Beyond Language Teaching Methods and Methodologies

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Introduction

Language Teacher Education (LTE) lies at the confluence of 'teaching in theory' and 'teaching in practice'. Many LTE programmes seek to draw on theoretical or academic knowledge to develop 'the specialized kind of knowledge that teachers use to actually teach' (Johnson 2016: 125), albeit in differing ways and to different extents in differing contexts. Meanwhile, language teaching methods, 'theories translated into classroom applications' (Hinkel 2005: 631), occupy a similar position at the interface of practice and theory. It is unsurprising, therefore, that discussion of methods and methodologies has long been a feature of LTE programmes.

And yet, the idea that language teaching theory can be straightforwardly 'translated' into practical classroom applications and activities has been significantly problematized since the early 1990s; similarly, the concept of method, the relevance of particular methods to many contexts and classrooms, and even the idea that such methods actually exist in the real world that lies beyond the pages of the methodological literature, have been widely critiqued. Claims that methods are 'dead' (Allwright 1991) have underpinned suggestions that language teaching has entered a 'Postmethod' era (Kumaravadivelu 2003; 2006; 2012), whilst Postmethod thinking itself overlaps with more explicitly 'critical' perspectives which explore and expose inequitable power relationships both within language teaching and across wider society, seeking transformation and, ultimately, social justice. From a critical perspective, the concept of method and the promulgation of methods across the field generally favours academics (who are often male) over language teachers (who are often female), valuing theoretical interests and forms of knowledge over more the practical, local, and contextualized knowledge that teachers have about classroom life and activities, and thus often favouring 'Western' approaches and interests over non-Western practices (Crookes 2013; Pennycook 1989).

Thus, as postmethod thinking and, to a lesser extent, critical perspectives have increasingly taken hold in language teaching over the last thirty years, it is necessary to rethink and/or re-evaluate the position of language teaching methods as a key focus of many LTE programmes, asking how LTE might look 'beyond' methods and methodologies. This chapter seeks to explore this question by tracing two related developments in language teaching and LTE. It first outlines how thinking about 'method' and methods has changed, from 'traditional' understandings to the emergence of more recent postmethod and critical perspectives from the 1990s onwards. The discussion then reflects on the ways in which thinking about LTE itself has developed over the same period, similarly moving from top-down prescriptions for practice to an acknowledgement of the value of teachers' own contextually-based understandings and knowledge in their professional development. The chapter brings these developments together by drawing parallels with the emergence of criticality and critical perspectives within the field, looking at the implications of this for critical LTE.

Key issues

Method and methods: central concepts and 'traditional' perspectives

Many accounts suggest that, for much of the twentieth century, teacher educators 'sought to solve the problems of language teaching by focusing exclusively on teaching *method*' (Stern 1983: 452 – emphasis in original; see also Kumaravadivelu 2006; 2012; Richards and Rodgers 2014). Traditionally defined as 'a theory of language teaching…which has resulted from practical and theoretical discussions in a given historical context' (Stern *ibid*.: 452-3), all methods 'assume[d] there is a single

set of principles [which] propose a single set of precepts for teacher and learner classroom behaviour, and assert that if these principles are faithfully followed, they will result in learning for all' (Nunan 1991: 30).[1] Consequently, language teaching until the 1990s has often been conceptualized as a sequence of methods - broadly speaking, from Grammar-translation to the Direct Method in the early part of the twentieth century, through to the Audiolingual Approach in the 1950s, on, via a 1970s era of 'Humanistic' approaches, to Communicative Language Teaching and subsequently Task-based Teaching in the 1980s, and so forth. However, this idea, of a sequence of identifiable methods dominating identifiable time-limited periods, has been strongly critiqued in recent years, as we shall now see.

