

Automated Teachers No More: A Closer Look into Teachers’ Role in Postmethod Era

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This paper discusses the perceived roles of teachers explicated from the principles of postmethod pedagogy proposed by Kumaravadivelu (2001). This review of an article published in TESOL Quarterly Vol. 35, No. 4 by Kumaravadivelu (2001) entitled *Toward a Postmethod Pedagogy* highlights some salient points and directions set by postmethod as a response to increasing dependence on method-based language teaching. Here, we situated the facets of postmethod in the Philippine setting as well as experiences from other foreign language classrooms. The focus of the review was on the perceived roles of English Language Teachers (ELT) in the postmethod era. There are three derived key characteristics of teachers: postmethod teachers are autonomous, they have a sense of plausibility, and they are educators who legitimize voices and visions of prospective teachers. In brief, teachers in the postmethod have to be theorizers of their practices. Reflective teaching must be emphasized to address issues in the classrooms. Since no method is considered best, teachers should reconsider developing their own contextualized strategies to maximize learning opportunities.

Keywords: *Postmethod, Autonomy, Plausibility, Language Teaching*

BACKGROUND

Finding the best method is thought to be an integral part of language education. In the last two decades, a dramatic shift in language teaching is observed particularly on which ‘Methods’ are deemed effective. However, Prabhu (1990) contrastingly emphasized that no single method is best for all

because the 'best method' is relatively dependent on the classroom contexts. In this sense, we could say that no particular method should fit a general classroom situation. Similarly, every classroom is unique and within which are varied groups of language learners coming from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The concept of method is criticized by Kumaravadivelu (2001) who stated that methods have 'limiting and limited effects' both on the teachers and learners of the language. Methods may provide guiding principles; however, they may fail to offer context-specific situations among teacher-practitioners. Methods should not be synthetically transplanted into the classroom thus swaying away from the prescriptive and 'mechanical' nature of methods to a 'real' language learning and teaching experience. Therefore, teachers should develop language teaching approaches that could permit them to be themselves and do what is appropriate and necessary (Brown, 2002).

Hence, this critical commentary will explore the perceived roles of teachers in the postmethod era and does not include relevant criticisms towards postmethod pedagogy.

SUMMARY OF ARTICLE

The shift of perspectives from method to postmethod has assigned different roles to language teachers. It is extremely difficult for teachers to contest which 'Method' is most appropriate in every teaching situation. Kumaravadivelu (2001) published an article in TESOL Quarterly where he conceptualized the parameters of postmethod pedagogy and discussed the roles of learners, teachers, and teacher educators as postmethod practitioners. The focus, however, of this paper is on the perceived roles of teachers and teacher-educators in the move towards postmethod era.

Since postmethod looks into the localization of experiences in the classroom and the involvement of social and political ideologies, there is a need to redefine what exactly the roles of teachers are. Therefore, postmethod teachers are deemed to be autonomous (Kumaravadivelu, 2001), to have a sense of plausibility (Prabhu, 1990), and to be persons whose voices and visions are recognized and whose knowledge and experiences are legitimized.

COMMENTARY AND DISCUSSION

The following discusses the perceived roles of teachers in the postmethod era as presented in Kumaravadivelu's (2001) article.

Postmethod Teacher is Autonomous

Autonomy is central in postmethod that Kumaravadivelu (2006a) referred to it as 'the heart of postmethod pedagogy.' In this context, teacher autonomy connotes competence and confidence on the part of the teachers in building and implementing their theory of practice (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). The prior and current knowledge of teachers are recognized, as well as their potential to act and teach independently (Chen, 2014). Consequently, this promotes teachers' ability to develop reflective teaching which is critical in the process of creating changes in the classroom and in analyzing and evaluating their effects.

Reflective teaching, as a sign of the autonomous role of postmethod teacher, is integral especially in the field of language teaching. Owing to the principles and standards of TESOL, teachers are expected to demonstrate and apply knowledge of various factors and contexts (dynamic academic, personal, familial, cultural, social, and socio-political) on English language learners and language learning (TESOL International Association, 2017). Language teachers should reflect on the personal and academic characteristics of students to develop effective instructional and assessment practices in recognizing how their identity, role, culture, and biases impact the interpretation of English language learners' strengths and needs. Adjusting their teaching to the social and cultural context of students leads to the 'localized' language pedagogy (Lusianov, 2020). Kumaravadivelu (2006b, p. 173) emphasized that postmethod teachers should "theorize from their practice and practice what they theorize."

