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Making Pre-Service Language Teacher Education Relevant in the Post-Method Era

The idea that the concept of *method*, for decades treated as central to foreign/second language methodology, seems to be too limiting and not very adequate is winning more and more supporters among theoreticians and practitioners in the field of language teaching. As early as in 1965, Mackey remarked that the term method “means so much and so little” (qtd. in Kumaravadivelu 2003: 23), and this criticism reverberates in a number of recent publications on L2 teaching and learning (e.g. Kumaravadivelu 2003; Pennycook 1989; Prabhu 1990; Sowden 2003).

Method Dethroned

There are a number of convincing arguments put forward against the well-established method-orientation in post-modern language didactics. Firstly, if a method is treated as a homogenous set of language teaching principles, “no part of which contradicts, and all of which is based upon the selected *approach*,” (Anthony 1963: 65) taken to constitute the body of “correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of language and the nature of language teaching and learning” (Anthony 1963: 63), then the word *method* refers to a theoretical construal rather than to established classroom practice (cf. Kumaravadivelu 2003: 24). Its usefulness

to practitioners might be questioned if only on this ground. To push it even further, as a method is, by definition, “based on idealized concepts and geared toward idealized contexts, . . . no . . . method can visualize all the variables in advance,” so it is doomed to remain a kind of “one-size-fits-all” plan (Kumaravadivelu 2003: 28), which should immediately alert thoughtful language educationists.

This initial criticism is directly linked with the second obvious reservation to be voiced. As Kumaravadivelu rightly observes in the paper “Toward a Postmethod Pedagogy,” the notion of method cannot satisfactorily account for the diversity and intricate nature of language teaching/learning processes in different geographic, political, social, economic, and educational situations. Teachers necessarily need to observe language policies, cultural parameters, institutional demands and social characteristics of the situation that they function in, which suggests that they will always have to make context-sensitive decisions on how a given method should be implemented in the particular educational milieu in which they teach. Additionally, specific idiosyncratic features related to their personal preferences and beliefs will be responsible for “customising” a given method’s design. In consequence, as some studies reveal, the same set of principles commonly recognized as a particular method is more often than not exercised by teachers in specific classroom settings in diametrically different ways. For this reason among others, method comparison research has been rendered to a large extent invalid (cf. Nunan 1992: 92–3). Methods are supposed to be uniform, explicit and coherent sets of didactic principles in theory, but, when applied in real contexts, they depart significantly from the procedural prescriptions that they are. Thus the rationale behind the term *method* is severely undermined.

Thirdly, it is widely acknowledged that there is some overlap in the principles and tenets postulated by apparently different methods. As there are no explicit rules which would make it possible to distinguish between different methods and mere variants of the same method (Kumaravadivelu 2003: 24–5), confusion prevails. And as far as preferred classroom practices are concerned, many language teachers the world over admit to practising what is labelled as principled or informed eclecticism (Sowden 2003: 378), which – for obvious reasons – defies the *raison d’être* of the notion of language teaching method as such.

All these arguments as well as some others, which for spatial limitations I will not mention here, support the idea that the notion of method has outlived its usefulness. As Pennycook trenchantly observes, “the term seems to obfuscate more than to clarify our understanding of language teaching” (1989: 589).

Postmethod Language Teaching

As Kumaravadivelu (2003: 32) convincingly argues,

the language teaching profession seems to have reached a state of heightened awareness – an awareness that, as long as we remain in the web of method, we will continue to get entangled in an unending search for an unavailable solution; that such a search drives us to continually recycle and repackage the same ideas; and that nothing short of breaking the cycle can salvage the situation. Out of this awareness has emerged a “postmethod condition.”

While some scholars go as far as to follow anti-method pedagogy, which “elevated to the status of ultimate method, becomes a system of constraint” (Tochon 1999: 275) itself, I would like to side with Kumaravadivelu, who argues for overcoming the weaknesses of method-based didactics by anchoring language teaching and learning in the three-dimensional system based on particularity, practicality and possibility.

