

The Road That Paved the Way for Critical Research Methods in ELT

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Abstract

A wide variety of approaches have been adapted for the purpose of conducting research related to English Language Teaching. In the first quarter of the 20th century, reflective thought was introduced by John Dewey. He highlighted the role of reflection through interpretation of the experience, naming the problem coming into view during experience, offering explanations for the problem, producing hypotheses and experimenting them. Although these phases seem familiar in today's instructional context, it is truly compelling that reflective thought has become prominent and characteristics of effective instruction almost recently. This may be due to discrepancy between teachers and researchers or several researchers' disregarding the important variables that directly influenced the results they obtained. Currently many prefer to proceed on the basis of their own determinations of the particular context of the research setting, essentially acknowledging the teacher's active role in determining the most appropriate methodologies to use, contextual and affective factors. Thus, much *post method era* research eschews adherence to established methods and their principles and is at liberty to tailor approaches to contextual requirements. This paper intends to provide a brief overview of ELT research shift towards a more context specific and reflective stage.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The previous century's prescriptive language teaching methods, such as Suggestopedia, Total Physical Response, The Direct Method, The Audiolingual Method, and the like were gradually left behind as they could not meet the needs of the modern, redefined, and varied contexts of language teaching in the 1990s. In fact, it was too unrealistic, even absurd, to assume that one method would fit the needs of a diversity of language teaching intuitions, teacher characteristics, students, and learning objectives since "All pedagogy, like all politics, is local" (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, p. 539). Language teaching can be more effective if teachers are open to adjusting the practices of methods, testing the implications of research, trying out action studies in their local context, recreating their notion of teaching and learning by exploring the impact of their teaching performance. Hence, a fresh perspective considering the particular interactions of salient teaching-related parameters of different language teaching settings, materials, objectives, and teacher beliefs was heralded by the emergence of the post method era (Ahmadi & Maftoon, 2015; Ellis, 2009; İlyas, 2017; Kim, 2015; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Stern, 2003). In the 1990s, the established methods were becoming less popular at English language teaching institutions, which marked the start of the post method approach. Clarifying the dimensions with which the postmodern era has to be studied was a significant turn in the history of ELT research methodology that was summarized in Kumaravadivelu's work, *Toward a Postmodern Pedagogy* under three titles, particularity, practicality and possibility in which he elaborates on the meanings and implications of these three concepts and supports the fact that teacher training and research should be situated by considering the linguistic, socio-cultural and political contexts in which language teaching takes place (Kumaravadivelu, 2001).

Inclination Towards Making Sense of The Theory

As the aim of theories is not to create new knowledge but to improve practice (Elliot, 1995; İlyas, 2018) the value of small scale, to the point and context-sensitive action research conducted by individual teachers is undeniable. A dynamic and on-going knowledge construction process in which teachers themselves are actively involved is required to improve teaching since they are able to collect their own data on their own teaching, interpret it and reach conclusions that they can test rather than having to depend on the 'narrow data' made available by 'experts'. The sobering thought of the practicing teacher as the active researcher who can formulate their own language teaching and learning theories does not deny the benefits of reflective teacher education, it merely transforms it from being illusional to being more fact-based, practical and realistic (Zeichner, 1996; Maftoon & Sarem, 2012). Reflective teaching practice triggers critical thinking and is actually very beneficial in making teachers reconsider their common classroom 'rituals'. Even though in some training, if teachers are in subservient positions to the trainers who are probably and preferably much more experienced, they can still gain much insight when they are engaged in retrospection as if they were participants in a stimulated recall method research. It helps teachers self-regulate their teaching practices having them reconsider habitualised practices that may not be as productive as they assume. It is supported by extensive research that reflective teacher education has contributed much to teacher education (Walsh & Mann 2015). Thus, reflection need not be judged by a 'more knowledgeable other', but a mediator who may be a peer of relatively equal status. Such reflection being much more beneficial in mirroring one's teaching not only with its assets but also taking in hand its repairable flaws that one cannot observe if left to observe them alone (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). Spolksy & Hult (2008) also emphasize that researchers are often academics intensely engaged in research to improve time and effort spent on a more efficient language teaching methodology, yet often lacking the cumulative knowledge of classroom practice. On the other hand, teachers try to conduct unstructured action research without the enlightening support of literature in the field which would reveal the theoretical background of their situated context. The research agenda for educational linguistics cannot afford to disregard the importance of the interactive nature of the practice and theory relationship. Researchers refer to this constant research action during practice emphasizing the dynamic nature of the interaction between research and practice and arguing that this interaction should be on-going (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, p. 541; Chambers, 1992). Freeman (1998) also postulates on the importance of theory in raising awareness for teachers to formulate thoughts on what constitutes good teaching. In fact, the suggestion of making sense of the theory for teachers dates back to the 1970s. Van Mannen asserts that teachers should not only view pedagogy as a

mechanism for maximizing classroom opportunities in the classroom, but also as a means for understanding and transforming possibilities in and outside the classroom (van Mannen, 1991; Finaran, 2015).

