

Methods and beliefs – How to teach a second or foreign language as “reflective practitioner”

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Second and foreign language teaching methods have, in the last century, been subject to many and sometimes quite radical changes. Concurrently teacher education and textbooks followed whatever was the most recent trend in how language should be "best" taught. It was not until the 1990s that the limitations of the concept of *method* became the focus of discussion and it was then that the idea of a *postmethod pedagogy* (Kumaravadivelu, 2001) was generated.

Even though the concept of method failed from an empirical point of view as well as because methods are not ideally applied in practice, textbooks still seem to follow methodological trends in foreign language teaching didactics rather than considering the increasing results of foreign language acquisition research. However it is indispensable for teachers to at least know the background of language teaching methodology so as to confront, what are in a broader sense, methodological decisions in their day to day professional life. Therefore this article summarizes chronologically previous "main stream" methods of L2 teaching. I then discuss why the former concept of method has failed in its application in praxis by emphasizing the role of teachers' beliefs. Finally I conclude with the principles of *post-method pedagogy* and how they could be applied to both L2 teaching and teacher education.

1. Definition of “method”

The term method from Greek “*methodos*” the equivalent of “the way leading to an aim”, as used in discussions among educational professionals carries very different meanings. In a broad sense it includes both didactical approaches, and curricula norms such as teaching techniques and principles for example whether or not to use the native language of the students in classrooms. Some clarifications of the terms involved would seem to be useful if not necessary.

I propose a hierarchical definition comprising the terms Didactics, Approach, Method and Techniques. Didactics, the term with the broadest meaning among those four, reflects the theory and ideology, aims and functions of language teaching within a

given society. To make it more understandable it could be summarized as meaning “What”.

Approach is understood as a theory of language teaching “that reflects a certain model of research paradigm” (Celce-Murcia 1991:5).

Method however means a concept of “how” to teach and learn, in this case a foreign language. Methods have been developed on the basis of didactical premises and describe a “set of procedures” (Celce-Murcia 1991:5). Last but not least the term technique describes concrete ways of behaving in class, for example “pattern practice” or allowing only the target language in teaching.

2. History of L2 teaching methods

In the following I refer to the mainstream methods of the 19th and 20th century. The interesting history of language teaching methodology prior to the 19th century has been summarized by Celce-Murcia (1991:3-5). Reading her description it becomes clear that since the Classical Greek and Medieval Latin period to present day, two major approaches to language teaching can be distinguished. One is an inductive method, aimed at enabling students to really use the target language in daily life by reading, writing, listening and speaking. The other is a rather deductive approach, aiming to analyze a foreign language by focusing on its grammatical structure. The popularity of these two approaches seem to alternate as the following overview shows.

I must first point out that summarizing methods is not easy task since sometimes one and the same method has been labeled differently. Another problem is how to categorize methods. A chronological approach is rather problematic because of overlaps in time. For example, the Grammar-Translation Approach that came into vogue in the teaching of “modern” languages in schools of the 19th century still appears in today`s textbooks. Taking these dilemmas into account the following overview tries to describe methods along the lines proposed by Henrici (1994). The order is chronological from the time of their appearance under the criteria of respective aims and approaches, didactical background, linguistic background as well as the underlying theory of how language is learned.

a) Grammar-Translation Method

“Offspring of German scholarship” (Richards 1986:3), and therefore in the United States first called the *Prussian Method* is based on the study of Latin and by the 19th century had become the standard method of teaching “modern” languages in schools.

Aims and approaches: The goal is reading literature in the foreign language through analyzing its grammatical structure and translating from and into the first language.

Didactical background: Language learning strengthens the intellectual and personal development of the students. The instruction is organized in a deductive-stereotyped and frontal way in the students’ native language.

Linguistic background: The grammar of Latin is used to analyze “modern” languages. This inevitably requires recognition of the many exceptions from the rule. The major focus is on reading and writing.

