A critical examination of Kumaravadivelu's postmethod pedagogy and its scope for application in ELT in Bangladesh

Liza Sharmin[1]

Mohammad Elius Hossain[2]

Abstract

For many years, scholars have proposed various second/foreign language (L2) teaching methods that are expected to work for all learners in all contexts. Kumaravadivelu (2001, 2003a, 2006) argues that the methods are developed for worldwide use and are designed as one-size-fits-all. Such method-based pedagogy undermines the local knowledge base of teaching-learning. Those methods have persistently failed to yield results as expected by heterogeneous learners in varied settings. Against this backdrop, Kumaravadivelu proposes the postmethod pedagogy that assumes to address the challenges encountered by L2 teachers in various local contexts having their own characteristics. Through a review of the relevant literature, the present paper first attempts to critically examine the conditions, parameters, and macrostrategies of the postmethod pedagogy. Then it explores the scope of its application in English language teaching (ELT) in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Method, Postmethod pedagogy, Postmethod conditions, Postmethod parameters, Macrostrategic framework

1. Introduction

The quest for the best or most effective L2 teaching method has been a significant concern in much of the history of language teaching. To that effort, throughout the twentieth century, particularly from the middle of it till the 1990s, pedagogical experts, practitioners, applied linguistics, and researchers have proposed diverse methods that are found on "idealized concepts geared towards idealized contexts" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 165). The established methods are meant for worldwide use and are guided by the idea that they are fit for all local settings (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 165). In contrast, L2 learning and teaching needs, expectations, and settings around the world are varied and the local idiosyncrasies are mostly not predictable. Therefore, it can be argued that the methods that are produced and promoted as usable in every L2 teaching/learning context can be useful in no L2 teaching/learning context (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 544). As a result, language teachers and researchers worldwide have become quite dissatisfied because those methods have continually unsuccessful to satisfy the necessities and expectations of diverse learners in varied local settings (Moniruzzaman, 2020, p. 2).

[1]Associate Professor, Department of English, Daffodil International University
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of English, Daffodil International University

Even the prevalence of methods has reduced and weakened our understanding of language teaching rather than enhancing it (Pennycook, 1989, p 597). Moreover, Kumaravadivelu (2003, p. 544) considers a 'method' as a concept is a "construct of marginality" that expands the colonial mission of economic exploitation and cultural domination. It reflects a stereotypical worldview coupled with an unequal power relationship between the producers and the users of such methods (Pennycook, 1989, pp. 589-90, as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2003a). Against this backdrop, when there is no point in searching for an alternative method, Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2003a, 2003b, 2006) proposes an alternative to method what he calls "postmethod pedagogy".

Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2003a, 2003b, 2006) exhibits the inbuilt shortcomings of method-based language teaching and questions the unequal power relationship between the theorists and the practitioners, as well as between the centre and the periphery. The conditions in the arena of second/foreign language teaching pedagogy that necessitates the emergence of postmethod pedagogy are known as the "postmethod condition" (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). Kumaravadivelu (2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2006) also delineates three principles, known as "postmethod parameters," that build a theoretical justification essential to constitute a postmethod pedagogy. Based on the basics of the three parameters, Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2003a, 2006) has offered a method-neutral operational framework that he calls a "macrostrategic framework".

This paper first intends to look at the significant characteristics of the 'postmethod condition' that led to postmethod pedagogy and survey the distinctive features of the three pedagogic parameters and the macrostrategic framework. Through a critical examination of the parameters and macrostrategies, the paper then attempts to evaluate the possibilities of application of this pedagogy in Bangladeshi English language teaching (ELT) contexts.

2. Postmethod Condition

There is rigidity inherent in the concept of method because each of the L2 teaching methods is consisted of a fixed set of theoretical principles and a definite set of classroom procedures. According to Kumaravadivelu (1994, p. 29)), neither language-centred methods (e.g., Audiolingualism) nor learner-centred methods (e.g., communicative methods) nor learning-centred methods (e.g., the natural approach) can be implemented in their original form in the local classroom because the established methods are not based on the peripheral classroom experience and experiments. When such methods are imported to and implemented in the local classrooms, they are bound to fail since they are far removed from local classroom realities.

The second postmethod condition signifies autonomy of L2 teachers, which allows L2 teachers to theorize from their classroom practice and experiments, and practice in L2 teaching what they theorize (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, p. 30). Principled pragmatism is the third postmethod condition. It is not the same to 'eclecticism' because eclecticism, when applied in L2 teaching, often "degenerates into a systematic, unprincipled, and uncritical pedagogy" due to the fact that teachers with limited pedagogical knowledge and preparation tend to randomly put together a set of technique from different methods and tag it eclectic (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, p. 30). Unlike eclecticism, as Kumaravadivelu argues, principled pragmatism emphases on L2 teachers' influence on and management of classroom learning through the help of their well-informed teaching considerations and critical judgment. Referring to teacher's sense of plausibility, a concept originally coined by Prabhu (1990), Kumaravadivelu suggests that L2 teachers can follow principled pragmatism by developing their sense of plausibility through their classroom teaching experience and experiments. The sense of plausibility of a teacher is their personal understanding of L2 teaching they do, of what should or can be done.