By contrast with method-centred L2 didactics, in accordance with which it is meaningful to identify teaching/learning objectives and formulate procedural protocols in terms of idealised principles, pedagogy of *particularity* proclaims that language teaching and learning is always contextualised. This means that in order to be useful, meaningful and educationally suitable, language pedagogy must reflect what some authors refer to as “site-specific nature of teaching” (e.g. Sharma 2003: 24).

An important quality inherent in particularity is that it should be viewed both as a product and a process, in that “it is the critical awareness of local exigencies that triggers the exploration and achievement of a pedagogy of particularity” (Kumaravadivelu 2001: 539). In-service language teachers then need to apply principles adjusted to specific parameters of the socio-political, cultural and institutional context in which

they teach an L2, while at the same time generating situated pedagogic knowledge of how language learning outcomes could be maximised. If the parameter of particularity is ignored and a teacher simply implements generic language pedagogy in the classroom, the results may be disappointing if not positively harmful. Reasoning along these lines, Jarvis and Atsilarat (2004: 9) suggest that “the export of at times inappropriate, unworkable and culturally-loaded teaching approaches [should be] replaced with the primacy of context.” Even though a bit sceptical about teaching beyond methods, Larsen-Freeman in the paper “On the Appropriateness of Language Teaching Methods in Language Development,” in a similar vein argues that a given language teaching methodology will never be of much value if it is not adequately adjusted to specific features of the teaching and learning situation, so unless it is par excellence the implementation of pedagogy of particularity (cf. also Schumann 1999: 38–41; Freeman 2000).

Particularity is inherently related to the parameter of *practicality*, which should not be thought of simply as the teacher’s everyday classroom work, but rather understood as dialectal relationship between theory and practice in language teaching. According to Kumaravadivelu (2001: 541), teachers should be encouraged “to theorize from their practice and practice what they theorize.” In this way, Kumaravadivelu makes a case for a teacher-generated theory of practice.

It is not my aim here to dispute this postulate in the context of in-service teacher development, however, I would like to suggest that in pre-service tertiary teacher education the most important consideration with respect to the theory–practice dichotomy should lead to assigning adequate status to theory as taught in university and college courses designed for student teachers. Student teachers cannot engage in any serious theorising from practice, as their access to practice is highly restricted and definitely insufficient for this postulate to be achieved. Besides, it seems not very desirable for anyone to embark on discovering theoretical principles that have already been formulated and confirmed through research in the field, as reinventing the wheel is hardly ever a worthwhile enterprise.

Leaving aside the problem of language teachers theorising from practice, I would like to emphasise that the issue of the theory–practice relationship must be attended to with due concern by both language

teacher educators and future language teachers. Before this topic is briefly addressed here, the third parameter in postmethod language pedagogy, that is *possibility*, needs to be explained. Possibility assumes that socio-political situation and individual identities of teachers and students need to be recognised as an important factor in language teaching. Language teaching/learning goals cannot be formulated and pursued in isolation from cultural, social, and psychological needs of those participating in the didactic process. It seems that in the era of globalisation processes, multicultural concerns and growing research on gender studies and intercultural communication, all of which affect developments in language teaching (cf. Zawadzka 2004: 185–220), the idea that pedagogy needs to reach beyond classroom walls and “branch out to tap the sociopolitical consciousness . . . so that it can also function as a catalyst for a continual quest for identity formation and social transformation” (Kumaravadivelu 2003: 37) should not surprise anyone (cf. also Morgan 2004).

How to Make Student Teacher University/College Education Relevant

Theory As a Tool

The first crucial problem to be dealt with in an attempt to answer the question how to make tertiary education programmes for pre-service language teachers relevant is related to the aforementioned theory–practice relationship. I would like to suggest that, in the first place, theory must be assigned adequate status in teacher education programmes by making student teachers aware what role it is supposed to play. All too often do teacher educators hear students complain about problems with “applying theory in practice” or having to cope with too much theory at the expense of practice, which clearly shows that many student teachers are probably confused about the function of theory in teacher preparation for the profession.

