

THE WORD AND THE WORLD. INTERVIEW TO B. KUMARAVADIVELU SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY, CALIFORNIA, USA

Some of your papers (i.e. *Macrostrategies for the second / foreign language teacher*, 1992; *The postmethod condition: Emerging strategies for second / foreign language teaching*, 1994) and books (*Beyond Methods: Macrostrategies for language teaching*, 2003; *Understanding Language Teaching*, 2006; and so on) are focused on methodology and teacher education areas in second language instruction. There, your view about second/foreign language teaching is connected with a turn-of-the-century tradition (Stevick, Pennycook, Richards, Rodgers, Prabhu, Brown, and so on) which has been continued by several authors. The message conveyed in your writings is clear: “propel the language teaching profession beyond the limited and limiting concept of method”. In this regard, we would like to ask you a few questions about this very important statement.

Although your work has often been mentioned and quoted by several authors in Spanish-speaking countries, it has not been translated into Spanish as yet. To this we must add that a great number of our readers are teachers in their pre-service training. Both reasons make it reasonable, in our opinion, to request of you some elaboration on such a key concept as the difference(s) between method and post-method, the specific characteristics of the latter and the evolution this concept has gone through since it was first

formulated. What's the difference between method and post-method? What does specifically distinguish the latter?



Well, the two books mentioned above have detailed explanations, reasoned arguments, and illustrative examples. I'm afraid your readers may have to go to these sources in order to get a full picture. Partial knowledge is not very helpful. But, briefly:

A method is a top-down entity. It is a product of the professional knowledge of the expert. It is aimed at creating a generic set of theoretical principles and classroom practices that can be used anywhere and everywhere. And, as such, it is not responsive to the needs and wants of any given group of learners, nor is it sensitive to the experiences and expectations of any given group of teachers. That's the reason why teachers have to often resort to what they call an "eclectic method" (see my response to the next question).

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The concept of postmethod, on the other hand, seeks the development of a pedagogy that (a) is generated by practitioners on the ground, (b) is sensitive to local needs, wants, and situations, (c) is based on the lived experience of learners and teachers, (d) is informed by three organizing principles - particularity, practicality, and possibility. The first entails to a true understanding of the linguistic, social, cultural, political, and educational factors that determine learning and teaching in a specific context. The second entails a true understanding of pedagogic knowledge that emerges from the classroom, and constructed by practicing teachers. The third entails a true understanding of the sociopolitical consciousness that learners and teachers bring with them to the classroom so that it can function as a catalyst for personal and social transformation.

What I have tried to do is to provide a broad framework for the construction of a context-sensitive postmethod pedagogy. Any actual postmethod pedagogy has to be constructed by practicing teachers using their ever-evolving professional as well as personal knowledge. In other words, to paraphrase Antonio Machado, they have to create their own path as they walk it.

As you argue in *Beyond Method* and other works, in the absence of this concept of method, several teachers currently claim that they identify more with certain eclectic approach in their teaching. To this respect, we hear some authoritative voices speaking suspiciously about this "eclectic approach" (Widdowson, 1990; Stern, 1992), while others, such as Richards and Rodgers (2001), talk about certain "informed eclectic approach", or even what Brown (2007) calls "an enlightened eclectic approach / method". What is your opinion about this fear or suspicion when speaking about an eclectic approach? Why does this fear exist?

Actually, it is the presence, not the absence, of the concept of method that compels teachers to try to put together what is called an eclectic method. They have been doing this long before the concept of method came to be questioned. That is because they have all along known the limitations of an established method, namely, it is not location-specific, it is not derived from their classroom; it is artificially transplanted into it; it can not be implemented as is, and so on. Confronted with the complexities of their everyday teaching, and frustrated with established methods, teachers see no option but to try to invent an "eclectic method" that might work for them.