The Role of Power Relations

Coleman (1996, p.109), and Jeyarah and Harland (2016) mention the “psychological barriers to learning” rooted in the political power relations of the country the teaching is located. Apparently, resistance to learning a language may stem from an attachment to one’s own nation and a subtle desire to protect its culture and identity is acceptable. On the other hand, the same motives can trigger putting more effort into studying the target language if one perceives the target language as a gate opening factor to ‘equalize’ a country’s status with that of the dominating powers in the world. Especially when the target language is English, our proficiency in the target language becomes a gate opener for us, and only when we are proficient in English an abundance of resources about the power relationships among countries and the dynamics of world politics become accessible. Freire refers to many TESOL practitioners’ work when he explains that the philosophy that any pedagogy involves power relations between the empowered and subservient. Also, a close examination of any English teaching situation would reveal attitudes towards the language which are rooted in social inequalities that are not always explicitly admitted or acknowledged. Class, range, gender and ethnicity are the main factors that contribute to the formulation of these attitudes (Freire, 1972). They can also be triggering factors which can help motivate students to learn English, to speak English not only fluently but accurately, to the extent that pronunciation and intonation is native-like, indistinguishable from the educated native speakers of English, depending on the motivation of the nonnative speaker as ‘language is agent through which social and political organizations are formed, defined and contested’ Weedon (1987, p. 543). Immigrants transfer the language and culture dichotomy to a more comprehensive debate since the socially, politically and economically bound contexts of immigrants in the world are dynamic, that is there are new situations every day in world politics which brings about new motives for large groups of people to migrate to countries that they find themselves in a situation where they have to learn a second language. Examples are Syrians in Turkey and Rohingya Muslims fleeing the ethnic cleansing in Myanmar and seeking refuge in Bangladesh. The role of these factors is undeniable in teaching. Teachers are in a continuous meaning making process affected by the specific power relations they encounter in their circumstances. Canagarajah (1999) exemplifies the issue of power relations from a socio- political aspect and reports the resistance to learning and speaking English in Sri Lanka by Tamil students after the civil war. In a similar vein, the degree of cultural representations is an issue raised by the language scholars (Baker, 2015; Byram, 1989; Kim, 2004; Rodriguez & Fernando, 2015; Wang, 2011). In Turkey, several local publishers produced English language teaching materials whose content comprises of not only the culture of the target language but also Turkish cultural elements to eliminate the problem of alienation. Modern English Course for Turks, Grade 6 and 7 (Akdikmen, 1999 & 2002) and Time for English (Ersöz et al., 2008) are among the locally published textbooks to illustrate how a local culture can be embedded in English language textbooks. Yet, such material always requires meticulous review for authentic language use since language and culture are intricately interwoven.

Recent Conditions

In post method pedagogy, we should acknowledge the fact that a language teachers’ obligations frame their vision of a good language teacher, and that they inescapably teach under the influence of the predetermined principles and procedures of their sociocultural reality. The complex nature of language teaching apparently agrees with Chaos Theory (Larsen-Freeman, 1997) which emphasizes that the components of a system, when they are united, may not bear the features of the whole. Typical language teaching practice in a country or area, may not necessarily represent each teacher’s particular practices in the local circumstances. The researcher teacher dwells on learner differences and learning styles rather than simply applying a prescribed methodology to all learners, assuming them to be the same. This leads to the focus on learner reflections on teaching gaining even more importance as it is highlighted in the CEFR teacher portfolio (Newby 2012), or as it is introduced in the self-regulated learning concept of the Sociocultural Approach (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). Currently, thanks to digital technology, the interaction between competent speakers of the target language and students is made possible and the post method teachers’ role has shifted accordingly from the source of information to the facilitator of learning. The importance attached to metacognitive awareness and learning management systems

is attributed to the importance of interaction in self-regulated learning. Today's language students have become self-directed and their teachers too have become self-directed no matter how dependent they still are on their institutions and fixed curricula. Theory driven and terminology-laden teacher education should steer theory-practice interaction.

CONCLUSION

Today, teachers can be ethnographers who are aware of the political dynamics that influence their teaching contexts. On the road to betterment of personal histories or biographies, it is predicted that post method pedagogy will retain its dynamic quality. Although the notion of method continues to be emphasized in foreign language teacher training curricula worldwide, it is likely that in the future less emphasis will be put on using standard techniques. A critical view of what language teaching methods suggest can be underlined in teacher training curricula. It would also be sensible to approach methods within the historical context they were developed. Also, knowledge of the language acquisition theories that support various methods would help teacher researchers to apply them more meaningfully in context. However, some approaches like the popular Grammar Translation Method are neither grounded in specific theory nor flexible to be adapted in any significant way by the practitioner regardless of their local circumstances. Why such anomalies persist in traditional settings especially in adult teaching contexts in several countries, and why such methods still have prominence in the post method era that puts emphasis on the teacher researcher meeting local needs, invite further investigation.

Statement of Researchers

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