3. Postmethod Parameters

The theoretical basis of postmethod pedagogy consists of three parameters - particularity, practicality, and possibility. Through these three operating principles, postmethod pedagogy seeks to aid the development of context-specific pedagogy. The first of the three parameters, the parameter of particularity, is established on the concept that any language teaching pedagogy must be sensitive and appropriate to a particular group of teachers who are teaching a specific group of learners who are seeking to achieve a particular set of objectives within a particular educational context rooted in a particular sociocultural setting (Kumaravadivelu, 200l, p. 538). To realize the particularity principle of postmethod pedagogy, classroom teachers need to develop a critical awareness of classroom reality that is an amalgam of various contextual components, such as local linguistics, socio-political and cultural components (Kumaravadivelu, 200l, 2003a, 2006). Classroom teachers also need to engage in an ongoing cycle of observation, reflection, and action for the search of pedagogic knowledge that is context-sensitive (Kumaravadivelu, 2003a, 2006). Postmethod teachers are also aware of the principles and practices of the colonial concept of method. They will rely primarily on situation-sensitive local understanding and experience to detect problems, find out solutions, and experiment on them to see whether they work or do not work in their specific contexts (Kumaravadivelu, 2003a, 2006).

The second operating principle of postmethod pedagogy, the parameter of practicality, is based on the relationship between theory and practice or between the

theorists and the practitioners. Kumaravadivelu (2003a) brings to our notice one of the long lasting ideas propagated by the colonial powers is that the West constructs theories whereas the East is concerned with disconnected facts and figures, and is incapable of unifying those facts and figures into theories. Through such (mis)representations, the West has marginalizes peripheral or local knowledge. Moreover, it has created the unexpected and unproductive separation of work in the field of applied linguistics between the theorist and the teacher – that is, the job of theorists is to produces knowledge, and the responsibility of local teachers is to consume that knowledge. Such division can also be found in the colonial concept of marginality (Kumaravadivelu, 2003a, 2006). Therefore, the practicality parameter opposes expert-generated teaching theories and calls for teacher-developed theories. Along with teaching, English language teachers need to engage in various classroom-based research to theorize from their practice. Thus, a practicing teacher will have a personal theory of practice.

The third operating principle, parameter of possibility, has been formulated based on the critical pedagogy advocated by the Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire. This parameter advocates the need to empower the L2 learners to critically think about the socio-political and historical facts that contribute to creation of the cultural practices and interesting knowledge they find in their lives. Thus, it entails tapping the socio-historical consciousness of the learners in order to empower them. Their day-to-day experiences, influenced by their sociocultural and historical contexts, should assist them to look at the English language critically and use it in their own needs and wants according to their own values (Kumaravadivelu, 2003a, 2006). Such an appropriation of the English language, according to Kumaravadivelu (2003a, 2006), requires a critical understanding of its importance in current economic and cultural globalization because English language teachers and learners cannot ignore the international socio-cultural reality that influences identity construction inside the classroom and the beyond.

According to Kumaravadivelu (2001, 2003a, 2006), the three parameters of his postmethod pedagogy are intermingled with one another in a harmonious and collaborative relationship where the whole is bigger than the total of its parts. The three parameters together establish a theoretical basis necessary to develop a postmethod pedagogy as a postcolonial project.

4. Macrostrategic Framework

Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2003a, 2006) has proposed a macrostrategic framework founded on the basics of the three parameters. The framework is comprised of both macrostrategies and microstrategies. He insists that postmethod pedagogy

requires local L2 teachers and teacher trainers, based on their professional and personal knowledge base, take the step to develop a teaching pedagogy that is responsive to the local needs, expectations, and situations, and the macrostrategic framework will help them do that.

According to Kumaravadivelu (2006), the microstrategies are "guiding principles" stemmed from current theoretical, empirical, and experimental knowledge related to L2 teaching and learning (p. 208). Therefore, he considers a macrostrategy as a general plan and a general guideline. Based on each of the macrostrategies, L2 teachers are expected to create their own context-specific microstrategies or techniques that are effective in the immediate classroom settings. As a result, Kumaravadivelu (2003b) argues that each of the macrostrategies would help create different microstrategies or techniques capitalizing local expertise and expectations (p. 545). The framework Kumaravadivelu (2001, 2003b, 2006) offers consists ten macrostrategies and they are:

a. Maximize learning opportunities: In this macrostrategy, teaching is considered as a process of generating and utilizing learning opportunities. English language teachers or any L2 teacher should strike a balance between their responsibly as managers of teaching and their job as moderator of learning.
b. Facilitate negotiated interaction: This macrostrategy suggests ensuring purposeful and meaningful classroom interactions between/among learners, and between/among learner and teacher. In the classroom, it is essential for learners to feel free and find flexibility to introduce topics and be encouraged to speak, not just react and reply.
c. Minimize perceptual mismatches: This macrostrategy asks for teachers' awareness of the likely miscarriage between teacher plan and learner understanding and what teachers should do about such mismatches, particularly when carrying out a specified classroom activity.
d. Activate intuitive heuristics: It requires giving learners enough amount of rich textual input so that they can notice and internalize the fundamental rules of form and function governing grammar usage and communicative use and thus assisting learners in the process of developing their grammar.
e. Foster language awareness: To promote L2 learning, it is important to try to draw learners' attention to the formal features of the L2 to increase learners' explicit knowledge of the L2. Learners also need critical language awareness to identify how language is manipulated to create and maintain a socio-political power structure. Therefore, this macrostrategy attempts to create both broad and critical language awareness, and to draw learners' awareness to the structural and functional properties of the L2.
f. Contextualize linguistic input: It is essential to draw learners' attention to the

integrated nature of language used in various contexts. Therefore, this macrostrategy provides contextual information to draw learners' attention to how language rules and functions are influenced by linguistic, social, and cultural settings.

g. Integrate language skills: The nature of L2 learning involves integrating both linguistic components and skills of language. Therefore, this macrostrategy involves the comprehensive integration of language skills that are usually separated and sequenced in terms of four skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It also requires acknowledging the role of L2 across the curriculum.

h. Promote learner autonomy: The postmethod learner is an autonomous learner. Promoting learner autonomy is crucial because language learning is largely autonomous. Therefore, this macrostrategy requires teachers to provide learners the strategies to learn an L2 and help them learn how to achieve self-independence in the process of learning an L2, and equip them with the techniques essential monitor their own learning and development.

i. Ensure social relevance: Second language education is not an isolated activity; it is very much embedded in the broder social, political, economic, and educational contexts that profoundly affect it. Therefore, this macrostrategy calls the teachers to be sensitive to various factors of the environment in where learning and teaching occur, the nature of the factors might be societal, political, economic, and educational.

j. Raise cultural consciousness: Global cultural consciousness is now required for L2 learners. This macrostrategy stresses the importance to consider learners as 'cultural informants'. Therefore, the teachers need to motivate them to engage in the process of classroom interaction and participate in classroom activities with their knowledge, subjectivity, and identity.

Kumaravadivelu (1994, p. 43) clarifies that the strategic framework is not fixed and closed, rather open to include appropriate options. The scheme it represents is descriptive, not prescriptive. He suggests that it is not a closed-end package of fixed solutions but a temporary plan that is expected to be regularly modified, broadened, and improved by classroom teachers based on continuous feedback" (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, p. 43). The number of strategies can be extended beyond the ten macrostrategies through further experience and experimentation. The suggested framework of ten strategies has the ability to transform classroom instructors into effective teachers and competent researchers.

5. Critical Examination of the Parameters and the Macrostrategies

The postmethod parameters and macrostrategies initially convince us to adopt and adapt the strategies in teaching the English language successfully in every

local context having distinctive characteristics shaped by various local factors, such as socio-political, cultural, economic, learner factors, and teacher perceptions and so on, and having its distinctive local and international needs in the current century (Maniruzzaman, 2020, p. 7). But the postmethod pedagogy is not beyond criticism.

Akbari (2008) points out that the postmethod pedagogy "heavily emphasizes teacher qualifications" by expecting them to carry out their tasks with competency and expertise (p. 642). The postmethod pedagogy, he also mentions, expects L2 teacher to ensure social transformation and improvement by considering the life histories of L2 learners. Akbari (2008, p. 642) further argues that, by placing such demands on the teacher, postmethod pedagogy ignores the realities of teaching conditions and language teachers, and it turns a blind eye to the local socio-political and cultural facts of language teaching contexts and the limitations within which L2 teachers operate. Indeed, one can see the truth in the words of Akbari if one looks at the lives of teachers in countries such as Bangladesh, where one single teacher is often assigned the responsibility of teaching several hundred students in classrooms. In contrast, they do not even have the basic facilities. Moreover, L2 teachers regularly perform administrative duties apart from running from one classroom to another. Akbari (2008, p. 646) also clarifies that the financial and occupational constraints L2 teachers work within, such as busy working hours, poor pay, textbook, and exam culture, do not allow them to act as critical nonconformists and social transformers.