The fears and suspicions about an "eclectic method" expressed by some scholars are not unfounded. It is not easy for teachers (or for scholars) to

derive a really “informed” or “enlightened” eclectic method. That is the reason why teacher education programs do not provide student teachers with the knowledge and skill necessary to be responsibly eclectic, and why no popular textbook on methods has a chapter called “eclectic method.” In order to derive one, we need to know, with a reasonable degree of certainty, which features of method A, which features of method B, etc. can be combined, how, for what reason, and with what result. And, all this has to be done taking into account the particularity of a given learning / teaching context. This is no small task. As a result, the talk of deriving an “informed” or an “enlightened” eclectic method remains just that – talk.

In this absence of method, as a concept which can solve everything a teacher needs to know, your post-method condition is an interesting call to trust a teacher as a reflective professional and not as a passive figure who repeats and does in class what others consider right to do. As you mention in your books, a different way of thinking is required as far as courses for teacher education are concerned. We suppose you wouldn’t like to give a recipe, but let’s put it as a kind of metaphor. What kind of ingredients do you miss in the current system of second language teacher education? What would you recommend from the point of view of your experience?

I have a 150-page response to these and other related questions. I am referring to my 2012 book *Language Teacher Education for Global Society* (Routledge).

The current system of language teacher education is flawed both conceptually and structurally. Conceptually, it is aimed (a) at transmitting a generic set of pre-determined, pre-selected, and pre-sequenced body of knowledge from teacher educators to prospective

teachers without taking into account their specific needs, wants, and situations; (b) at training teachers to passively model the master teacher rather than creatively master the teaching model; and (c) at turning teachers into consumers of knowledge rather than producers of knowledge. Structurally, most of the current programs offer prospective teachers a series of discrete courses in areas such as linguistic theories, second language acquisition, pedagogic grammar, methods, curriculum, and testing, usually ending with a capstone course in practicum or practice teaching. Such a formulation hardly presents a holistic picture of learning, teaching, and teacher development. Therefore, it is generally left to student-teachers to see ‘the pattern that connects’ in order to make sense of it all.

My recommendation is that we should move away from the linear, discrete, additive, and compartmentalized system of teacher education, and move towards a cyclical, integrated, interactive, multidirectional and multidimensional model. In my 2012 book, I have attempted such a model. It is a modular model consisting of five modules – Knowing, Analyzing, Recognizing, Doing, and Seeing (KARDS). I contend that, in order to become self-determining and self-transforming individuals, teachers have to (a) develop their professional, procedural and personal knowledge base, (b) analyze learner needs, motivation, and autonomy, (c) recognize their own identities, beliefs and values, (d) do teaching, theorizing and dialogizing, and (e) monitor their own teaching acts. I believe that only such an integrated, holistic teacher education has the potential to help teachers fully understand what happens in their classroom, and eventually enable them to produce their own context-sensitive pedagogic knowledge.

A very interesting issue in your writings is that you seem worried not only about the advisability for teachers to acquire a solid knowledge

about the language they teach, or about the skills they develop in class, but also about the importance of an attitudinal conception of teaching. In addition to that, you highlight the importance of *vocation*.

This call to be vocational is significant and, along with your view of a critical pedagogy, it seems like a claim for humanistic pedagogy. At least, that's what we can sense after reading your quote about Paulo Freire. To what extent has humanistic psychology been influential in your work?

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Well, it's not any one strand of philosophical thought that had an impact on me. I have been influenced by secular philosophers such as Gandhi and Vivekananda, educational thinkers such as John Dewey and Paulo Friere, poststructural theorists such as Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, and postcolonial critics such as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. Humanism of one kind or another is a common thread that runs through the enlightening thoughts of these individuals. They all believed in a humanistic education that enhances personal freedom, intellectual growth, and human dignity - an education that enables the individual to realize his or her fullest potential. What this means to us as language educators is that we must uncompromisingly forge a connection between the word and the world, and also unrelentingly help our learners see and benefit from that connection. These thoughts, I believe, are reflected in all my professional work.

In your view about second language teaching you highlight the importance of improvisation. Could you please elaborate a bit on this idea? We have very often heard that teachers should not improvise in class and they even sometimes perceive improvisation as a negative aspect. However, it was Stenhouse (1975) who defined our vocation as the art of teaching and this art, as any kind of art, shouldn't be constrained. What could you tell us about this issue?

