

## Teachers' Perceptions of the Post-method Feasibility

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### Abstract

The Second Language Teaching profession, seemingly, is an ongoing development. New theories, terminologies, and concepts turn into common themes of discussion and research. Yet, a plethora of terms and labels rarely facilitate teachers in the journey of professionalism. One of these conceptual shifts, which has left teachers uncertain to follow, is “the death of the method” (Allwright, 1991) and the birth of the post-method debate (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). With this thought in the researcher’s mind the current qualitative exploratory study is concerned with English teachers’ perceptions of these conceptual shifts. The aim of this study was two-fold: first, to reviews the theories of methods and post-method in second language literature; second, to explore teachers’ perceptions of opportunities and barriers of the post-method. Research data collected through in-depth interviewing revealed the conflict between teachers’ expectations and realities of classrooms for implementing the post-method. The study heightens teacher educators’ awareness of the possible barriers of the post-method. It also provides them with some practical solutions to overcome those barriers.

**Key words:** Pedagogic parameters, pedagogic indicators, and post-method pedagogy

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## 1. Introduction

At the turn of the third millennium, post-method was born in the heels of the myriad shortcomings attributed to the then-in-the-fashion L2 methods and in order for the second language acquisition to keep abreast of the pedagogical advances in terms of incorporating socio-cultural and critical considerations into the context of teaching/learning. Rooted largely in an eclectic, context-based approach, post-method goes beyond method. It facilitates teachers to find out what works and what does not work in their classroom in accordance with their own experiential knowledge. Kumaravadivelu (2001) defines post-method pedagogy as consisting of three parameters, namely particularity (context), possibility (empowerment), and practicality (making a bridge between professional theories and those of the individual teachers).

As one of the key participants in second language learning and teaching is teachers, I conducted this study with the aim to get more familiar with their ideas and thoughts about post-method pedagogy.

The very two questions that served as my motivation to conduct this study have been:

- What is the perception of ESL teachers towards the post-method?
- What practical implications do they suggest on the post-method teaching and learning in ESL classrooms?

### 1.1. Statement of the Problem

The post-method discussion is a positive turn of events for a desirable learning context and the reality of learners. However, many critics of post-method rebut it as being not feasible (Akbari, 2008).

Language and ideology seemingly are inseparable when it comes to teaching languages. Since one of the barriers of applying strategies of the post-method is teachers' willingness for such a change that is always an issue. I attempt to address this issue by linking the two components of consulting the intellectual contents that scholars have provided us with and interacting with ESL teachers in order to analyze their perceptions regarding their role in the post-method era.

The present study aims to explore into three TESOL practitioners' perception of such a transition. The reason the researcher chose them to conduct her study on is the participants' familiarity with the concept of methods and post-method as well as methodology. She is hopeful that this exploratory practice might shed light on the path of those who are trying to overcome the "ideological barrier" of post-method. By means of interaction, the researcher has tried to portray the practitioners' inner thoughts regarding the features of the post method discourse. She has also tried to trace the participants' methodological views through an online discussion. That's why this study can be categorized as an exploratory practice.

## 2. Literature review

The early documented framework understanding the constituents of method can be traced back to what Antony (1963) represents as the elements that constitute language teaching: approach, method, and technique. He defines approach as "a set of correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of language and the nature of language teaching and learning". What he terms as a method is, "an overall plan for orderly presentation of language material." He terms "a

particular trick, stratagem, or contrivance used to accomplish an immediate objective” as a technique (p.63).

Since then, language teaching methods have developed overtime in terms of theories of language, language learning, and language teaching. In other words, a new method with a new label was born in the heels of the merit shortcomings attributed to the existing L2 methods.

One way of clearing the concept of the existing methods is to categorize the established methods based on their theoretical as well as practical orientation to L2 teaching and learning. Kumaravadivelu (1993b) classifies the methods into three categories; a) language –centered methods, b) learner-centered methods, and c) learning-centered methods.