Teachers' autonomy in postmethod era would be effective as it sounds. However, there are constraints especially to preservice teachers and teachers whose view on critical language pedagogy is narrow. In a study conducted by Amiri (2018), he endeavored to unveil the perspective of Iranian EFL teachers concerning the applicability of the postmethod pedagogy. Findings indicated the absence of required autonomy among teachers. They claimed

to have no available time to participate in decision-making activity with regards to the overall process of teaching. The problem with this is a result of the lack of opportunities for teachers to design and decide on the content of the syllabus.

Similar to the Philippines, the Department of Education provides all guidelines on language policy. By reviewing all these, there are three identified dominant English Language Teaching (ELT) practices in the Philippines according to Martin (2014): Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). There are criticisms provided on the use of these approaches, however. Generally, the assumptions set by these ELT approaches are not neutral and universal and may or may not be applied to the unique contexts of teaching and learning English in the Philippines. Persistently using those approaches will have negative effects on the students because the practices accompanied by these language teaching approaches promote 'native speaker' norms (Martin, 2014). So, if teaching autonomy is practiced in the Philippines, language practitioners should receive ample opportunity to effect modifications on the curriculum and the way language skills are assessed for example. Cases of standardized exams measuring only content knowledge of language must be deemphasized, and focus should be lifted towards the acquisition of communicative skills.

In the study of Bacus (2021) conducted among Grade 10 students in the Philippines, teachers were identified to be leaning towards the parameter of postmethod. According to her, there were practices of developing contextualized activities for students and not using a particular method in the class, thus showing teachers' control in class. In foreign classrooms, however, research studies show contrasting results. A study conducted by Motallebzadeh et al. (2017) indicated that Iranian EFL teachers do not show a significantly high level of willingness and conformity to the principles of postmethod pedagogy which includes the principle of autonomy. This is consistent with the results gained by Khany and Darabi (2014), Razmjoo, et al. (2013), and Mardani and Moradian (2016), who confirmed that postmethod pedagogy is not highly applied in EFL Iranian classes. Furthermore, Pishghadam et al. (2009) and Pourali (2011) asserted that Iran's educational system is still under the influence of Behaviorist view of learning. The same finding presented by Safari and Rashidi (2015) indicated

that most teachers in Iran lack skills, knowledge, and autonomy. This lack of autonomy is brought about by the prevalence of 'banking education' (Safari & Rashidi, 2015).

The autonomous role of teachers in the postmethod era offers hopes of getting away from traditional perspectives of language teaching. However, teachers' willingness to adopt the changes shows significant inconformity. Lack of training and opportunities for language teachers to practice autonomy especially on the evaluation of classroom curriculum can be attributed to that. In addition, the nature of the curriculum itself does not recognize the professional autonomy of teachers to exercise their ability to evaluate the programs. A striking comment comes from a teacher-practitioner (Amiri, 2018), who said that the concept of teacher autonomy is neglected in Iran's EFL context as teachers are supposed to follow predefined syllabus prepared for them.

Postmethod Teacher has Sense of Plausibility

One important facet of postmethod is the conceptualization of localized strategies and techniques which fit classroom-specific situations. When teachers are confined only to top-down syllabuses, teaching becomes more synthetic and mechanical rather than real. Teachers even do not have the chance to involve themselves in the reformulation of syllabuses and become passive recipients of knowledge which is automatically transferred to students which in turn solidify their learning experience into a predesigned sequence of thoughts and ideologies. With this, Prabhu (1990) asserted that teachers need to possess a 'sense of plausibility' to enhance the process of teaching.

Sense of plausibility is the product of teachers' gained experiences and varies from one teacher to another. Prabhu (1990) maintained the idea that teachers build their theories of teaching and learning through a continuing process of reflection on life experiences. The experiences teachers have in the past (e.g., their preservice years) greatly affect their sense of plausibility. However, almost all higher education institutions treat prospective teachers to be clean slates, therefore are ought to receive inputs from their teacher educators. Preservice teachers are taught and trained to do things by the book, following suggested pedagogical principles from experts resulting in

shaped behavior. This is the reason why Kumaravadivelu (2001) asserted that this kind of preservice education is hopeless and that student teachers should not be seen as clean slates. To quote verbatim, Prabhu (1987, p.1) explained that “the development of competence in a second language requires not systematization of language inputs or maximization of planned practice, but rather the creation of conditions in which learners engage to cope with communication.”

In the Philippines, preservice education faces different challenges. One of which is the lack of teaching resources and teaching strategies (Ulla, 2016). In an interview conducted with some student-teachers of BSEd and AB English courses about their reasons for using particular techniques and strategies in their actual classroom teaching, they revealed to just be imitating what they observed from their teacher educators. There is a lack of resources for them to make their lessons effective and enjoyable other than what they had already known and learned. And this eventually leads to the recycling of learned strategies and methods during their practice teaching years (Ulla, 2016).

