot do any other jobs. Otherwise, I would do something else. Teaching...is not as rewarding as other people think.*

The painful honesty exhibited in Extract 12 calls attention to the feeling some teachers may have that their job is not rewarding. When a teacher states that they would do any other job if they could, it means that policymakers and teacher recruiters need to exercise more caution in recruitment processes.

## Conclusions and Implications

The present study examined teachers' beliefs about *teacher metamorphosis* in the Iranian context and examined the feasibility of *teacher metamorphosis* from teachers' perspectives.

The participating teachers all agreed that there is a need for *teacher metamorphosis* and that it should be carried in the Iranian context of language learning, although they also agreed that some infrastructure is needed to support *teacher metamorphosis*. Six and eight out of ten teachers argued, respectively, that a good teacher is also an examiner and/or a materials developer. However, seven of the ten teachers argued that they cannot undergo *teacher metamorphosis* themselves.

Moreover, the present study identified four barriers to *teacher metamorphosis* additional to those proposed by Kumaravadivelu (2005): pedagogical barriers and ideological barriers. Other barriers identified from the analysis of teacher interviews conducted in the present study were financial barriers, respect barriers, time-constraint barriers, and incentive barriers. It should be recognized that the identified barriers might be relevant specifically to the Iranian context in which the study was carried out, which recalls the postmethod principle of particularity by which Kumaravadivelu (2001) means "any postmethod 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 social milieu" (p. 538). Accordingly, lessons from the results of the present study should be only generalized to other contexts with meticulous care, and further research in other contexts to better understand teachers' beliefs about *teacher metamorphosis* is needed. Nevertheless, based on the analysis of the collected data, the present study suggests that a new teacher education program is needed, with characteristics aligned with Kumaravadivelu's (2012) KARDS proposal, in which knowing, analyzing, recognizing, doing, and seeing occur in a cyclical pattern.

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