However, by going through the literature, one can conclude that beside the great achievements of language-centered methods, learner-centered methods, and learning-centered methods they were not able to truly achieve the goals they set for themselves. As Kumaravadivelu (2006) claims “in all probability, the invention of a truly novel method that is fundamentally different from [the existing ones] is very slim, at least in the foreseeable future” (p.161).

In recent era when critical thoughts are popular, language-teaching practitioners need to be careful regarding their methodological choices. During the transitional time when dissatisfaction with one method results in the gradual development of another, scholars such as Allwright (1991), and Stern (1983) emphasize on unhelpfulness of the existing methods. The merits of methods encouraged Allwright (1991) to give the talk entitled “The Death of Method.” He (1991) explains that a method provides teachers with “cheap” but “externally derived sense of coherence for language teachers, which may itself inhibit the development of a personally “expensive”, but ultimately far more valuable, internally derived coherence” (p.7). Later, Brown (2002) uses the same expressions for “recently interred methods” (p.14). It seems that a method based teacher education may not be sufficient to meet the challenges of the classroom life. That is why teachers usually try to use different techniques at their avail based on their experiential knowledge in order to find out what works in their classrooms that is termed as “eclectic method.” Yet, eclectic method has its own shortcomings. As Stern (1992, p. 11) points out:

the weakness of the eclectic position is that it offers no criteria according to which we can determine which is the best theory, nor does it provide any principles by which to include or exclude features which form part of existing theories or practices. The choice is left to the individual’s intuitive judgment and is, therefore, too broad and too vague to be satisfactory as a theory in its own right (p. 11).

Consequently, in this situation Kumaravadivelu (2006) presents the essentials of the post-method pedagogy in terms of pedagogic parameters and pedagogic indicators that will be define below.

## 2. 2. Post-method era

Kumaravadivelu (1994 b) presents post-method pedagogy in terms of “pedagogic parameters” and “pedagogic indicators” that shape the construction of a post-method pedagogy. He defines

post- method pedagogy as consisting of three parameters, namely particularity (context), possibility (empowerment), and practicality (making a bridge between professional theories and those of the individual teachers). The pedagogy of particularity aims to raise practitioners' critical awareness of individuals' social and cultural background. As Kumaravadivelu (2001) claims the post-method pedagogy "must be sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular institutional context embedded in a particular sociocultural milieu" (p. 538). Parameter of practicality is intended to encourage practitioners to make a bridge between professional theories and personal theories. Edge (2001) makes it crystal clear when he argues that "the thinking teacher is no longer perceived as someone who applies theories, but someone who theorize practice" (p. 6). The parameter of possibility that has been rooted in Paulo Freire's educational philosophy is concerned with the issue of power and dominance, and is aimed at creating "the sociopolitical consciousness that students bring with them to the classroom" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b, p.59.) In other words, this parameter stresses the importance of acknowledging and highlighting students' and teachers' individuality and encourage them to question the status quo in order to "develop theories, form of knowledge, and social practices that work with the experiences that people bring to the pedagogical setting" (Giroux. 1998, p. 134.)

Although the post-method advocates show a willingness to promote reflective and self-exploratory desire among teachers and learners instead of imposing them a prepackaged and pre-sequenced body of knowledge that is based on the well-articulated theories, critics point out that in practice the post-method is more idealistic approach than the realistic one. As Akbari (2008, p.645) argues that

"now that method is gone, the question is how teachers [without having the framework of method] are going to develop the competence demanded of them in dealing with pedagogical and social responsibilities assigned to them" (p. 645).

Akbari believes that post-method has ignored the constraining realities of the classroom in teachers' responsibilities. He brings into attention that in many contexts teachers have overloaded classrooms. So, the financial and occupational constraints they work within do not leave them with the time or the willingness to act autonomous. In addition, textbooks and tests can be counted as further constraints. Since, textbooks take care of all details of the classroom, life even they include quizzes and tests. Therefore, in such a situation even if teachers do not subscribe to a method, methods are imposed to them through the materials.