Improvisation is the hallmark of good teaching, if we define it as a necessary deviation from a planned classroom activity. Even the best lesson plan constitutes only a tentative road map. The real challenge is when “the rubber meets the road” (as an American epithet goes), that is, when the lesson plan meets its beneficiaries – the learners. Based on the unfolding classroom input and interaction, and on on-going feedback from the learners, the teacher should be willing and able to modify the lesson plan, and improvise classroom events and activities. After all, the success of classroom learning and teaching vastly depends on maximization of learning opportunities. And, learning opportunities can be created and utilized by both teachers and learners. If teachers religiously stick to their prepared lesson plans, ignore the unfolding classroom discourse, and refuse to improvise, then, they will fail miserably fail in their task of maximizing learning potential in the classroom.

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Your works are an inspiration to teachers who aspire to enjoy language pedagogy in their particular and enthusiastic manner. For this reason, as you point out, cultivating the autonomy and self-reflection is very important. In this regard, you propose a framework to provide classroom teachers with a possible mechanism to theorize from their practice and to practise what they theorize. And you draw a set of principles based on three vertexes: speculative theory, the findings of empirical research and the experiential knowledge of practicing teachers. Nevertheless, you underline “None of these, however, should be presented as the privileged source of knowledge”. Is this warning due to the long-standing prevalence of several findings from a quantitative research area on other factors of second language teaching?

We should always be wary of false prophets and true believers. Clearly, we know very little about how second language learning takes place, particularly in an institutionalized setting. We know very little about the correlation between teaching strategies and learning outcomes. All the knowledge we have in the field of language learning and teaching is at best partial and tentative. Language teaching is, and will remain for a foreseeable future, a matter of “coping with the unknown.” Given such a condition, I don’t think any one source of knowledge should be privileged over others. All we can (and should) do, as I have stated with irritating persistence, is to provide present and prospective teachers with the knowledge, skill, attitude, and autonomy necessary for them to continually and critically engage in professional self-development so that, eventually, they will be able to construct their own theory of practice.

Stevick (1996), whom you mention in your work, once said that success in the foreign language class depends less on materials,

techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom. In relation to that, you speak about the need of a socially-realistic and contextually-sensitive language pedagogy: Is there a connection between your point of view and Stevick’s? How important is this attention to social, culture and affective factors in your framework?

“Language teaching is much more than teaching language. It is not merely about transmitting phonological, syntactic, and pragmatic knowledge of language usage, but it is also about transforming cultural forms and interested knowledge so as to give meaning to the lived experiences of teachers and learners.”

Yes, there is. There is no doubt that what happens in the classroom largely determines the extent to which learning opportunities are created and utilized. A classroom, however, does not exist in a sociological vacuum. It is indeed an arena where, as Freirean critical pedagogists relentlessly remind us, historical, political, social, cultural and ideological forces collide in a never-ending struggle for dominance. As such, a classroom, a language classroom in particular, can not be treated as a cloistered space unaffected by what happens outside. Language teaching is much more than teaching language. It is not merely about transmitting phonological, syntactic, and pragmatic knowledge of language usage, but it is also about transforming cultural forms and interested knowledge so as to give meaning to the lived experiences of teachers and learners. My scholarly exploration, then, is motivated by a desire to understand the language classroom not just in

its linguistic complexities but also in all its historical, political, social, and cultural ones.

Your approaching to a local and contextual pedagogy is really interesting for us as an ode to freedom, as teachers have always felt that teaching can't be the same anywhere -or even within a same classroom- when different groups of students are involved. This statement where you claim the importance to build the educative edifice from bottom-up requires more liberty and empowers the teacher. Which tools would you recommend our readers interested in achieving autonomy and a major participation in making decisions in their educational contexts?

Liberty is not something that is *given*; liberty is something that is *taken*. My advice to teachers: go, take your liberty.

I know it is easily said than done. I know teachers everywhere work under tremendous governmental and institutional constraints. Seldom do they have the freedom to make their own decisions on crucial matters such as curriculum design, textbook production / adoption, classroom teaching, etc. And yet, it is within such constraining environment that they have to find a way to make a difference. They can, and they should.