Akbari (2008) further argues that, through designating the additional duties of social transformers and cultural critic to teachers, the postmethod has taken L2 teaching beyond "the realms of possibility and practice" (p. 645). By speaking of L2 teachers and their teaching from "a purely theoretical perspective", the postmethod becomes more of a philosophy than practice (Akbari, 2008, p. 650). The reality of the L2 teaching profession is that no big theory or grand idea can encompass the local characteristics of all language classes at all time and place (Akbari, 2008, p. 650).

Unfortunately, the ideal classroom environments necessary for teachers to exercise their autonomy rarely exist in the reality of L2 classrooms. Within the strict administrative framework, teachers' classroom teaching is shaped by textbook-defined practices and the testing policies formulated by central organizations. Many L2 teachers considers tests not only as testing the language competencies of their students but also as evaluating their own performances (Shohamy, 2005, p. 107). Akbari (2008) argues that such realities highly restrict the scope for L2 teachers to practice the postmethod principles and to function as social transformers, particularly when they are challenged by high-stakes and large-scale L2 achievement tests (p. 647). He has called it 'the destructive effects of standardized tests' because the

teachers need to worry about the pass/fail of their students because the perfor-mance of their students are viewed "as a measure of their teaching efficiency" (p. 649). Despite his criticism of postmethod pedagogy, Akbari admits that postmethod pedagogy represents "a positive turn of events with the potential for many desirable outcomes" (p. 644).

However, Bell (2007) conducted research about teachers' beliefs about methods in contrast with postmethod and found that the majority of L2 teachers consider methods as a good source of various options and a basis for eclectic teach-ing practice in language classroom, and thus, they already appear to be conscious of both the effectiveness of established L2 teaching methods and the necessity to go beyond them (pp. 142-143). He argues that the way postmethod announces the end of methods is unnecessary, but rather he stresses that the teachers should have an understanding of the limitations of the notion of method as it is narrowly defined and a desire to go beyond those limitations (p. 143). He further contends that the teachers have always been 'beyond method' (p. 143). In an earlier work, Bell (2003) also observes that methods have many positive aspects, and those positive features have been overshadowed by the postmethod pedagogy in a rush to bury methods (p. 332). He maintains that postmethod pedagogy, therefore, should not be consid-ered as an alternative to method, rather as a synthesis of various methods, what Liu (1995) labels a "method redefining condition" (p. 176).

Although postmethod pedagogy theoretically sounds impressive, it prag-matically confronts many questions that need to be resolved for its effective imple-mentation by language teachers. It is also argued that it overstates the inflexibilities of methods and ignores the positive features of methods (Ziafar & Namaziandost, 2019, p. 33). In conclusion, it can be said that postmethod pedagogy has made too many demands on teachers, but, in practice, it has not considered the sociopolitical and cultural conditions of L2 teaching contexts and the limitations within which L2 teachers perform their job.

6. Scopes for the Application of Postmethod Pedagogy in ELT in Bangladesh

All the above criticisms against postmethod pedagogy seem to be real obstacles in its way of practical application in the English language classrooms in Bangladesh. However, postmethod pedagogy comes as a breath of fresh air at a time when the existing ELT practices in Bangladesh fail to yield desired results. For the Bangladeshi ELT situation, as Jahan (2019, p. 65) observes, postmethod pedagogy offers the teachers a scope to practice personal ways of teaching, but, he assumes, very few Bangladeshi English language teachers working in the school system are aware of Kumaravadivelu's work. Therefore, proper teacher education or training

programmes should be in place for the pre-service and in-service English language teachers so that their understanding of the postmethod teaching-learning conditions can be developed and their beliefs and attitude to teaching can be modified where necessary.

Jahan (2019, p. 71) notes that the issues relating to limited teaching resources and restricting teachers' scope to exercise postmethod pedagogy need to be addressed. Another implication he suggests to actualize the postmethod pedagogic principles in classroom teaching in the Bangladeshi context is the teachers need to be better oriented with the theorizing role to generating the personal theory of practice (p. 71). He also points out that articulating teachers' subjective understanding of teaching is essential to develop the personal theory of practice. Practicing teachers should have opportunities to express and share their views on teaching. Teacher training programmes for ELT practitioners in Bangladesh should address this issue. Moreover, the economic and professional limitations the Bangladeshi teachers work within, such as busy working hours, poor pay, textbook, and exam culture that do not allow them to act as postmethod practitioners, should be taken care of.

7. Conclusion

The field of L2 teaching and teacher education underwent significant changes in the 1990s due to the emergence of fresh new ideas. As a result, there was a need to go beyond the limitation of the concepts of method by finding an alternative way to design effective teaching-learning strategies. There was also a need to replace the 'transformation model' of teacher education by emphasizing instead matters such as teacher beliefs, teacher reasoning, and teacher cognition in professional development programmes for teachers (Barman & Basu, 2013, p. 188). Against this backdrop, Kumaravadivelu's model of postmethod pedagogy comes as a breath of fresh air.

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