

## **Locating methods in ELT education: perspectives and possibilities**

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*As over the last 30 years, I have developed MAs in ELT, Applied Linguistics and TESOL in 5 different universities, I have struggled to develop an approach to methods which meets the needs of teacher education on the one hand, and Applied Linguistics on the other (UK-based language teacher educator)*

### **INTRODUCTION**

English Language Teacher Education (ELTE) lies at the interface between ‘teaching in theory’ and ‘teaching in practice’. With the exception of short, introductory, and explicitly practice or practically-oriented courses such as the Cambridge English Certificate in Teaching English Language to Adults (CELTA; Thornbury and Watkins, 2007), most ELTE programmes seek to draw explicitly on disciplinary knowledge while developing the ‘specialised kind of knowledge that teachers use to actually teach’ (Johnson, 2016: 125), albeit to differing degrees and in differing ways.

Exploring the place of language teaching methods, ‘theories translated into classroom applications’ (Hinkel, 2005: 631), within ELTE thus brings together a number of key debates and perspectives drawn not only from the domain of language teacher education itself, but also from the broader field of English language teaching (ELT) and the related academic discipline of applied linguistics. Problematizing the relationship between

‘theory’ and ‘practice’ and between ‘theorists’ and ‘practitioners’, these perspectives highlight the importance of teachers’ experiences, beliefs and understandings of their own work and professional contexts in diverse settings around the world, and question the relevance and continued discussion of methods within ELTE programmes, if, as is claimed, methods are ‘dead’ (Allwright, 1991) and ELT is entering a Postmethod era (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2006, 2012).

This chapter seeks to navigate these issues. It first outlines ‘traditional’ understandings of ‘method’ and methods, and the substantial criticisms of these conceptualisations that have emerged since the early 1990s. The chapter then traces how thinking about language teacher education has developed over the same period, similarly moving away from top-down prescriptions for practice to an appreciation of the importance of teachers’ own contextually-based reflections and understandings for their professional development. Given these moves towards complexity and diversity in the field, the chapter then asks what, if anything, a focus on language teaching methods brings to ELT education, and how methods might be explored in practice on ELTE programmes. The discussion draws on and is illustrated by the perspectives of a range of ELT educators working in a variety of contexts and on a variety of ELT education courses around the world.

### **‘METHOD’, METHODS AND POSTMETHOD: CONCEPTS AND CRITIQUES**

Although the teaching of English has a long history (Howatt with Widdowson, 2004), ELT emerged as a distinctive and recognizable enterprise in the early twentieth century. According to many accounts of methods, therefore, for much of the last century, language educators sought ‘to solve the problems of language teaching by focusing attention

exclusively on teaching *method*' (Stern, 1983: 452 – emphasis in original; see also, for example, Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Richards and Rodgers, 2014). However, while this might have been true of largely UK and USA-based theorists and methodologists, we might question the extent to which such concerns were shared by *teachers* around the world, a point we shall return to later in the chapter.

And while some terminological distinctions emerged, including references to language teaching 'approaches', 'styles', and even 'ways' (for further discussion, see, for example, Hall (2017); Richards and Rodgers (2014)), alongside the additional challenge of similar terms being used in differing ways (Bell, 2003), a method can typically be characterized by its perspectives towards:

- a) The nature of language
- b) The nature of second language learning
- c) Goals and objectives in teaching
- d) The type of syllabus to use
- e) The role of teacher, learners and instructional materials
- f) The activities, techniques and procedures to use

(Richards and Schmidt, 2002: 330)

As this framework indicates, 'the concept of method has the *potential* to provide links between theory, practical principles and practice' (Andon and Leung, 2013: 156; emphasis added). Method could thus be an appropriate focus for ELTE as it offers a possible route from theories to practices (moving from a) to f) in Richards and Schmidt's

framework). Equally, starting from activities, techniques and procedures, i.e., ‘the actual point of contact with the students’, (Cook, 2016:258), and moving from Richard’s and Schmidt’s points f) to a), ELTE programmes could move from teachers’ classroom practices to their theoretical foundations. (Such processes could, of course, be two-directional, moving from theories to practices, or practices to theories, and back again in an iterative cycle of analysis).

Yet the difficulties which surround methods soon become evident once the discussion moves from method as simply a concept or a framework for understanding to examine methods in practice; this might be methods as pedagogic practice (i.e., methods as implemented by teachers in their classrooms) or as a social practice (i.e., methods as both constituting and reflecting the professional relationship between theorists and methodologists on the one hand and teachers on the other). As Nunan (1991: 3) suggests, all methods in fact:

... assume that there is a single set of principles which will determine whether or not learning will take place. Thus they all 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.