It seems particularly important to make student teachers see that theory should not be treated as something to be applied or used in real-

life teaching, but rather as a microscope through which classroom processes can be scrutinised. It is frequently emphasised by educationists (cf. e.g. Kwiatkowska 1997: 5, 153; Richards and Lockhart 1994: 3) that what the teacher will be able to perceive and how much sense he/she will make of the classroom reality depend largely on the knowledge-base that the individual possesses. It is precisely this knowledge-base that should help the teacher analyse, survey, and penetrate the nature of the pedagogic context in which he/she functions. In this way, theory plays a significant a posteriori role for an observer trying to explore language classroom reality or for the facilitator interested in optimising learning conditions and maximising learning outcomes. However, theoretical knowledge has an important a priori role, too. A student teacher who is to teach classes as part of his/her practicum, or a novice teacher who most probably has not yet accumulated enough experiential knowledge to rely on will be able to plan and carry out teaching tasks thanks to his/her declarative and procedural knowledge accumulated during the university or college education.

All this indicates that the received knowledge, which student teachers collect through courses in theoretical, applied and historical linguistics, pedagogy, psychology, foreign language methodology or literature, should help them develop the tools necessary for enlightened decision-makers, who will be able to make well advised choices as to how the language teaching and learning processes should be organised, how language skills and subskills should be prioritised, which materials ought to be chosen to match the required learning outcomes, which evaluation procedures would be most appropriate for the particular group of learners in a specific pedagogic milieu, etc. So making pre-service language teacher education relevant in the first place means raising student teachers' awareness as to what should be the role assigned to the theoretical knowledge they are exposed to in university or college courses.

Constructivist Approach

Apart from understanding the role of broadly understood theory in their education, future teachers must be prepared to capitalise adequately on the knowledge they already have. This goal can be achieved only if courses in foreign language didactics at tertiary level education insti-

tutions are run in such a way that inferential and generative aspects of knowledge are emphasised. The knowledge that student teachers are exposed to should be identified by them as an instrument for analysing, understanding and changing the didactic reality. Prospective teachers need to be actively involved in analysing real or imagined classroom conditions, by, for example, identifying the essential parameters in various types of learners at different levels of language advancement, or evaluating different kinds of language teaching materials, in this way generating new ideas and devising their own ways of dealing with didactic problems.

This means that what would-be teachers learn at college or university courses in second language didactics should not be limited to an inventory of facts, assumptions, or directives to be memorised and then followed in the classroom, but rather seen as tools for reflection in-action and on-action. Furthermore, they must be made to realise and remember that their knowledge-base must necessarily be continually expanded, that it should serve as a basis for solving problems, creating new ways of dealing with the reality, arriving at innovative, original ideas. Thus prepared to constantly engage in inferential processing, the pre-service teacher should become accustomed to generating knowledge that will be context-sensitive and relevant to his/her aims. This kind of approach seems better suited to make prospective teachers ready to face classroom reality, which is unpredictable, dynamic, ever-changing and unique, and which cannot be managed by adherence to predetermined and ready-made routines.

What has been argued for so far suggests that teacher education must proceed along constructivist lines. Student teachers enter teacher education programmes in universities and colleges as experienced language learners, keen observers and even evaluators of language students and other teachers, who know quite a lot about what the language teaching and learning reality is like and cherish strong inner beliefs and assumptions about what makes it efficient.

Personalisation

This suggests that for student teacher education to be relevant, the knowledge input must be personalised. So the acquisition of received knowledge, which tends to be generic, must be supplemented with ac-

tivities through which future teachers will relate what they are learning to specific contexts, look at the principles and rules through the lens of their own experience, and get a chance to respond in a subjective, highly personal way to what they are supposed to study. In other words, it is essential to introduce a component of meta-awareness raising into a foreign language didactics programme.

