

## **Interrogating the Post-Method Condition: Are We there Yet?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper examines through the eyes of Indian teachers of English (teaching English as a second language at the undergraduate level) the much touted belief that methods are passé and that it is now the rosy dawn of an age sans predefined ways of teaching. While the news of demise of methods and the arrival of post-method condition has been in the corridors of universities and the boardrooms of theoreticians for quite some time now, the question as to whether methods really are dead and if CLT is the reigning king as of now forms the crux of the discussion. Data collected through questionnaires and interviews on the telephone was examined for analysis. The evidence from the data points to one unmistakable fact: it isn't so easy to dispense with methods. Teacher belief in methods is rather strong for various pragmatic reasons. The paper concludes by looking at the implications of the study for teachers, learners and teacher educators.*

**Key words:** Approach, methods, linguistic imperialism, CLT, post method pedagogy

### **INTRODUCTION**

In his seminal work *Linguistic imperialism* (1992) which brought forth a whole new field of research for scholars, researchers and language experts in the developing and developed nations to work on, Phillipson, a former British council officer, unmasked the real intent behind the aggressive promotion of ELT in countries of the *Periphery* (countries of Asia and Africa) by the *Centre* (the USA and the UK). Labelling attempts by the *Centre* to promote the teaching of English in Asia and Africa *linguistic imperialism*, Phillipson expressed grave reservations about the tenets and mechanisms deployed by the advanced nations of the globe to gain access to and dominate the publishing industry in countries where English is taught and learnt as a second language ; in particular he defined *linguistic imperialism* as attempts – covert and overt – to operate “ within a structure in which unequal power and resource allocation is effected and legitimated (1992, p.54).

Drawing on data gleaned from official records, policy documents, articles and studies by researchers, Phillipson identified the nature of the enterprise involving an unequal struggle between the powerful and the powerless, the dependent and the free, the controllers and the controlled. He maintains that:

ELT aid consists of the transfer of a language, **a preferred approach to teaching and learning the language**, a certain type of training, know-how and skills (emphasis mine, 1992, p.64).

The result is rather unfortunate for the importing nations since:

Activities in each area contribute to the incorporation of the Periphery into the ‘modern’ world system. They all involve ‘modelling’, presenting a norm and an example to follow, the transfer of institutions, ideals of training and education and occupational ideologies (Phillipson, 1992, p.65)

This has ushered in a helpless dependence on and endorsement of Centre norms in teaching and training; materials too are imported regardless of their usefulness in helping teachers teach language in contexts where the culture may be so alien as to push learners off the learning curve.

A case in point is Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) that was imported into India way back in the nineties and which has stayed ever since in several pockets because of its popularity in the West and subsequently with curriculum designers and materials developers in India who see in CLT potential for learning; the teaching aspect, however, seems to have been consigned to the background.

### **Research Questions**

In order to determine the extent to which teachers were dependent on “recommended” methods for teaching English as a second language and to examine if methods had had their day as predicted by pundits in the West, two research questions informed the study.

- (a) To investigate whether teachers have been compelled to stick to a particular method;
- (b) To find out if methods are no longer in use.

### **Participants**

The study was conducted in Hyderabad, Telangana state, India. A total of 8 teachers, all of whom are from India, participated in the study; out of them 4 had taught in schools before graduating to teaching in engineering colleges; all of them had work experience of more than 5 years and four had doctorates while 4 were pursuing PhD. They were all teaching in engineering colleges except one who was teaching at a central university and had taught in Ethiopia for three years before joining the central university. The person who was teaching at the central university in India was easily the most competent among those who answered the questionnaire for he had singlehandedly designed the M.A. curriculum in ELT for an Ethiopian university.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study was conducted through a questionnaire which had 4 questions in all, beginning with the method teachers used in the ESL classroom; it then moved on to ask of teachers whether they had been restricted in their use of methods, their opinion about teachers being facilitators and if they ever conceived of a time when methods would cease to exist. Telephonic clarifications were taken from the participants every time there was a problem with the answer or in the event of ambiguity in replying to questions.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

The four questions asked of each of the eight teachers was then compiled and analysed for arriving at conclusions based on the study.