Competing narratives and emerging critiques

Originally, the sequence of methods outlined above was accounted for via a progressive narrative which suggested that each method in the series was 'succeeded by a better one until we reach the present' (Pennycook 1989: 597). From this perspective, the role of LTE was to inculcate teachers into learning to teach 'correctly' through the specific method which dominated the field at that particular time. Looked at critically, this approach to methods sees a flow of ideas from theorists to teachers, the favouring of decontextualized academic knowledge over practitioners' locally-embedded understandings of how to teach effectively, and the 'de-skilling' of teachers who become merely 'technicians' implementing the ideas of others (Pennycook *ibid*.); in effect, the imposition of method becomes a form of 'control' (Allwright and Hanks 2009).

More contemporary perspectives, however, argue that the development of methods has been cyclical and context-dependent, that we can find commonalities between what happens in language classrooms now and what has happened throughout history (suggested by, for example, Kelly's (1969) review of 2,500 years of language teaching), and that 'no method is inherently superior to another; instead some methods are more appropriate than others in a particular context' (Adamson 2004: 605). This critique of the progressive narrative instead sees methods as products of their times, in which 'different approaches emerged in response to changing geopolitical circumstances and social attitudes and values, as well as to shifts in fashion in linguistics' (Cook 2003: 30). From this standpoint for example, grammar-translation was appropriate to an era when languages were often learned by relatively few, often as an intellectual pursuit or to read literature in its original languages rather than for communicative purposes; audiolingualism can be linked to the 1950s emergence of behavioral psychology, structuralism in linguistics, and a focus on oral drills which had developed in the teaching of languages to US servicemen following the Second World War; and Communicative Language Teaching emerged in an era of mass travel where the ability to communicate, usually in English, was increasingly seen as a key skill for workers around the world (Hall 2016).

Yet despite their contrasts, both these narratives of methods share the key perspective that a succession of methods *can* be identified and labelled across 'bounded periods of history' (Hunter and Smith 2012: 430). Pennycook (1989) points out, however, that accounts of methods (e.g., Larsen-Freeman and Anderson 2011; Richards and Rodgers 2014) differ in the number of methods they present, the terminology used, their sequencing over time, and their conceptual coherence.

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[1] In contrast to these understandings of 'method', 'methodology' is 'a general word to describe classroom practices… irrespective of the particular method that a teachers is using'- it is 'the *how* of teaching' (Thornbury 2006: 131 and 2011: 185), or, as Kumaravadivelu (2006: 84) puts it, 'Method [refers to] established methods constructed by experts in the field… Methodology [is] what practising teachers actually do in the classroom to achieve their stated or unstated teaching objectives'.

Furthermore, 'there is little evidence that methods ever reflected classroom reality' (p.602). Hunter and Smith (2012) thus argue that a 'mythology' has developed around methods which 'packages up' complex and contested classroom practices in simplistic and stereotypical ways. For example, far from disappearing in the early twentieth century, grammar-translation continues today in many contexts; audiolingual approaches had a limited global reach, even in the 1950s (*ibid*.).

The acknowledgement that there is 'no best method' for teaching languages (Prabhu 1990), and even that methods themselves are, in practical terms, 'mythological' has significantly shifted the ways in which developments in language teaching are perceived and, with it, the possibilities for methodological discussion in LTE. With a 'shift to localization' (Howatt with Widdowson 2004: 369), there is recognition that, rather than searching for universal solutions to the dilemmas of language teaching, local conditions, learner diversity and teacher agency must be acknowledged (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson 2011). For LTE, therefore, the discussion of methods potentially offers a range of empowering options for teachers who are transformed into engaged decision-makers within their own classrooms. From this perspective, teachers need to be aware of the range of pedagogical possibilities available in order to make informed choices as they seek to meet the needs of their learners. Discussion of methods can be a prompt for deeper reflection as to what underpins their classroom practices, and can broaden teachers' range of teaching techniques (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson 2011). Developing knowledge of methods via LTE is thus seen as a potential source of teacher empowerment as they develop their own principled and eclectic pedagogy (we will return to the evident connection between 'teacher empowerment' and ideas around social transformation, justice and critical perspectives on LTE towards the end of the chapter).