Take, for instance, textbooks. They have a direct bearing on teaching methods because it is through them a particular method is propagated and preserved. They also have a direct bearing on the teaching of culture, because it is through them a particular cultural knowledge is imposed on teachers and students. But still, many teachers around the world have very little say in the preparation / adoption of textbooks because they are mostly produced and promoted by global or national

publishing industries, and may have to be approved by Ministry of Education. Even under these conditions, teachers can try to generate their own materials. A beginning can be made if interested teachers come together as a group, design tasks and activities, use them in their classes, revise them based on student / peer feedback, and disseminate them among other interested teachers. With the help of desk-top publishing, these systematically produced "supplementary" materials can, eventually, pave the way for teacher-generated textbook production. The Internatization of information has spawned on-line newspapers, blogs, twitters, YouTube, Facebook and other forms of social networking all of which constitute valuable resources that can be exploited for designing instructional materials.

Secondly, even in cases where teachers have to use textbooks imposed on them, they should be able to take liberty to deviate from them, while at the same time fulfilling institutional requirements to cover the prescribed books or to prepare students for content-based standardized tests, etc. In this context, a simple strategy I frequently ask to my graduate students to follow when they become practicing teachers is what I call a 50-10 formula. That is, if you have 60 minutes of teaching to do, adhere to the prescribed syllabus, methods, and materials for 50 minutes (otherwise, you might lose your job), but for the remaining 10 minutes, deviate from the pre-determined syllabus and prescribed textbook, and follow your heart, do what you really want to do in order to render your teaching truly meaningful and truly transformative.

In your works you suggest that teachers usually consider their students' beliefs as an obstacle and not as a starting point. That is, teachers often feel that students expect a certain attitude from them, a peculiar teaching style, and instead of seeing how positive

this can be they insist on changing those beliefs. Several policy documents underpinning modern language teaching, learning and assessment, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages for instance, refer to the student as a cross-cultural speaker, and deal with the need to develop this dimension. What precautions should teachers take into account when decisions on methodology conflict with the educational tradition of a country? Does this fact have an influence on the student's development as a cross-cultural speaker?

I do not see any unsolvable conflict between a context-sensitive methodology that is constructed by local practitioners (which is what a postmethod pedagogy is all about) and "the educational tradition" of a country. Conflicts arise only when an alien pedagogy is imposed from the outside. Remember also that, looking at it at a broader and deeper level, no tradition is immutable. Tradition can be re-formed. Is it not a primary purpose of education to develop critical thinking in our learners so that they can transcend the limitations of customs and traditions that prevent them from realizing their fullest potential? Should not education enable them to transgress the artificial boundaries imposed on them by historical exigencies or political expediency? How else will they transform themselves personally, socially, culturally? About learners as cross-cultural speakers, see below.

"Conflicts arise only when an alien pedagogy is imposed from the outside."

You state that "no theory of practice can be fully useful and usable unless it is generated through practice". In this regard, and related to your contributions in *Cultural Globalization and Language*

Education, how does "cultural realism" affect language teaching on a daily basis? What could be the consequences for authors of teaching materials and textbooks as well as for language teaching publishers? What specific training should all they have and what could be the risks involved in possible biased, limited and, ultimately, deficient views? As for the universalization and the democratization of knowledge associated with the Internet and the media, to which extent could they mean an ideological manipulation?

As I see it, the universalization and the democratization of knowledge can function as an antidote to widespread ideological manipulation, if the Internet and other media avenues opened up by information revolution are used prudently in the classroom. Some of the pedagogic principles and instructional strategies I have outlined in my book referred to above provide a necessary pathway towards that end.

Let us face it: ideological manipulation in the field of English language teaching is a secret hidden in plain sight. Center-based methods and Center-produced materials are all the time imposed on the Periphery. Constructing a context-specific postmethod pedagogy is one way of countering the methodological manipulation that come with Center-based methods. As for materials, I have addressed the limitations of textbooks and how teachers can overcome them in my response to a previous question.