1. What method do you use in the classroom?

This question was put to teachers since, more often than not, teachers are forced to opt for particular methods without being aware of what they mean to themselves as teachers or to students who may not find recommended methods useful or sensible. The question also meant to test teacher awareness of methods and their readiness to use them according to the demands of circumstances. As has been rightly observed by Prabhu (1990), "... what is best depends on who the method is for, in what circumstances, for what purpose, and so on" (p.162). For effective teaching to happen, it is for the teacher to decide what method to use, as the responses below indicate:

- a. I always use Eclectic method in my class room. This is because students come from different backgrounds. If I confine myself to any one method, I will not be able to cater to the needs of all the students.
- b. I use Eclectic Method of Teaching. Depending on the aptitude of the learners, availability of time, size of the class, topic, I vary my method. I am not rigid. In my opinion, they are not water tight compartments. I prefer to choose 'the method of the day' depending on the various factors involved. It comes spontaneously.
- c. I could not say that I follow a particular method. According to students understanding I may use different methods in class.
- d. I generally use direct method and sometimes the audio-lingual method. As far as my approach is concerned, it is a communicative approach.
- e. I use combination of teacher and learner centred approaches. It is because language teaching and learning is a dynamic process and teachers should adopt the changing times and change their methods/approaches from time to time. I take the central role while delivering a lecture and I simultaneously encourage my students for their active participation and ideas. I think there is no standard method/approach that we can rely on\stick to forever. I use icebreaking activities to foster the participation of students who are shy and reticent. I support active and bright students to initiate for presentations and JAM sessions with an aim to encourage the slow learners. I keep changing these methods/approaches from class to class.
- f. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method predominantly. However, I would also use other methods like Structural method, Audio-lingual method and so on depending on the topic and the background of the set of students I teach.
- g. Discourse based method.

From what has been recorded above, it is apparent that 6 teachers replied that they used *eclectic method*, meaning they did not confine themselves to one method. This shows that there is a tendency to independent thinking among teachers, with learners and learning being paramount in their minds.

2. Are you constrained by the use of any method because of imposition from above? i.e. are you forced to use a method because the management of the school/college where you teach wants it or the textbook/materials specifically advocate it?

The question was asked of teachers since many a time the compulsion to use a set of methods is imposed from above, by the curriculum, textbooks or simply the management of

colleges where the teacher is employed; four teachers claimed that they were free to use any method since there were no compulsions from above to use only what had been prescribed; the remaining four replied in the negative since they were apparently not free to use a 'recommended' method. The reasons supplied are very interesting. In one case, as will be evident from reading 'b' below, the teacher was given a free hand in using any method though circumstances precluded any attempt at experimenting with new methods or including innovation in teaching. The teacher who teaches at a central university was also skeptical about being free to use any method since he felt that learner needs textbook and learner competence did not allow that.

- a. No. I am not constrained by the use of any method because of imposition from above.
  - b. No. There is greater autonomy in a government college than in a private one. The management does not exist. So there is no interference from the higher authorities. Nobody dictates terms. However, guidelines are given by the Board of higher education in the form of induction training, workshops where the seniors do advocate the use of certain methods and share their experiences in the classroom. The text book/materials do advocate specific methods. But the teacher has the discretion to be innovative. However, the attitude and aptitude of the learners, lack of proper infrastructure act as a dampener to the spirit of innovation and experimentation in the teacher.
  - c. Yes', it is not by the management but it is by the text book. Right now I am teaching at HCU [University of Hyderabad] , Department of CELS [ Centre for English Language Studies]. There I take classes for the basic group students of integrated masters, whose English language skills are not up to the mark. For these students 'Language in Use' is the prescribed text book, which is completely in communicative method. However, the students are not in a position to follow that and expecting the teacher to give more traditional grammar.
  - d. Yes, at times I do feel so.
  - e. I feel I am imposed to use teacher centred method because of the pressures of timely completion of syllabus and to prepare students for the examinations. There is limited number of theory hours i.e. 3 to complete vast syllabus which includes pieces of prose and activities on listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. I had to do take the active role because of the system (college management, syllabus & time) which prepares me.
  - f. No, not really. If I find a strong reason and logic behind the advocacy of certain method either by the management of the institution where I teach or the textbook I use for teaching I would not mind employing that method. I would decide so based on my understanding of different approaches and methods of teaching and their appropriacy to different sets of students as well as the textbook/materials used. On the other hand, if I find a method (I deem fit depending on the contextual factors) other than the one imposed I would not hesitate using it.
  - g. No.
3. Do you see teacher as a facilitator?