Contiguous with this perspective was the idea that a ‘best’ method could be identified. Indeed, it was the 20<sup>th</sup> century search for ‘the best method’ which resulted in the proliferation of methods which we can see in ELT today; Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011), for example, identify 11 methods, Richards and Rodgers review 16

methods and approaches, while Thornbury (2017) summarises 30 language teaching methods. Such methods include Grammar-translation, the Direct Method, the Audiolingual Method, 'Humanistic' approaches such as the Silent Way and Community Language Learning, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Content-based Instruction (CBI), Competency-based Teaching and so forth.

From a pedagogical perspective, however, it is evident that individual methods have failed to justify the claims made on their behalf or have 'solved the problems' of language teaching; there is little evidence in favour of one method over another (Andon and Leung, 2013). It is also clear that teachers quite sensibly adapt and bring together aspects drawn from differing methods to accommodate contextual influences and their own personal beliefs (Prabhu, 1990). Meanwhile, the prescriptivism inherent in the notion of methods ('if these principles are faithfully followed...' – see Nunan (1991), above) is said to create and maintain a hierarchical divide between (largely male) theorists and (largely female) practising teachers (Apple, 1986; Pennycook, 1989). 'Method' thereby frustrates teachers who are unable to fully implement and follow prescribed principles and resulting practices fully and consistently; values one-size-fits-all, 'scientific' or disciplinary knowledge over teachers' own local and contextual knowledge; and ultimately 'de-skills' teachers who are required to merely implement the ideas of others (Pennycook, 1989). Such concerns are also reflected in Holliday's 'Appropriate Methodology' critique (1994) of **British, Australian and North American (BANA)** method-based thinking and practice, questioning its relevance to non-BANA contexts, while Phillipson's (1992) identification of endemic 'Linguistic Imperialism' within ELT suggests that methods, and a Centre-to-

Periphery ‘methods trade’ from English-dominant ‘Centre’ countries such as the UK and USA to ‘the Periphery’, creates and sustains patterns of power and control which favour ‘the West’ over ‘the rest’ in English Language Teaching.

Although the discussion so far may already make us question the place of methods in ELTE, a final, arguably more ‘existential’ concern can be added to this critique. That is, while focusing on apparently very different issues – from little evidence in favour of any particular method in the classroom to the global politics of ELT – all share the fundamental perspective that a succession of methods can be identified and labelled across ‘bounded periods of history’ (Hunter and Smith, 2012: 430). While contemporary accounts have moved away from the ‘progressive’ histories of methods, in which successive methods represent continuous improvements in language teaching effectiveness over time (Pennycook, 1989; Andon and Leung, 2013) to now characterise methods as ‘products of their times’ and subject to ‘fashions’, ‘in which no method is inherently superior to another; instead, some methods are more appropriate than others in a particular context’ (Adamson, 2004: 605), this view of methods has itself been critiqued. Hunter and Smith (2012), for example, suggest that the application of simple labels such as ‘Grammar-translation’ do not really accommodate the complex range of practices that were (and still are) found around translation and explicit grammar teaching in the classroom; similar arguments might be made regarding the variety of ways in which ‘Communicative Language Teaching’ or ‘Content and Language Integrated Learning’ are interpreted around the world. For Smith and Hunter, a ‘mythology’ has developed around methods which simplifies and stereotypes complex and contested practices (p. 430-431) and, as we have noted, prioritises the understandings of Anglo-American methodologists

at the expense of local teaching traditions and teachers' own experiences. From this perspective, therefore, the concept of method and subsequent discussion of methods is essentially 'reductive', as it does not satisfactorily outline what really happens in language classrooms (Pennycook, 2004: 278).

As such arguments have taken hold in ELT over the last 25 years, and the limitations of Method, both as a theoretical concept and in practice, have become clear, many methodologists (and, indeed, teachers) have started to talk of a 'Postmethod era' (Kumaravadivelu, 2004; 2006; 2012) or 'Postmethod Discourse' (Akbari, 2008) within the field. Building on notions of 'principled eclecticism' in which teachers purposefully bring together and plan varied practices which are appropriate to the aims and context of their classroom (Rivers, 1981), Kumaravadivelu (2012: 12-16) proposes three principles which underpin Postmethod pedagogy: *particularity* (i.e., pedagogy which is sensitive to the local institutional, social and cultural contexts of teaching and learning); *practicality* (i.e., the superiority of theorists over teachers ends, as teachers theorise from their own practices and put into practice their own theories); and *possibility* (i.e., the socio-political consciousness of teachers and learners is developed in the classroom so their personal and social identities can be transformed). Postmethod teachers thereby assume an 'enhanced' role in which they make 'informed decisions' based on local and contextual expertise, utilising a series of 'macrostrategies' including the promotion of learner autonomy, fostering language awareness, maximising learning opportunities, facilitating interaction between learners and so forth (Kumaravadivelu, 2004; 2006; see also Bax's (2003) discussion of a 'Context Approach' to language teaching).