From method to postmethod?

Beyond this idea of methods as a source for teachers' 'principled methodological eclecticism', a more fundamental rejection of 'method' can be found in the Postmethod thinking of the 1990s onwards. Postmethod pedagogy, suggest its proponents, moves beyond concerns which might be associated with 'method' (such as teaching practices, materials, curriculum, and assessment) to also consider the range of historical, political, and sociocultural experiences that influence language teaching in any particular context. In effect, therefore, the influence of methods and methods-driven teaching, which emerged from and reflect the assumptions and cultural norms of dominant **B**ritish, **A**ustralasia and **N**orth **A**merican (i.e., **BANA**) contexts (Holliday 1994) is challenged as local pedagogic and contextual knowledge and perspectives guide pedagogy.

Consequently, teaching results from bottom-up rather than top-down processes, in which teacher autonomy, self-observation, self-analysis and self-evaluation shape and reshape classroom pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu 2003). Teachers may take ideas from existing methods, but are not constrained by them. For Kumaravadivelu (2012: 12-14), Postmethod pedagogy draws on three key principles: *particularity* (i.e., sensitivity to the local individual and institutional, and social and cultural, contexts of teaching and learning); *practicality* (i.e., teachers develop and put into practice their own theories, based on their contextual knowledge; thus, the superiority of academic theorists over practitioners is broken); and *possibility* (i.e., the socio-political consciousness of teachers and learners is developed so they can 'form and transform their personal and social identity').

Like 'principled eclecticism', therefore, the 'principled pragmatism' of Postmethod envisions an enhanced role for teachers in which they have the power and freedom to make methodological decisions based on their local knowledge and expertise. Clearly, however, most teachers around the

world are not completely free to decide how they teach – they are constrained by school and ministry policies, by learner (and, often, parent) expectations, by end-of-course evaluations, and, more generally, by social conventions (Crookes 2003). And yet bringing Postmethod thinking, and ideas around Particularity, Practicality and Possibility, into LTE can create space for more critical approaches to language teacher education. Before looking at these possibilities, however, the chapter will first trace how LTE itself has, like ideas around method, developed from largely top-down approaches aiming to transmit 'expert knowledge' to bottom-up, 'located' perspectives which value teachers' perspectives, again creating discursive space for more critical LTE.

The emergence of 'located' language teacher education

Unsurprisingly, LTE has developed in differing ways in different contexts. In the UK, for example, there was no requirement, until 1973, for language graduates working in state schools to hold an additional *teaching* qualification; in Germany, meanwhile, language teachers had undertaken a compulsory year's practical training since the late 1800s (McClelland 2018). Yet as both these examples indicate in contrasting ways, language teaching was generally seen as 'a practical activity' until the mid-twentieth century, and although relatively short training courses existed in many contexts, much LTE focused on 'providing teaching materials and guidance on their use in the classroom' (Howatt with Widdowson 2004: 237).

In the post-1945 period, however, LTE became more widespread; it also often became more academically-oriented. For example, responsibility for LTE moved from schools to universities in the USA (Labaree 2004, in Johnson 2016), whilst LTE programmes, particularly those at university level, often focused on specialized knowledge about language and language learning derived from Applied Linguistics which emerged as an academic discipline in the 1960s. This was based on the view that teachers' classroom pedagogy would improve if they had knowledge of theory and research. Thus, as Johnson (2016: 121-122) suggests:

> Teachers were considered to be 'doers' rather than 'thinkers', and the doing of teaching was conceptualized as a set of instructional behaviours that, if carried out systematically and efficiently, would ultimately lead to greater gains in student learning, regardless of institutional and/or social context.

The approach to LTE in this period is, therefore, clearly intertwined with the traditional conception of method which we have already seen, i.e., the transmission of universal principles, devised by 'experts' and 'handed down' for teachers to subsequently implement (Clarke 1994; Hall 2019).