Language learning theory: The underlying concept of language learning is strictly cognitive. Language learning helps to develop the capacity of thinking in an abstract and logical way.

b) Reform Movement, Natural Approach and Direct Method

In the 19th century the dominance of the Grammar-Translation method was already being increasingly criticized by many, including the two French reformers Marcel (1793-1896) and Gouin (1831-1896). Gouin suggested language should be learned through play, gestures and action. Meanwhile Berlitz founded his first school in 1878 in Providence, USA introducing colloquial language in conversation oriented classes.

But the Reform Movement was only strengthened after also famous linguists like the Englishman Henry Sweet, and the German Wilhelm Viëtor with his famous pamphlet “Der Sprachunterricht muss umkehren” (*Language Teaching Must Start Afresh*) backed up their ideas. The reformers generally shared the following beliefs and principles:

Aims and approaches: Oral communication skills are the primary aim and the spoken language is taught in an oral-based methodology.

Didactical background: Language learning is organized in an inductive, playful way. Learners are first introduced to hearing the foreign language before they see it in a

written form.

Linguistic background: Writings of scholars like the above mentioned Sweet and Viëtor provide linguistic principles that could be applied in practice. Grammar should be taught inductively.

Language learning theory: Naturalistic principles, as in first language acquisition, establish the basis for second or foreign language teaching.

As a reaction to the limitations of the Direct Approach, the **Reading Approach** appeared in the 1930s, mainly in the United States. Since only a few teachers had sufficient oral skills in foreign language to really teach communication in class, the focus once again turned to reading comprehension. In turn in reaction to the Reading Approach, the **Situational Approach** was generated. Dominant mainly in Britain in the 1940s, 50s and 60s, this approach again emphasized on communication skills embedded in situations. As with the Direct Approach reading and writing are taught after listening and speaking.

c) Audiolingualism

Also known as “Army Method”, “New Key Method”, “Pattern Method”, “Habit Formation Method” or “Oral Approach” but with a respectively diverse emphasis was popularized in the United States during the 1940s , 50s and 60s.

Aims and approaches: The acquisition of *patterns*, sentences of the same structure but different lexical content is practiced through *drills* which in turn should lead to *habit-formation*. Students learn authentic pattern-dialogs integrated into a context.

Didactical background: Language learning suits the purpose of communicating with people of different native languages. Classes are organized in sequences that should be strictly maintained.

Linguistic background: Theoretical basis of the Audiolingualism is the *Structuralism* developed by Linguists and especially by Fries (around 1945).

Language learning theory: The theory that forms the basis of language learning in Audiolingualism is the behavioral psychology as proposed by researchers such as Thorndike, Watson and Skinner. From their point of view human behavior can be reduced to simple stimulus and response. Therefore mimicry and habit-formation are used for language learning.

d) Audio-Visual Method

Developed by Guberina and Rivenc in the 1960s in France and Yugoslavia, this method is based on similar principles to Audiolingualism as described above. The Audio-Visual-Method has also been called “Global-Structural Method”. The first six months, instruction is done orally. Grammar explanation is strictly excluded and the use of the students’ mother tongue for explanation is also interdicted. Each class is divided into the five steps *présentation*, *explication*, *répétition*, *exploitation* and *transposition*. This division, which has also been adapted by other approaches to language teaching, is to be followed rigorously. Due to this strictness and also because neither Audiolingualism nor the Audio-Visual Method allow for the learners’ creativity both methods have been criticized.

e) Cognitive Approach

The Cognitive Approach became popular in the end of 1960 and the beginning of the 1970s as a reaction to the behaviourist background of Audiolingualism and Audio-Visual-Method.

Aims and approaches: The idea of rule-governed-creativity in foreign language, utilizing learners knowledge about the structures of their first language is the over-riding aim of this approach.

Didactical background: The teacher is understood as “guidepost” on the way to language proficiency. Teachers help students to form and prove their hypothesis about the language to be acquired. Instruction can be given in strict sequences according to the theories of Russian researchers such as Galperin, Vygotski and Leont’ev (Henrici 1994:515).