Meta-awareness raising in language teacher education involves engaging student teachers in the process of reflecting on their own subjective response to the principles of language teaching, or models of language skills and subskills development or any other canons that they study in foreign language didactics courses (cf. Jodłowiec). By contrast with language awareness-raising tasks, which consist in learners becoming conscious of how different language forms work to convey meanings and perform communicative functions (Ellis 2003: 162–7), in meta-awareness raising activities, student teachers should engage in the process of inquiry into the nature of the theory that they are learning about by thinking of how it corresponds with their own beliefs and assumptions, how appealing they find it personally, whether or not a particular model or notion in their estimation helps in making the teaching process more efficient, and what insights it offers to them as both language learners and users and future language teachers.

Strictly speaking, meta-awareness raising procedures can be classified as an instrument through which students construct their own highly personalised knowledge resources (cf. Gwyn-Paquette and Tochon 2002: 207–8). This suggests that meta-awareness raising is by definition a sense-making procedure (cf. Black 2002: 77), whereby received generic knowledge becomes part of the personal teaching philosophy of the future language teacher (cf. Wysocka 2003: 42 and *passim*). Furthermore, it helps to create a learning-to-teach environment in which theoretical constructs become meaningful in practical terms (cf. Schoker-von Ditfurth and Legutke 2002: 168). In this way student teachers are, hopefully, **not** hindered but rather helped in “developing their abilities to analyse and respond to the [classroom] context productively” (Bax 2003: 295–6).

Meta-awareness raising techniques (described in some detail elsewhere, cf. Jodłowiec) range from students answering questions about personal attitudes and assumptions they cherish as far as a specific as-

pect of theory is concerned, to guided diary writing, to open-ended or close-ended mini-questionnaires filled in by the students, to informal discussions directed by the instructor. Whatever the actual technique employed, its major goal is to engage the student teacher in conceptualising a given theoretical postulate vis-à-vis his/her own views, beliefs and attitudes. This indicates that the procedures under discussion involve both cognitive processing and affective response, thus contributing to making language teacher education humanistic and holistic (cf. Moskowitz 1999: 178, Szesztay 2004: 129–30). Besides, teacher education embracing meta-awareness raising becomes student teacher-centred and promotes teacher autonomy: the prospective teacher is given a chance to develop into a specialist conscious of the different ways of conducting the teaching process and ready to choose the one that seems the most efficient and tuned in with the particularity, practicality and possibility of the didactic milieu.

There is yet another important issue worth mentioning. As Jaatinen (2001: 107) rightly emphasises, “the starting-point in the change is always the process of interpreting and giving subjective meanings to things and objects that reach our consciousness. It sets the limits and offers possibilities for actions and thinking.” It can be hoped that meta-awareness raising, through which student teachers are led to attend to some important principles of language teaching/learning and made to interpret them subjectively, will significantly help them to implement in real classrooms what they are learning about at the tertiary courses. In this way meta-awareness raising is a means of ensuring that prospective teachers will be willing to try out in practice new, innovative ideas that they find out about in the course of studying rather than simply teach the way that they used to be taught. Possibilities for change, action and new thinking, which Jaatinen (2001) refers to, are thus opened up for future language teachers.

Conclusion

It would be a truism to say that in order to be efficient, teacher education must be relevant: relevant at the macro-level, that is in the context of the goals defined at the university or college level, but also relevant

at the micro-level, that is pertinent to what each individual participant thinks, feels, finds convincing, objects to, considers useful or useless. Postmethod teacher preparation programmes must put future language teachers in the centre and make them realise that they are responsible for their own education not only after they graduate, but also during their college or university studies. Prospective teachers need to build up an awareness of what it means to adapt the theories they study to the contextual features of the classroom reality and to shape this reality in order to achieve target educational outcomes (cf. Black 2002: 76). It is only if each student teacher knows and feels that foreign language didactics courses are primarily geared towards helping them become self-directed professionals, responsible for their own development and ready to embark upon a life-long task of self-education that they will be empowered to become real “tomorrow’s teachers” (Lange 1990: 245).

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