One of the tenets of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is the concept of learner autonomy and by extension the minimal role accorded to teachers in the learning process.

Explaining the role of teachers in CLT classroom, Larsen-Freeman (2008) maintains that:

The teacher facilitates communication in the classroom...During the activities he acts as an advisor, answering students' questions and monitoring their performance.

...the teacher's role is less dominant than in a teacher-centred method, [and] students are seen as more responsible managers of their own learning (pp.128-129).

Therefore, the question was asked with a view to finding out if teachers teaching a class with an average strength of 50 plus students – normally a heterogeneous group with varying levels of fluency in English - really believed in *teacher as facilitator* idea. Opinion was evenly divided with four endorsing the view and four expressing reservations about it. One teacher (see answer c) refused to accept the idea since he felt very strongly that learners from deprived communities felt the necessity of continued support of teacher in the classroom and were fine with a teacher-centred class. Another (see answer d) was pessimistic about the feasibility of the idea and expressed disgust that what looked good in theory was hard to follow in practice.

- a. I do see teacher as a facilitator in a language class room. Instead of being a formal teacher, if he /she acts as a facilitator, students will be motivated to learn and use the language.
- b. Yes. I see teacher as a facilitator - One who guides the students in improving their skills. He/ She does not act like 'the all-knowing and the all wise'. She/he rather maintains a low profile to enable the students to discover their hidden potential and play a key role in language learning.
- c. According to the recent developments in the context of language teaching and learning a teacher is supposed to be a facilitator. However, in a country like India where more than 70% of the learners are from regional medium even in the universities they expect lecture method. Since they are tuned to such kind of learning the concept of 'teacher as a facilitator', in a complete sense, I doubt how far it works.
- d. - a teacher is basically a facilitator but pathetically teachers these days are forced to just transfer information and examine , nothing more than that.
- e. Yes, I see teacher as a facilitator of knowledge. It is because when teachers facilitate information their learners are encouraged to express their creativity, self-study and feel more responsible about their own learning.
- f. In my opinion, teacher should be a multi-faceted person. Therefore, one of the roles the teacher would play is the role of a facilitator. When a teacher gives practice to their students, they become facilitator then.
- g. Yes.

The general opinion was that the *facilitator* idea though fine was not all that acceptable in the Indian milieu, with a typical classroom having a heterogeneous group of learners.

4. Can there ever be a time when methods are no longer in use?

This question intended to know from the horse's mouth – i.e. teachers themselves whether the era of methods, like the Roman Empire, had come to an end and if the end was brought about by teacher dissatisfaction with methods. Researchers and theoreticians such as Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2006) speak of *post method pedagogy* and *going beyond methods* while Brown (2002) wrongly predicted the death of methods. The *expiry* of methods in the teaching domain was attributed to the inability of any method or combination of methods to work their charm and power to ensure learning. Kumaravadivelu (2006) instead posited *parameters of possibility, particularity and practicality* as a way out of the confusion around methods.

Opinion was evenly divided on whether methods have had their day; 4 teachers held that it was true and such a possibility did exist while four were vehemently against the conclusion. Two teachers (see answers *b* and *g*) were very perspicacious in their observation. They maintained that methods as we know them will continue to exist, though the terminology might change from time to time. Two views have been pushed to the “conclusion” part since it seemed appropriate to place them there.