Linguistic background: The generative transformation grammar of linguist Noam Chomsky features the theoretical basis of the cognitive approach. Chomsky believed that the fundamental linguistic structures are shared by all languages at a deep level and that differences in languages are only at a surface level. The deep-level structures shared by all languages are language universals. The didactical idea was to transfer the description of grammar into simplified sequences for instruction.

Language learning theory: Cognitive approaches are based on the conviction that learning is a creative and holistic process whereby learners are aware of what they

are doing. To facilitate the awareness of the learning process, classroom activities such as explanation, systematization, categorization are applied.

Subsequent to Audiolingualism and the Cognitive Approach the **Affective Humanistic Approach** resulted from the lack of affective factors in the two former methods. In this approach individual feelings and the classroom atmosphere play a major role in language learning.

f) **Communicative Approach**

“Communicative competence” has become a slogan of foreign language education since the middle of the 1970s.

Aims and approaches: The goal is to enable students to communicate in the target language in different social contexts. Therefore authentic materials and activities are transferred into classrooms. Speechacts are dramatized in role-plays and students work in pair or groups using the target language.

Didactical background: Emancipatory theories from philosophers such as Habermas in opposition to former, as some believe, rather authoritarian forms of instruction.

Linguistic background: The theories of anthropological linguists, such as the American Dell Hymes, and Firthian Linguists such as Michael Hallyday established the linguistic basis of communicative approaches. For them language is not just the sum of linguistic structures but also includes pragmatic aspects, such as social functions and semantic notions. This perception of language should be reflected in language teaching.

Language learning theory: There is no explicit theory but the tendency found in current class books is rather cognitive in terms of how to use grammatical structures.

In the 1980s the **Intercultural Approach** was popularized. It is a continuation of the Communicative Approach with emphasis on cultural aspects. Different cultural perspectives were made the subject of discussions in classrooms in order to enhance international understanding.

Besides the above listed methods, there was a number of mostly holistic, psychologically motivated approaches to language teaching, such as *Total Physical*

Response (Asher 1977), *Community Language Learning* (Curran 1976), the above mentioned *Humanistic Approach* (Galyean 1977), the *Silent Way* (Gattegno 1976) and *Superlearning* or *Suggestopedia* (Lozanow 1978). Since those approaches only consider some aspects of language learning and are not based on a theoretical framework unlike the methods above, Henrici proposes not to call them “method” (Henrici 1994).

3. About methods and beliefs

Regarding the history of L2 teaching methods it is obvious, that there was no single concept that could really convince. Why?

One reason might be that closed concepts can hardly be applied in the practice of teaching because they do not consider the two main “Players” in language teaching and learning: teachers and students. Methods that have been developed in theory do not meet the needs and beliefs of students or teachers in a concrete teaching environment simply because every teacher and every student is different.

In her research about the professional self-conception of foreign language teachers, Caspari (2004: 55-78) found that teachers who had attended a 25 hours of teacher training course were not applying their new knowledge in their daily practice, even though during the course they had been very committed to putting into practice what they had learned. There seemed to be strong resistance to the theoretical and methodological knowledge generated by others. Analyzing the reasons, Caspari (2004: 56) further discovered that the professional self-conception of teachers is a highly complex and coherent subjective theory. It includes the following factors: opinions about foreign languages and foreign language teaching, the function of foreign language with respect to language teaching, the role of a teacher and the problems involved, professional satisfaction, opinions about institutional strings, and the personal experience as a student or apprentice.

These factors, closely connected to each other, are relatively stable, very emotional and have according to Caspari (2004: 56f) their source in:

- *Personal experience as a learner of a foreign language*
- *Experience in countries of the target language*
- *Personal experience as foreign language teacher*

- *Perceived needs, expectations and behavior of students*

Considering the fact that a teacher's schooldays date back many years, it seems surprising that they have such a strong impact on their behavior as professionals. But as Caspari found out in a former study (2003:194-206), early contact with foreign language learning seems to influence the emotional and personal attitude towards language teaching most strongly, whereas curricula and institutional guidelines or didactical theories play only a minor role. Also curricula and guidelines are caught in a crossfire of personal interpretations.