It is perhaps here, therefore, that a link to ELT education might be identified, as, logically, teachers in a Postmethod era need to be ‘better informed’ in order to make ‘sound’ decisions (Waters, 2009: 112); we shall return to this issue later in the chapter. And yet, like method and methods, conceptions of Postmethod are also problematic: are teachers really free to pick and choose how they teach, or are they actually limited by government and institutional policies, social convention and learners’ expectations (Crookes, 2009)? Do teachers have the time, resources and willingness to carry the responsibilities Postmethod pedagogy requires of them (Akbari, 2008)? And do, in fact, the principles and related macrostrategies of Postmethod perhaps even qualify it as yet another method (Larsen-Freeman, 2005)?

The discussion so far has mapped out the key concepts and the debates which surround methods. Tracing a shift in perspectives over time within the field (or at least within the theoretical and methodological literature) from a position of confidence in method to one of doubt, and from an era in which methods were seen as overarching ‘solutions’ to the difficulties of language teaching to one which more clearly recognises the importance of a myriad of factors relating to teachers, learners, resources, contexts and cultures, which interact with each other in complex and diverse ways, we might question the relevance of a focus on methods within ELT education. And it is within this context that we now turn to consider briefly the emergence and development of ELTE, in which we can trace a parallel repositioning from certainty and the transmission of ‘expert knowledge’ to teachers, to perspectives which hold teachers’ own experiences and beliefs to be central to the experience and success of teacher education.

## **PARALLEL DEBATES? THE EMERGENCE OF ‘LOCATED’ ELT EDUCATION**

The emergence of formal courses or programmes of ELT education is a relatively recent development (Borg, 2011; Johnson, 2016). Although some language teaching methodology courses had previously existed, responsibility for language teacher education in the USA moved from schools to universities in the mid-twentieth century (Labaree, 2004, in Johnson, 2016), while, in the UK, EFL training courses commenced in the 1960s under the auspices of John Haycraft at International House, leading to the eventual emergence of the Cambridge ESOL CELTA and the Trinity Cert. qualifications (Borg, 2011).

At the same time, the 1960s saw the emergence of Applied Linguistics as a field of study offering ‘a body of specialized knowledge and theory that provided the foundation of the new discipline. This knowledge was represented in the curricula of MA programs, which began to be offered from this time’ (Richards, 2008: 159). The aim of these programmes at this time was therefore to familiarise teachers with theory and research, on the assumption that this would improve their classroom pedagogy (Borg, 2011). As Johnson (2016: 121-22) puts it:

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.

There are evident parallels here with the traditional conception of method as a set of principles ‘handed down’ for teachers to follow (see above, Nunan, 1991) which was dominant during this period.

However, the early 1990s realization that there are no universal certainties in language teaching which underpinned the critiques of method that emerged at this time also underpinned a shift in thinking about ELT education. Arguing for an end to ‘wish lists of what is best for the teacher’ (p. xi), Richards and Nunan summarised (1990) the change in perspective as ‘a movement away from a “training” perspective to an “education” perspective and recognition that effective teaching involves higher-level cognitive processes, which cannot be taught directly’ (p.xiii). This involved ‘less emphasis on prescriptions and top-down directives’ and more emphasis on ‘bottom-up learning’ in which teachers ‘generate theories and hypotheses and ... reflect critically on teaching’ (ibid.). Consequently, as in Postmethod thinking (indeed the roots of both the shift in thinking about methods and ELT education can be traced to the emergence ‘the social turn’ in applied linguistics (Block, 2003) and, more generally, to ideas associated with postmodernism (Crookes, 2009)), contemporary approaches to ELTE conceive of teacher learning as being constructed through teachers’ experiences in specific social contexts, with their knowledge, thoughts and actions emerging from participation in specific classrooms and school environments (Johnson, 2016). In the context of the debates surrounding methods and postmethod, therefore, this can be characterised as a move from the top-down transmission of product-oriented (i.e., method-oriented) theories to teachers, to the emergence of teachers’ own methodological or Postmethod thinking, theories and practices.