### 2.3. Theoretical Framework

What the aforementioned discussion shows is that post-method has been mainly criticized for ignoring the constraining realities of the classroom in teachers' responsibilities. Whereas, the advocators of the post-method claim that it is in method based pedagogy that "teachers find themselves in an unenviable position where they have to straddle two pedagogic worlds: a method-based one that is imposed on them, and a methodological one that is improvised by them" (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p. 170).

Clarifying teachers' perception regarding post-method pedagogy depends on what we know about teachers' cognition. In other words, teachers' cognition is the focus of this study to find out

how teachers interpret and evaluate transition of method based pedagogy to the post method one. Borg (2003) defines teacher cognition as “what teachers know, believe, and think” (p. 81). He believes that teacher cognition leads to the “greater understanding of the contextual factors which shape what language teachers do” (p. 106). To achieve this understanding, this study investigated if teaching English based on post-method is feasible in a real classroom from practitioners’ perspective, and if it is not, what inhibits practitioners to adopt the post-method pedagogy.

### 3. Methodology and Method

The choice of method has a significant implication for the produced knowledge. Thus, this is one of the most important decisions that a researcher should make. In this study, *what* questions were not used in the sense of finding relationships existing between the phenomena but to explore the practitioners’ points of view towards the post-method feasibility. In order to take sufficient account of this, two sources were used; scholars’ intellectual content and the practitioners’ views, working life, and experiences.

#### Participants

The researcher selected her sample based on intensity purposeful sampling paradigm for maximizing information with the emphasis on the quality of the information taken from the participants. Since, having access to all ESL teachers was impossible due to time and financial constraints. The researcher accessed participants from her immediately available colleagues at EdD program in TESOL. The reason that she chose her participants from EdD in TESOL students and professors was their familiarity with the concept of methods and post-method.

The researcher has not been looking for generalizability, but she was looking for the quality of the information that she could take from participants. In order to meet the ethic of the study, she sent an email to 53 EdD colleagues and professors and explained the purpose of her study along with a brief introduction of the concept of post-method. Three practitioners replied her back and expressed their willingness to share their thoughts and ideas. One of the participants whose thoughts are discussed here is a British native English speaker in his sixties who had been involved in TESOL industry for nearly 20 years. He worked in Africa, Latin America, Asia and Europe during his working life, in contexts where English was variously a foreign language, a second language, a medium of instruction, and a language for 'specific purposes'. In addition, He published regularly (books, papers, editing), primarily on language teacher education and associated topics. The other one is a recently graduated practitioners in EdD. He is originally from Egypt who has worked as an English teacher for over 15 years. And the last one is a native English speaker who is currently studying EdD in TESOL, he has worked as an English instructor, syllabus designer, and writer of ESP textbooks for nearly 30 years. Here after, I would recall them Kevin, James, and Joseph respectively.

#### Ethical dimensions

After the participants had accepted the first participation request, the researcher assured them via an email that they were free to withdraw from the project at any time. Also, In order to meet the participants’ right to know how the data would be interpreted and reported, member checking was conducted. To do so, a table was created displaying the participants’ put down information



checked with them in the course of the study. In addition to ensure confidentiality, male pseudonyms were given to all 3 participants.

### **Data Collections**

For data collection, the researcher chose interviewing via email as a method to obtain the data that she believed would suit her research questions and the knowledge they produce later on. This was meant to meet the “logic of appropriateness” (Greener, 2011. P. 1). Here, the data is mutually created by the practitioners and the researcher to figure out a better understanding of a phenomenon through interviews. The interview schedule contained open ended questions on two central themes of finding out a practical solution for implementing the post-method in actual classroom environment, as well as their possible suggestions. The interview sessions availed the researcher with an interpersonal connection. Therefore, she had a chance to monitor and modify the questions for better understanding. In order to apply research related side comments, the comments were written down in the margins of the interviews transcriptions so as to lead the questions towards the theme of the study. This approach was really helpful to make clear the ambiguous points. On the other way round, this approach was challenging as the researcher needed to avoid being subjective in raising the follow up questions.