Subsequently, however, thinking about LTE changed in ways which again parallel developments around method. The 1990s recognition that there are few, if any, global certainties in language teaching, the re-evaluation of the role of context, and the re-valuing of teachers' own experiences and knowledge led to less emphasis on providing teachers with 'top-down solutions' and more focus on teachers' own theories, hypotheses, and critical reflections on teaching. From this perspective, the role of LTE was, and is, no longer to provide one-size-fits-all, method-oriented theories to teachers; rather it is to create opportunities for teachers' own methodological or Postmethod thinking and practices to emerge (Hall *ibid*.). This provides 'space' for critical language teacher education, which could focus on, for example, how classroom management might be made more democratic; how needs analysis can take on the actual life concerns of learners, rather than pre-assigned curricula; and how language itself embeds ideological perspectives, and so forth.

<u>Implications and conclusions</u>

As the discussion above indicates, a major element in the reconsideration of both method and methods in language teaching, and of LTE, has been the acknowledgement of power and hierarchical relationships within the field, the recognition of the locally-constituted nature of language teaching practices, and, consequently, a desire to challenge and change a status quo of top-down transmission of agendas, assumptions and cultural norms, usually from the Global North to the Global South. Similarly, the goal of critical approaches to education is to challenge apparently 'natural' constructs such as 'rationality' and 'neutrality', instead recognizing 'the subjective, the social and the partisan nature of reality' and the ways in which 'our ideas, interactions … learning practices, and so forth are shaped by and within social relationships that systematically advantage some people over others' (Hawkins and Norton 2009: 31). Thus, although much of the literature around Postmethod does not tend to *explicitly* align itself with critical approaches to language teaching and to critical LTE, there are evident connections.

Language teacher education which provides opportunities for teachers to develop pedagogies which are *particular* and *practical* and which seek to explore and expand what is *possible* (i.e., build upon the three key principles of Postmethod) in effect creates a site for 'praxis' - from a critical perspective, when theorizing and practice come together to create action for further social and political change (Hawkins and Norton *ibid*.). Such actions can be focused on the profession of language teaching itself, addressing how language teachers can work and develop in ways and with goals which are appropriate to their own contexts, and thus rebalancing the relationships between theorists and practitioners, academic and practical knowledge, and such like. This may be through the operationalization of the 'microstrategies' of postmethod teaching, which include, for example, ensuring the *social relevance of pedagogy* by embedding within it the complex social and critical concerns of the local environment, and *raising cultural consciousness*, explicitly recognizing and addressing the implications of the learners' ethnic heritage, class, ages and gender both within and beyond the classroom (Kumaravadivelu 2004).

And praxis can see the focus of LTE itself go beyond language teaching methods and methodologies as traditionally conceptualized (in other words, as outlined in the early stages of this chapter) to find space to engage critically with a broader range of issues which are of immediate concern in particular contexts. Often overlooked by the relatively constrained, method-oriented curricula of many LTE programmes, these might include gender and sexuality, standard language ideology and language varieties, race and ethnicity, and other issues with implications for social justice both within the classroom and in wider society.

However, given its locally constituted, bottom-up, and thus almost inevitably varied nature, how might such critical LTE be brought to a more central location within the field? How might accounts be shared, in order to avoid critical LTE becoming a marginal concern, overlooked within the traditional hierarchies of language teaching and pedagogical knowledge? Smith (2015) calls for bottom-up accounts of practice which challenge methods-based perspectives, whilst Braine's (2005) edited collection gives voice to teachers from a range of countries as they examine their own priorities, perspectives and practices, and illuminate the complex political, social and economic relationships which affect classroom pedagogy. Such a rebalancing the literature of LTE, to provide space for language teachers' and teacher educators' accounts of praxis which others can learn from and be inspired by, is one way of supporting the turn in a more critical direction of language teacher education as it continues to move beyond language teaching methods and methodologies.

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