## **PLACING METHODS WITHIN THE KNOWLEDGE BASE OF ELT EDUCATION**

As the discussion so far suggests, therefore, until the mid-1980s, the knowledge base of language teaching was conceptualized as comprising two components – knowledge of language and knowledge of teaching - through dichotomies such as: content/pedagogy, theory/practice, and knowledge/skills (Graves, 2009). As we have seen, from this perspective a focus on methods within ELTE programmes provided disciplinary knowledge about teaching approaches underpinned by theories of language and of learning. From the mid-1980s onwards, however, the increased recognition of both the importance of context in teaching, and the role of teachers' prior knowledge, experience, and ways of thinking (see above) has meant that the knowledge base of ELTE has been reconsidered, thereby necessitating a re-evaluation of whether and/or how methods might be dealt with on ELTE programmes.

As discussed elsewhere in this volume [XXXX], the 1990s saw two significant attempts to re-conceptualise the knowledge base of language teaching. Richards' (1998) and Roberts (1998) both moved beyond notions of the transmission of theoretical knowledge of language and of learning imparted to teachers, to see teachers as active agents in the development of knowledge and enhancement of teaching skills. Considering, respectively, six 'domains of content' and six 'types of language teacher knowledge', their models subsume knowledge of method within categories such as 'theories of teaching', 'pedagogical content knowledge', 'subject matter knowledge', and 'curricular knowledge'. Central to these approaches, however, is the idea that there is no universal

‘wish list’ of desired teacher knowledge; rather, the knowledge that constitutes each domain or type of knowledge, and the balance between these domains, varies according to context, and is dependent on who the learning-teachers and their teacher educators are, where and who they teach or will teach and so forth (Graves, 2009). Thus, as Graves continues:

the issue is not *what* is relevant – almost anything can be made relevant to language [teaching] – but *who* makes it relevant, how and why. In other words, teachers themselves need to conceptualize the relevance in their practice (p. 120; original emphasis).

Why, therefore, given the problems which surround the notion of method and methods, and the ways in which teachers’ own understandings about practice are now seen as central to ELT education, might teachers regard a focus on methods within ELT education as relevant to their practice and to their development as language teaching professionals?

### **‘THE CASE FOR METHODS’ IN ELT EDUCATION: EMPOWERMENT, REFLECTION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

The strong and valuable critique of language teaching methods outlined earlier in the chapter has, it is sometimes argued, led to a ‘shunning’ of method in the contemporary literature (Thornbury, 2017). And yet, while there has been an evident change in the way methods are talked and written about in the field - a shift which, as we shall see, reflects Postmethod thinking - numerous writers and contemporary texts still focus on and make the case for the study of methods in teacher education, and argue for their continued

relevance to teachers' professional practice more generally. Texts designed to meet the needs of and be accessible to teachers, and which focus exclusively on methods include Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011), Richards and Rodgers (2014), and Thornbury (2017); meanwhile, numerous other teacher education volumes include a significant focus on methods alongside other aspects of language teaching (e.g., Cook, 2016; Hall, 2017; Johnson, 2017; Ur, 2012). Furthermore, a focus on methods continues within the papers of academic, yet practitioner-oriented publications such as *ELT Journal*.

Underpinning all these accounts is a recognition that local decision-making by teachers is central in the development of contextually appropriate teaching, both as a matter of principle (i.e., teachers *should* make decisions about how to teach) and of practice (i.e., teachers *do* make decisions about how to teach, shaping any method(s) in light of their own experiences and beliefs). Consequently, echoing Waters' call for 'sound' teacher decision-making in a Postmethod era (2009), methods are said to offer a range of pedagogical options which 'empower teachers to respond meaningfully to particular classroom contexts' (Bell, 2007: 141-142). In practical terms, therefore, the suggestion is that methods offer 'templates' which enable teachers to coherently bring together classroom activities and routines (Thornbury, 2017). Thornbury suggests that, for novice teachers, methods might be 'a lifeline' as they navigate the complexities of classroom life; meanwhile, they are a 'toolkit' which more experienced teachers can adopt, adapt and combine (we shall return to differences between novice and more experienced teachers below).