For weighting the data and increasing the credibility, detailed information was provided about the participants and the researcher depended on triangulation by using the spiral technique via collecting information at different times to support findings of the study. In the beginning, the resulting themes were affected by the research questions. However, later on the categories were redefined along the course of the interview sessions. Themes and interpretations emerged from the input through the transcripts, coded and categorized themes. The researcher used the technique of constant comparison starting with a particular episode in the data from the interview and comparing it with a similar episode that was gathered through literature.

In the same vein of credibility, rich, thick description of the participants and content are provided by adding excerpts from the collected data.

### **4. Data analysis**

Hereafter, the themes that were emerged throughout 3 practitioners' interviews via emails will be discussed. Findings illustrate the participants' vision on the feasibility of post-method as well as their suggestions for any possible ways of applying this theory in the classroom. The process of determining the issue was recursive; the researcher worked through the transcripts, wrote the initial draft of the article; and then returned again to the data to check if she had accurately represented the participants' concerns.

To present a balanced argument, the first part of this analysis gives an account to acknowledge some contribution of post-method to English language pedagogy from the participants' perspective. The second part deals with what inhibits teachers to apply the post-method pedagogy in their classroom as well as the features the post method discourse needs to take into account for it to move towards feasibility. Three main themes emerged in the course of the interviews including the participants' views towards post-method pedagogy, materials, and teacher education.

The analysis of data revealed that even if the teachers want to adapt post-method pedagogy in their classrooms, there are some barriers that would not allow them feel secure to apply the post-method strategies.

#### 4.1. Post-method pedagogy

One of the participants emphasized that “the key advantage of post-method pedagogy is the increase of learner agency that it might bring about” (Kevin). This perspective is in line with what Breen and Littlejohn (2000) term as “proper learning”. They claim

a pedagogy that does not directly call upon students’ capacities to make decisions conveys to them that either they are not allowed to or that they are incapable of doing so; or it may convey that the more over struggle to interpret and plan is not part of proper learning (p. 21).

Another participant preferred to apply “eclecticism and communicative language teaching approach”. He believed that there is “only little difference between Communicative Approach and post-method” (Joseph). However, other participants recognized the post-method as a positive turn of events with the potential for some practical outcomes. James and Kevin like what they called as a freedom that post-method pedagogy provides teachers and learners with.

The similarities between post-method pedagogy and CLT have been a controversial issue in the literature. For instance, Bell (2003) indicates the similarities between CLT and the post-method strategies. Yet, when it comes to the term context, one can see the main difference between CLT and post-method. Context in CLT is an umbrella term for who is talking to whom, about what and where. However, post-method goes beyond it and touches the aspects of the real sociopolitical live. Besides, as Akbari (2008) says

“CLT does not have a critical appreciation of the classroom because for CLT, negotiation of meaning and interpersonal communication are the two basic objectives envisaged by its proponents, and no effort is made to link L2 teaching practice to social change” (p.644).

#### 4. 2. Materials and test

All three participants believed that *the materials and tests* that they use, provide them with a working plan that has been subscribed to a method. As Kevin said “ syllabus design, teaching and learning, classroom activities, language assessment and teacher education all seem to be clouded both by the past different methods in the last 50 years and by the present fog of SLA research related or unrelated material available”. James also mentioned that in his context teachers have to “sticks to the script”. In addition, achievement tests can be counted as an administrative barrier in English foundation classes from the participants’ perspective. James mentioned that they are held back from an entirely post-method approach since they are expected to help learners to reach at a “fixed set of learning outcomes”.

Hutchinson and Terres (1994) see the textbooks as an agent of change because they provide us with the condition of a long lasting and smooth change. As they note one of the advantages of textbooks is that textbooks get the support of the group behind the individual teacher, and thus

relieves the teacher of much of the burden of responsibility for introducing changes. Seemingly, then, textbooks can provide the teachers and learners with the level of needed structure to adopt change.

#### 4. 3. Teacher Education

Another critical aspect of post-method, from the participants' angle, is the mainstream teacher training programs. The participants believed that effective and reflective teachers' training may open the door to the post-method pedagogy. It seems that teachers prefer to be exposed to knowledge rather than finding it out. They expect teacher educators to take the first step. During our online discussion James raised a question that "how do the current teacher training courses, and Master's courses present the post-method world of ELT to its trainees?" He believed that it is teacher educators who play the significant role to help post-method to move from the realm of ideas to that of practice.