- a. Probably yes. As teachers are no longer confining themselves to a particular method, there can be a time when methods are no longer in use.
- b. - I don't think so. We can't stop using Methods. We use them consciously or unconsciously.
- c. When the concept of learner autonomy is completely implemented, yes there is a possibility for the method no longer to be used.
- d. Yes, it can be. No method(s) can be in use, when teachers do not update their knowledge; explore opportunities of continuous professional development; conduct classroom research; analyse learners' needs and observe the changes in industry.
- e. I cannot imagine situations or times when methods are stopped being used completely. Certain theoretical conceptualizations of language always guide the methods that are used to teach a language.

#### CONCLUSION

- (a) It is too early to write off methods as being on the verge of demise; methods come into their own when the teacher needs a structure to lean on , a system to use to communicate with students , a channel to pour his/her thoughts into for disseminating knowledge.
- (b) Any method that works well with a set of learners is to be followed, regardless of what expert opinion suggests on the best way to teach. The methods in use will predictably change with time and learner needs, but there must be some well-ordered way to take language to learners and methods achieve just that.
- (c) It is a truth foretold that “the social context in which learning takes place is of vital importance to the success of the educational endeavour” (Harmer, 2003, p.288). One must establish what exactly the learners want out of the course before making a method paramount. If no method works, then the teacher has to think of ways and means to make the classes meaningful and interesting for learners by seeking recourse to any means, including those not listed in the defined category called “methods”. Also, the whole controversy over whether there should be methods is not really one that will be of any

interest to teachers tasked with teaching and hoping that some positive outcome will come of the whole exercise.

- (d) It must be noted too that “an insensitive insistence on a rigid methodology at the expense of classroom and learner realities “(Harmer, 2003, p.288) is a course of action fraught with peril since what has been recommended as the finest method is finest until tested. If wash-back effects reveal disappointment, the right thing to do would be to discard the approach at least for a time. Dissatisfaction with CLT as an approach has been reported in many parts of the world. It implies that CLT while remaining popular with curriculum designers and materials producers has not really been as popular with teachers or students because classroom conditions do not allow implementation, not in classrooms in India with a large student number and limited space and even limited student fluency.

In conclusion, one may safely assert that methods have not given up the ghost; with apologies to Shakespeare, a method by any other name would still smell just like a method and make no mistake, it will be one. It will be in order to close the debate with the opinions of two teachers who have this to say about death of methods:

1. No. Terminology may vary. Names may change. People may not call it a method. But unconsciously teachers will be using the principles of the methods. Conscious deliberate naming of the method may not be there. However the tenets of the method might still be followed as they are already internalised by the teaching fraternity.
2. I don't think methods will have death. People may come up with faddish names to replace methods, for instance, learning strategies. But learning strategies of a learner will change on the kind of method used by the teacher in the classroom and the level of maturity the one develops over a period of time. Suppose, a learner approaches a given input data from the meaning point of view and does not pay any attention to the form present in the input data, the organization of ideas, the role-relationships between the author and the audience, the instructor who follows a particular method plays an important role in changing the learner's strategy of learning a language.

The person who so confidently declared that methods won't have death (answer 2) , Dr. Appaswamy, is a seasoned teacher who has taught at various levels, designed materials for open university and offered remedial classes to weak learners students, apart from teaching research methodology , academic writing and genre analysis to researchers pursuing PhD in ELT. His views surely can't be discounted as the very same view has been upheld by Bell (2003) writing in *TESOL Quarterly*: “ Post-method need not imply the end of methods but rather an understanding of the limitations of the notion of method and a desire to transcend those limitations ( p.334).

On that note one may say that methods and their implementation are necessary since they are a “...source of options and a basis for eclecticism in the classroom...” (Bell, 2007, p.142) and teachers can “...reflect on the appropriateness of such methods to their particular teaching context (Bell, 2007, p.143).

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