Drawing on these ideas, Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011: xi-xii) argue that studying methods in language teacher education is 'invaluable'. Firstly, they suggest that focusing on methods provides a 'foil for reflection' which helps teachers understand what they already do in the classroom, making the tacit explicit (Freeman, 1991). By engaging with the principles and practices of particular methods, teachers become aware of *their own* beliefs and assumptions about teaching. Secondly, as their awareness of what they do in the classroom and why they do it develops, teachers can choose to teach in different ways to how they were themselves taught, drawing on the possibilities which are available; thus, 'they are able to make choices that are informed, not conditioned' (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson, 2011: p. xi). Change is not inevitable, however; teachers may decide that their current practices are effective and appropriate or they may face contextual constraints on what might be possible. However, change becomes a *possibility* as teacher understandings develop, and in accordance with their own 'sense of plausibility' (Prabhu, 1990). Furthermore, like Thornbury, Larsen-Freeman and Anderson also suggest that a knowledge of methods can expand a teacher's repertoire of classroom techniques and practices, leading to professional development and growth, and enabling them to deal more effectively with the 'unique qualities and idiosyncrasies of their students' (p. x).

Beyond this focus on the relationship between the study of methods and teachers' own beliefs and possible practices, however, a knowledge of methods is seen as 'part of the knowledge based of teaching' (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson, 2011: x), as noted above (see discussion of Richards, 1998, and Roberts, 1998). Thus, drawing upon key characteristics of method, Johnson (2016: 124) argues that 'gaining a deep understanding of the disciplinary knowledge that reflects the history and current debates that define what

language is, how second languages are learned and how language can best be taught' is 'an essential element of becoming a professional language teacher' (Johnson also notes, however, that such knowledge is only one element of the range or kinds of knowledge that contribute to teacher professionalism; others include experiential knowledge and the practical knowledge that teachers actually use in the classroom).

From this perspective, therefore, the study and knowledge of methods can provide English language teachers with an overview of how the profession has developed (Richards and Rodgers, 2014), thereby seeking to address the 'short memory' of language teaching theory, which has left ELT subject to fashions and trends (Stern, 1983: 76-77). In effect, such knowledge may enable teachers to be more critical of the many products, packages and apparently new ideas which typify the field, and, of course, may also be intrinsically interesting to some teachers in and of itself! Furthermore, according to Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011: x-xi), it also provides teachers with a stronger sense of professional identity and enables them to participate more fully in the wider professional community, the connection with others leaving them 'less isolated in their practice'. Interacting with others and sharing ideas about the principles and practices of teaching may prove invigorating and help teachers avoid becoming 'stale'.

Thus, knowledge of methods is widely posited as enabling teachers to join more fully ELT's professional 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998), and its related 'professional discourse community' (Snow, 2005), providing them with the professional or disciplinary concepts and also, importantly, the language through which to think and talk about language teaching in general and their own practices in particular (Larsen-Freeman and

Anderson, 2011; Graves, 2009). Yet if, as Kerr (2005) outlines, many teachers see practitioners on the one hand and methodologists, theorists and writers on the other as belonging to separate professional communities within the broader field of ELT, the potential for both groups to come together in a single community of practice which talks the 'same language' may not be realized.

### **FROM METHODOLOGISTS' TO TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES**

While the case for teachers' knowledge of and engagement with methods appears substantial, it is also evident that the vast majority of the discussion outlined above draws on the perspectives of ELT methodologists and writers, rather than identifying *teachers'* perspectives about the importance or otherwise of knowledge about methods and its place in ELT education - ironically, this could perhaps be evidence in support of the critical claim that method is a pre-occupation of theorists rather than teachers (see above). And certainly, there are a relatively limited number of professional and methodological publications which report or examine teachers' views on or ability and willingness to engage with the concept of method and methods, Bell (2007) and Andon and Leung (2013) being notable exceptions to this trend.

Working with both experienced and less experienced teachers, and with 'native' and 'non-native' English speaker teachers, Bell's (2007) study found that few teachers were as negative about methods as Postmethodologists might suggest, being open to any method that offers possible solution to the dilemmas and difficulties of their own teaching context. Echoing many of the arguments outlined above, teachers identified themselves as having an 'eclectic' approach in the classroom, which a knowledge of methods supported. From

this perspective, such knowledge was seen to be ‘empowering’, ‘pragmatic’ and ‘crucial to teacher growth’ (p. 141-142). Meanwhile, in Andon and Leung’s (2013) case-study, experienced teachers discussed their own personal teaching approaches and the principles which guided them, making extensive reference to methods as they did so. Again, the teachers did not follow a single particular method, but were more eclectic in their approaches. However, Andon and Leung emphasise how knowledge of methods not only supported these teachers as they developed their classroom practice, but also provided them with knowledge of the professional discourse, the language needed and the ‘conceptual tools’ (p.174) to share experiences and beliefs with their colleagues, and to be responsive to the demands of teaching in their own professional context.