It is clear that teacher educators play a significant role in clarification of the concept of the post-method as well its emergence to ESL pedagogy. Having considered the L2 literature as well as the comments made by the participants, the researcher found no evidence of appropriate inquiry- oriented teacher education that is one of the post-method indicators in the current teacher training courses, and Master's courses. In other words, teacher education is an essential part of L2 teaching and learning, as it would help teachers to articulate their thoughts and experiences with one another. According to Kumarvadelu (2006),

the task of the post-method teacher educators is to create conditions for prospective teachers to acquire necessary authority and autonomy that will enable them to reflect on and shape their own pedagogic experiences, and in certain cases transform such experiences (p. 182).

Now the question that might arise is that when current teacher education is based on the mainstream approach, how L2 teachers can recognize the short comings of these programs through dialogic approach? In other word, the post-method teacher educators need to do walking rather than do talking in order to create such a condition for L2 teachers to expose them to "pedagogy of possibility".

In other words, clarification of the concept of the post-method pedagogy is not something to be overlooked. It means even if the post-method pedagogy aims not to expose teachers with the prepackaged and pre-sequenced body of knowledge, neglecting real needs of introducing the concept of the post-method pedagogy to teachers in teacher training courses may not be a good idea.

#### 5. Discussion

Before seeing the post-method pedagogy as an alternative to make effective changes, advocates of post-method need to create suitable conditions for effective changes. It is clear that making change is one issue but accepting change is something else. The main challenging point of change is that individuals feel secure within the existing context and they usually resist the change. Akker (1988) claims the fundamental requirement in the process of change is security



(cited in Hutchinson & Terres, 1994, p.322). In his study on written materials and their helpful role in the implementation of a new curriculum, he concluded that the highly structured approach is more effective in getting curriculum change into the classroom. Akker (1988, p.54) adds

“certainly, if early experiences have been satisfying and yield positive results (both in teacher’s performance and in students’ learning) there seems to be more chance of commitment to a program and of stable and substantial changes in the direction of proposals for an innovation” (p. 54).

Yet, the situation even gets worse when the post-method pedagogy aims to change the highly structured method based pedagogy to the post-method macro strategies. As the participants mentioned the current materials and teacher education create constraints to apply the post-method strategies in the classroom. Teachers likely prefer textbooks that have laid down the framework within which they can operate.

The findings of this study suggest that the key factor in adapting post-method pedagogy in an actual classroom is not teachers’ willingness for such a change. But there are some other barriers such as the mainstream teachers education, materials, and tests.

### **5.1. Teachers’ perception towards the post-method**

It was found in the course of interviews that the participants believed that the post-method pedagogy increases the agency of both learners and teachers that is counted as the key advantage of post-method. That is what Kumaravadivelu (2006) terms as *academic autonomy* that enables learners to gain a sense of responsibility for their own learning. The participants of the study also believed that in the post-method pedagogy a teacher has more freedom to develop their own curriculum and vary their classroom approach. According to Freeman (1991) method-based pedagogy “overlooks the fund of experience and tacit knowledge about teaching which the teachers already have by virtue of their lives as students” (p. 35). On the other hand, if teachers have a desire to acquire a degree of autonomy, post-method pedagogy encourages them to develop a reflective approach to their own teaching. As Kumaravadivelu (2006) asserts post-method pedagogy “recognizes the teachers’ prior knowledge as well as their potential to know not only how to teach but also how to act autonomously within the academic and administrative constraints imposed by institutions, curricula, and textbooks” (p. 178).

### **5.2. The participants’ practical suggestion**

Although teachers may find themselves autonomic in the post-method pedagogy, there are some constraints that do not let them to apply post-method strategies in the classroom such as materials and tests. The current textbooks provide teachers with the framework that defines how languages are taught and learned, leaving little room for teachers’ reflection. In addition, in many contexts teachers are evaluated based on the students’ achievement in their tests. As Shohamy (2004) mentions teachers “view test not only as testing the language performance and proficiency level of their students but also as assessing or testing their own performances” (p. 107).