A possible preparation for both teachers and learners may lie in carefully designed, open-ended, reflective tasks that will develop in them critical consciousness necessary to identity and interrogate biased and deficient views presented in the media as well in textbooks. Let me continue this strand of thinking in responding to the next question.

How are the concepts of *globalization* and *glocalization* to be combined in the classroom without running the risk of giving rise to new stereotypes? Which new difficulties could arise from that in our 21st century? For instance, what does learning and teaching English in Iraq involve nowadays? How could we do meaningful activities in L2 without affecting the learner's autonomy, that is, how could we avoid that the proposals suggested by you can be presented nearly as explicit knowledge? How to tackle aspects such as socio-cultural and intercultural knowledge and attitudes?



The dangers of creating and sustaining new cultural stereotypes are real. However, I do see an advantage in “the universalization and the

democratization of knowledge associated with the Internet and the media.” And that is: the widespread access to the Internet has made it possible for us, sitting in our drawing room or in the classroom, to see various aspects of people’s cultural life – the good, the bad and the ugly. This accessibility, if properly channelized for pedagogic purposes, could help us dispel some of the existing stereotypes and avoid creating new ones. For instance, we have come across several stereotypes about the “passive” and “submissive” role Islamic women play in the political and social life of their country. Well, pictures that recently emerged from the Tahrir Square in Egypt, and from the streets of “Arab Spring” certainly make us rethink those stereotypes.

Twenty first century society, because it is fast becoming a globalized and globalizing society, demands that we rethink the teaching of culture in our second language classrooms. The teaching of culture, just like other aspects of second language pedagogy, is replete with ideological manipulations. For nearly half a century, we were told that developing L2 language competence also includes developing L2 cultural competence, that cultural assimilation is the desired destination, and that integrative motivation is the desired path to get there. Globalization has rendered such a notion hopelessly outdated. Nowadays, English is being treated broadly as a language of globality, as a tool for global communication, as a carrier of global cultural flows, not narrowly as an instrument for spreading the cultural beliefs and practices of native speakers of English. Everywhere, the global is encountering the local, and vice versa. This is what is shaping English language teaching in most parts of the world. Iraq and other Islamic countries are no exception.

Regarding learner autonomy, one way of ensuring it is to pay greater attention to the process of identity formation in this age of globalization. Awareness of identity formation dictated by emerging

globalization and *glocalization* has intensified the desire of second language learners and teachers to preserve and protect their own local linguistic and cultural identities. The 21st century world demands that we familiarize ourselves (and our students) with other peoples' way of life, partly to foster our own cultural growth. To respond to that demand, we need to go beyond biculturalism and interculturalism both of which, in my view, excessively and narrowly focus on understanding and (possibly assimilating) the cultural beliefs and practices of a target language community. We need to strive to achieve what I have called global cultural consciousness. The 21st century will increasingly demand that an educated citizen become a global citizen as well. Developing global cultural consciousness promotes not just cultural literacy but also cultural liberty, paving the way for an individual's genuine cultural growth.

Finally, something aroused our curiosity. Your book *Beyond Methods* concludes with a verse by the Spanish poet Antonio Machado, a senior teacher of a foreign language –French- at a Castilian high school. Could you please tell us about your relationship with the Spanish culture?

Well, as part of my own cultural growth, I have tried to educate myself about the history, culture and literature of a select group of countries that have contributed to the reshaping of the cultural and social life of people beyond their own borders. Spain is one of them. I was initially introduced to Spain during my early education, mainly through the achievements of two prominent Spaniards. One was Christopher Columbus (I used to wonder what difference would it have made to world history if he had, as he set out to do, actually reached my native, instead of my adopted, country). The other was Miguel de Cervantes. Don Quixote has been my long-time favorite which I read and re-read

at different times and with different levels of sophistication. Much later, my cultural knowledge of Spain expanded when I developed an interest in watching movies by classic filmmakers such as Luis Buñuel and Pedro Almodóvar. My cultural education continues.

Thanks for the opportunity to share some of my thoughts with colleagues and students in Spain. I wish you all success in all your good endeavors.

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