While these two papers can only offer a relatively limited insight into teachers’ perspectives on and engagement with knowledge of methods, they seem to exemplify many of the issues raised by methodologists and postmethodologists and which are outlined above. From a Postmethod orientation, these teachers do seem to teach ‘eclectically’ and no longer identify with or try to follow a single method; they reflect on what is and is not contextually appropriate, making pedagogical decisions for themselves where possible. However, they also engage with methods as sources of teaching practices, and as prompts for reflection and professional development, suggesting that, for these teachers at least, methods are not yet ‘dead’. As Block (2001: 72) notes, therefore, it seems that:

While method has been discredited at an etic level (that is, in the thinking and nomenclature of scholars) it certainly retains a great deal of vitality at the

grassroots, emic level (that is, it is still part of the nomenclature of lay people and teachers).

Yet the ‘vitality’ with which teachers debate, affiliate to and disaffiliate with method and methods is less intense and less a matter of principle than for theoreticians (Bell, 2007); teachers’ interest ‘is determined by how far [methods] provide options in dealing with their particular teaching contexts’ (p.142). And it is with this in mind that we now turn to examine specific examples of ELT education practice and the perspectives of ELT educators when reflecting on whether and how they locate language teaching methods in ELTE programmes.

## **LOCATING METHODS IN ELT EDUCATION: PROGRAMMES AND PRACTICES**

This section draws upon the perspectives of English language teacher educators working in a variety of contexts around the world to uncover and illustrate the extent to which and how method and methods are focused upon in contemporary ELT education programmes. The views of sixty-five teacher educators, known to the chapter author and working on both pre- and in-service programmes in over twenty-five countries (including, for example, Algeria, Argentina and Australia; Israel and India; the UK, Ukraine and Uzbekistan) were collected via an online survey. Meanwhile, teacher educators from twenty-six UK-based university Master’s programmes in ELT/TESOL (i.e. around half the total number of such courses in Britain, and again, both for pre- and in-service teachers), shared their perspectives with the author via email. Clearly, although discussing

a range of contexts, such data provides illustration and insights into the role of methods within ELT education rather than full representation of the field.

### **i. Methods and pre-service short courses**

As noted in the chapter Introduction, there is generally little place for a focus on methods in pre-service short courses; rather, as a US-based teacher educator notes, ‘more useful to participants [are] practical skills in both teaching/learning and reflecting upon teaching/learning, along with a rationale for that. The in-depth discussion of methods [is] more a preserve of the MA programme’. Consequently, this teacher educator argues ‘that the study of methods is more effectively placed in longer pre-service or in-service courses (BA or MA programmes, or the Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (DELTA))’, while, a teacher educator from Argentina simply states that ‘going over each individual method and analysing their characteristics does not help Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) much’.

This perspective is reflected in the Cambridge English pre-service CELTA syllabus (Cambridge English, 2015), which makes no reference to methods. That said, the lessons novice teachers prepare and deliver in the practicum element of the CELTA (and similar short courses) are usually based around published coursebook material (Thornbury and Watkins, 2007; Thornbury, this volume), which of course draws on and incorporates methodological principles and practices (most contemporary coursebooks follow what might best be described as a weak or eclectic form of CLT - or even, according to Ur, 2012, a ‘post-communicative’ approach - mixing pre-planned explicit attention on language with subsequent practice and skill development activities). Consequently, even

if it is not explicit, ‘methods work’ does take place on pre-service short courses, socialising teachers into a broad set of assumptions which many, but not all, in ELT will share (Lightbown, 2000).

Inevitably, in a field as diverse as ELT, perspectives and practices on pre-service teacher education short courses do vary. Although an explicit focus on methods is unusual, CELTA trainers in Australia and Ireland report that time is found on their programmes to focus on a selection of methods ‘to let trainees know how/why we do things the way we do, but also to let them know what other options are available’ and ‘help them prepare for ‘life after CELTA’’. Meanwhile, pre-service teacher educators in Spain, where CLIL is an increasingly specified approach, report focusing explicitly on the principles and practices of the ‘CLIL umbrella’, a term which serves as a reminder that not only are pre-service approaches to methods varied, but so are the ways in which methods are realized in practice.

## **ii. Methods and longer-term pre- and in-service programmes**

Amid the array of longer-term ELTE programmes that can be found around the world, arguably the most recognizable are postgraduate Master’s programmes of one or two years length for both pre- and in-service language teachers, and the Cambridge *DELTA* qualification, an 8-10 week programme (when studied fulltime) for experienced teachers which, although more limited in scope and more overtly a balance of theory and practice than the typical Master’s degree, is accredited at Master’s level. The discussion in this section will focus in particular on these programmes due to their focus on *language* teacher education. The tendency of 3 or 4 year-long pre-service undergraduate teacher

education courses around the world to embed language pedagogy within a general education framework, and the sheer variety of ways in which these programmes are subsequently designed, precludes their further investigation.