It seems that the advocates of the post-method pedagogy might need to design some effective theory-neutral materials and tests in order to introduce changes gradually within a

structured framework enabling the teachers and learners to develop in harmony with the introduction of new ideas.

In addition, teacher education can play the significant role to help post-method to move from the realm of ideas to that of practice by clarifying the concept of the post-method and creating conditions that enable teachers to reflect on and shape their own pedagogic experiences. According to Kumaravadivelu (2006), “it becomes necessary to have teacher education that does not merely pass on a body of knowledge, but rather one that is dialogically constructed by participants who think and act critically” (p. 182).

### 5. 3. Implication

This study can be an example of that the main barrier of applying the post-method pedagogy is not teachers' ideologies. But for the post-method to take hold, change should begin with teacher education which lays the foundations of norms of practice, teachers' evaluation, and choosing standardized textbooks and tests. Because notions of the post-method can remain just a topic for academic lectures, explicit opportunities need to be provided in which teachers can go through self-exploratory practice. Professional development program or academic discourse community could offer such opportunities.

### 5.4. Limitation

This study has two conceptual limitations. First, since the participants were chosen from EdD program in TESOL, they were more interested in exploring new issues in the L2 literature than teachers who might have to work overload to earn living and they do not have enough time to adapt any new strategies. Second, all the data were collected via email. Therefore, the researcher could not gather in-depth information about the participants' context such as (place, level, age group, and culture).

### 6. Concluding Remarks

This research is a preliminary work to portray the perception of English Language teachers regarding post-method pedagogy. The researcher tried to find out L2 teachers' perception of the current debate in TESOL via going through a set of interviews to delve into 3 practitioners' inner thoughts regarding the post-method pedagogy. Having considered the scholars' chapter of mind that was being reviewed as well as the collected data from, it has been concluded that,

1. Post-method was born in the heels of the myriad shortcomings attributed to the then-in-the-fashion L2 methods and in order for the SLA to keep abreast of the pedagogical advances in terms of incorporating socio-cultural and critical considerations into the context of teaching/learning. Clearly, the current textbooks cannot meet the learners' and the teachers' needs within the post-method pedagogy domain as they still emphasize the method based approach and ignores “competence in terms of social interaction” (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b, p. 60).
2. Since making change is one issue but accepting change is something else, the post-method pedagogy needs to take into account some specific features in order to move from the realm of ideas to that of practice. Two factors that prohibit teachers to apply the post-method pedagogy are textbooks and tests. As Akbari (2008) points “even if teachers do not openly subscribe to a method, the textbooks they use provide them with a working plan that defines how languages are

taught and learned” (p. 646). The participants of this study also believed that in order to involve L2 teachers in the post-method debates, the textbooks and tests requires the modification in order to provide the teachers and learners with the level of needed structure to adopt change.

3. It was found out within the course of the study that teacher education can play a significant role in L2 teaching and learning. The existence of an appropriate teacher education is essential for the post-method pedagogy to expose teachers to an inquiry based program. In addition, the realization of the post-method pedagogy needs an appropriate teacher education program to clarify the concept of the post-method pedagogy as well as to distinguish it from the method based approaches such as CLT. According to Kumaravadivelu (2006) it is necessary “to have a teacher education that does not merely pass on a body of knowledge, but rather one that is dialogically constructed by participants who think and act critically” (p. 182). To sum up, If and only if teachers educators stop transmitting a set of prepackaged body of knowledge to teachers and create a “dialogic” (Bakhtin, 1981) and “inquiry-oriented” program then teachers might feel more secure to accept such a change.

This paper tried to present some possible strategies, based on the scholars’ chapter of mind that was being reviewed and what the participants expected, which hopefully can make a practical change to the mainstream teacher education and the textbooks in order to meet the teachers’ needs to adopt the post method pedagogy.

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