Furthermore, Prabhu (1990) believed that classroom rapport is achieved when teachers engage their sense plausibility. Teachers can look into the depth of situations and involve students in crafting possible theories and apply such to achieve effective learning. Also, the considerations of students' needs are put on a pedestal, unlike adhering only to curricula that are written by experts. In fact, Rogers (2010 as cited in Ahmadian, 2014) argued that simply the imposition of any type of top-down syllabus exerts an external agenda on learners and does not regard their interests; in other words, it is external to learners rather internal; as such, this kind of syllabus by itself does not serve the postmethod purpose(s). In a study conducted by Seidi (2019), it was found out that teachers' sense of plausibility is not given importance. Public schools in Iran are somehow independent of the policies of the Ministry of Education in terms of their textbooks and methodology. Textbooks are designed and administered by the Ministry of Education, so the teachers are expected to manage the classroom to fulfill the textbooks needs. Unfortunately, as well, language institutions consider their activities more as a business than teaching as a very precious job.

However, in the Philippines, public school teachers practice the sense of plausibility in crafting their instructional materials. DepEd schools

outside Manila developed what they call ‘big books.’ These ‘big books’ contain indigenized stories reflective of the sociolinguistic realities of the students, and teachers who are doing it ensure the success of ELT in their classrooms (Martin, 2014). As teachers of English as Second Language (ESL), the adjustment of instruction based on the quality of students’ responses should be given emphasis. Effective teaching occurs when teachers evaluate what students know and what they do not know real-time. Most importantly, teachers must know their learners well by making sure that the curriculum caters to and capitalizes on linguistically and culturally diverse learners. For Filipino language teachers, the materials to be used should take into account the non-native status of Filipinos (Wa-Mbaleka, 2014). So, there must be some accommodations based on SLA theories and models to meet their language needs.

Considering all these, language teachers’ sense of plausibility can be beneficial in the language classroom only if it constitutes experiences of teachers that adhere to postmethod pedagogy. Furthermore, this sense of plausibility will become frozen if teachers are to follow some methods turning their teaching ‘mechanical’ than ‘real’ (Prabhu, 1990).

Prospective Teachers’ voices and visions should be recognized and their knowledge and experience should be legitimized

Since postmethod pedagogy looks into teachers’ language training and experiences, their predefined sets of knowledge must be given importance. Their voices and visions become the primary tool to develop meaningful language instruction. The idiosyncratic ideologies should be manifested as a unifying agent towards transformational instruction rather than meaningless proofs of individuality.

As an implication, language education and training in the preservice years should coincide with the postmethod condition. Programs must focus not on the transmission model of training but realistic pedagogy. In TESOL language courses, language training must be viewed as a pedagogy to develop lifelong learning. It is where greater emphasis is on becoming thinking teachers who can theorize practice (Richards, 2010) and on learning through experience in a reflective framework (Wright, 2010 as cited in Eaton et al. 2018). The importance of theorizing practice in a language classroom sheds

light on the significant role of reflective teaching as one of the signature pedagogies of TESOL as it emphasizes the total engagement of teachers that includes collaboration and self-direction. As described by Kumaravadivelu (2001), student teachers need to shift their perspectives from the previously hailed notion of teacher educators as producers of knowledge and student teachers as consumers of it.

In a study conducted by Dela Rosa (2017), he explored the dichotomy of reflective practice between experienced and novice language teachers. Result reveals that experienced language teachers (ELT) display a higher level of reflective practice specifically on showing diligence in completing reflective entries in daily lesson log. This can be noted with consideration to their long years of experience. This is supported by Kumaravadivelu's (2006a) claim that what postmethod pedagogy assumes is that this kind of personal knowledge that teachers develop over time will eventually lead them to construct their theory of practice. The aim of transforming Filipino teachers into reflective practitioners would enable them to produce well-prepared and well-planned lessons that are fundamental to ensuring the realization of quality teaching and learning in schools (Department of Education, 2016).

SUMMARY

This critical commentary explores the tenets of postmethod pedagogy and application in the language classroom. Specifically, this looks into the perceived roles of teachers in the postmethod era: having a sense of autonomy and plausibility and being persons whose voices and experiences are given importance.

Teachers in postmethod era have to be theorizers of their practices. Reflective teaching must be emphasized to address issues in the classrooms. Since no method is best, teachers should reconsider developing their own contextualized strategies to maximize learning opportunities. Specifically, teachers of English as a second language should continue challenging their approaches by learning and developing a personal understanding of what transpires in their classrooms and apply self-inquiry as a tool to effect positive changes in the teaching-learning process.

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