Turning first, therefore, to the *DELTA* qualification, its syllabus (Cambridge English, 2015) aims to develop teachers' 'critical awareness of approaches and methodologies and the principles underpinning these used in a range of ELT contexts' (p.2), and refers to illustrative examples such as grammar-translation, the Direct Method, CLT and TBLT, as well as what it terms 'non-mainstream' methods such as the Silent Way and Total Physical Response. Echoing perspectives raised throughout this chapter, central to the *DELTA*'s approach is the development of teachers' abilities to 'choose methods and approaches that are appropriate for the content and aims of the lesson' (p.4).

In contrast to the *DELTA*, teacher educators working on Master's programmes generally have far more autonomy in the design of their programmes' goals and syllabus. The ways in which methods are addressed on these courses thus reflects ELT educators' own perspectives, and, given the debates outlined in the chapter so far, it is perhaps unsurprising to find that an overwhelming majority of Master's programmes focus explicitly on method and methods, albeit in different ways and to differing degrees. In the UK, for example, the survey of contemporary UK Master's programmes for this chapter revealed that the vast majority of explorations of methods are embedded in the broader discussions of modules with titles such as 'The Principles and Practices of ELT', 'Approaches to teaching and learning', 'ELT methodology', 'Pedagogy and Curriculum in TESOL', and 'Second Language Teaching' (indeed, the titles of only two modules

from the range of programmes surveyed straightforwardly referred to ‘methods’). Within these programmes and modules, ELT educators seek to problematize methods, ‘putting time into developing a critical and reflective framework for an evidence-based appropriate methodology’ (UK-based teacher educator) which, as summarised by two teacher educators in Argentina, enables students ‘to develop more context-sensitive methodologies’ by ‘making sense of decisions they will need to take in the future’. That said, while clearly trying to explore methods within a framework of ‘principled eclecticism’, in some cases through an overtly Postmethod perspective, and, in all cases with ‘an awareness of the dangers of imposing methods ... context should be the starting point’ (UK teacher educator), Master’s programmes do tend to highlight communicative or task-based approaches. These, as a UK teacher educator puts it, ‘still have a great deal of contemporary resonance/relevance’ in the field. A number of programmes also focus on CLIL. While ELT educators report exploring these methods ‘critically’, a key emphasis for some to encourage a shift ‘from traditional to more student-centred’ approaches which help ‘transform the classroom into a more communicative space’ (views from Spain, Ireland and Canada). We may therefore see a critical approach to methods *per se* taking place within a broader set of assumptions that highlight the role of communication and interaction in language teaching and learning, the assumption being that knowing about communication is a key part of the knowledge base of language teaching (see above, Richards, 1990, and Roberts, 1990).

The discussion so far has focused on *what* and *how* methods are addressed on DELTA and Master’s courses, and a rationale for their inclusion on such programmes is, of course, implicit throughout (i.e., the importance of context, criticality, eclecticism, and an

awareness of Postmethod thinking, alongside socialization into a broadly communicative-oriented general professional discourse). Yet a range of further possible reasons explaining *why* methods remain a focus of ELTE programmes, especially those with the particular academic orientation found at Master's level, can be identified. Firstly, methods seem to offer a framework through which teachers can reflect on *their own* experiences to 'talk about what they themselves do and how they think about teaching in their context', before looking at theories and research. From this perspective, the study of methods offers, in the words of UK-based teacher educators, 'a good starting point', 'a useful foundation', and 'a window' to 'ways of seeing language and language learning, and giving a framework for the decisions that teachers make'.

Additionally, as teacher educators based in the UK and Israel note, the discussion of methods offers 'a way in which theory and research are indirectly passed down to teachers', operating as way 'to understand the professional literature'. From this perspective, shared by many of this chapter's informants, an exploration of methods makes theory more accessible to practitioners, usually through reflection about the relevance of method or methods to their own professional experiences. Yet there is perhaps a danger, as some UK-based ELT educators caution, that methods might be included on MA programmes because 'they seem they seem to give a good 'academic', university-appropriate kind of content', or because 'there is a 'teachability' factor that makes methods suitable input at Masters level. It represents content, with theoretical foundations and fixed procedures, and is manageable for Applied Linguists who have not had much engagement with classrooms'. From this perspective, are methods simply included in ELTE 'because it has always been done that way'?

A focus on methods is also said, by many teacher educators, to provide a way in which teachers might ‘engage with the history of ideas that have shaped language teaching’, in order that they can ‘become aware of the faddish history’ of the field. From this perspective, ‘if teachers don’t know where [a method] has come from, they won’t be able to judge if new developments are steps ‘forwards’ or ‘back’’. Yet it is important to note the contested nature of ELT history, whereby unifying narratives are viewed ‘with suspicion’ (Canagarajah, 2006: 9; see also earlier in the chapter). Thus while history offers a possible source of understanding for language teachers to build on, the history (or histories) of methods offers ‘not answers or solutions, but a rich array of realizations and perspectives’ (p.29); as we have seen, most ELT educators acknowledge this.

Clearly, a key consideration in all ELTE is the preparation of teachers ‘to equip them for their future jobs’ (UK-based teacher educator). Yet knowledge of the ways in which teachers take up, adapt or reject ideas about method and methods in their classroom practice following their studies remains rather vague; while there has been some research into teachers’ post-ELTE practices (e.g., Li and Edwards, 2013; Nguyen and Walkinshaw, 2018; Sahin and Yildirim, 2016), most teacher educators seem to draw on anecdotal evidence and feedback from individual students they have worked with. Thus, many teacher educators tend to summarise as ‘impressionistic’ or ‘speculative’ their knowledge of how their programmes’ explorations of methods impact on teachers’ future practice, outlining their ‘hopes’ that teachers leave with better understandings, ‘extended classroom repertoires’, and the ability to ‘build and act on’ their methodological insights. However, there is a clear acknowledgement that ‘much will depend on their teaching

situation and the freedom they have to adopt new or different methodologies to those which are prescribed'. For many teacher educators focusing on methods during UK-based Master's programmes, there is a clear concern as to 'how well this prepares international students for their [home] teaching contexts'.

Yet to focus on teachers' post-ELTE method innovations *per se* is, perhaps to miss the point of locating method and methods on English language teacher education programmes – as a UK-based teacher educator notes reflecting much of the discussion outlined earlier in the chapter, to assume that method discussions will, can and should 'simplistically transfer to classroom and teaching is to mis-serve teachers'. Rather, as suggested by another, teachers' explorations of methods within a broader programme of reflective ELTE can be 'transformational in the way they see themselves as teachers and how they understand their context and learners'. It is this process of reflection, which facilitates the emergence of locally-situated understandings of practice and theory (Smith and McLelland, 2018), rather than the focus on method and methods for their own sake, that many teacher educators report as being central to English language teacher education.

## **CONCLUSION**

In exploring the place and relevance (or otherwise) of methods in ELT education, this chapter has traced changing conceptions of both language teaching method(s) and of English language teacher education itself over the last 30 years. The assumption that a knowledge of methods learned on ELTE programmes would inform teachers' practices in straightforward ways has been replaced by an acknowledgement of the importance of teachers' own contextually-informed understandings, beliefs and sense of plausibility in

implementing or adapting methodological ideas and shaping their classroom practices. Yet the place of teaching methods within the field of ELT generally, and on many ELTE programmes specifically, ‘seems to have persisted because it serves a pragmatic purpose. It gives a public place to focus on the teaching/learning relationship, even though we recognise that there [is] more to this connection than what we can see’ (Freeman, 2013: 278). As Klapper (2006) suggests, therefore, examining methods through ELTE focuses attention on the links between practice and theory, and is ‘fundamental to the process of reflective continuing professional development’ (p.123), a central aim of language teacher education.

Yet a number of concerns endure. Despite the critiques of method and methods outlined in this chapter, knowledge of and research into ‘non-Western’, ‘traditional’ or ‘indigenous’ approaches (Crookes, 2009) to language teaching are almost absent from the field and its literature. Discussions of method remain wedded to the familiar ‘packaged-up’ methods listed earlier in the chapter, even if a critical or Postmethod perspective is taken. Thus, the ‘knowledge-base’ of methods within ELTE remains constrained, and potentially overlooks the array of practices from multiple contexts which could be a starting point for teacher reflection and understanding. Furthermore, the relative lack of insights into teachers’ post-ELTE practice, and if and how knowledge of methods is taken forward in the classroom, arguably suggests that, while a rationale for the location of methods within ELTE seems reasonable, its effects, whether on classroom practice or teachers’ subsequent development as language teaching professionals remain largely unknown. Consequently, while ‘the case for’ addressing methods within ELTE seems strong, and teacher educators’ accounts provide ample evidence of methodological

discussion as a springboard for more general reflection about teaching and learning, both further research and teachers' accounts of their own practices would be invaluable as we locate methods within English language teacher education.

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