What does this mean for a teacher's education and curricula decision making and institutional guidelines about what and how to teach? One would have to say that Caspari's findings are very significant. First and foremost, there is no sense in giving guidelines from the top down in organizations, because they would simply not survive in practice.

Teachers have their own "subjective theory" and it is very resistant to change.

Reflecting on this, Caspari (2004:57) proposes the following ideas for teacher-training:

- Teachers interpret methods, curricula and guidelines differently according to their personal "subjective theory". Therefore the first step is to reflect the "subjective theories" of teachers and trainers as well.
- The aim of training or curricula decisions should not be to suggest new guidelines but modification of "subjective theories" by giving teachers the chance to experience new kinds of language learning
- Nonrecurring trainings seem to have no effect in the long run
- To encourage modification of one's "subjective theory" it is important to consider not only cognitive but much more emotional-affective factors since they are crucial for teachers beliefs

Even though Caspari's suggestions were actually developed for teacher training, they could, in my opinion, also be applied in *democratic* approaches to curricula decision making

4. About methods and principles

In the 1990s teachers and their beliefs, reasoning and cognition, that is to say their

“subjective theories”, were recognized as a crucial factor in foreign language education, whereas the students had already been a subject of didactical discussions during the 1980s. By then the dilemma of method had been increasingly discussed and one way out of the closed concepts seemed to be Learner-Orientation. Learner-orientated means here that a program or syllabus should be tailored to the students’ specific needs, it should be particular. Henrici/Herlemann (1986) name 5 general principles of Learner-Orientation:

- consider learners experience of language learning as well as social experience
- consider the needs and interests of learners
- consider the real social contexts in which learners would actually use the foreign language
- consider “learning by doing”. Learners should use language in verbal, non-verbal, receptive and productive ways, as often as possible
- consider systematic reflection about the foreign language. Enable students to discover the systematic connections by themselves

Learner-Orientation can from today’s perspective be understood as a milestone towards *postmethod pedagogy*. But the focus only on students by forgetting teachers and institutions is not the answer. Also problematic is the fact that methods or principles had hardly been investigated. Research was until the late 1970s neither focused on the learning processes of learners nor on procedures between teachers and learners (Henrici/Riemer 1994:520). So there could not be any proof of how methods were brought into practice and how they worked with both teachers and students. And therefore there is no empirical evidence capable of proving the predominance of one closed concept of method over another. As for the principles of Learner-Orientation the same applies. Without research teachers can only rely on their own subjective perception of students’ needs and aims, which, as recent studies show, can be far from what those students themselves would name in interviews (Backhaus, unpublished). That is because students as well as teachers do have their own “subjective theories” about language learning. Not considering this means not respecting those who are the actual target of education.

With Henricis’ famous words “Ohne Forschung bleibt die Praxis blind” (“Without research practice remains blind”) (2000:178) can be outlined best what was missing. Only during the last twenty years were more and more empirical studies in foreign

language acquisition research conducted. Their fields of interest were factors such as classroom activities, learning processes and the social context of learning.

But again one has to ask oneself whether those studies, conducted by theorists, have any impact on practitioners and students who, as we saw above, do have their own theories about practice.

Aware of this dilemma, Light and Cox (2001:28ff) regard the integration of the different “academical worlds” that is to say researchers on one hand and practitioners and students on the other hand as crucial for the successful development of university education. They formulate the idea of a “reflective professional”, a person who understands himself as well as teacher as researcher. In this role students would act as participants in the research process and not as subjects in a research design far from practice. Explicitely: “Research and teaching are characterized by the same practice, providing exemplars and models of learning for another and, notably for the student. In this development the feeble- typically non-existent- correspondence and ‘encounter’ between researcher and student is established.” (Light/Cox 2001:38).

Kumaravadivelu’s (2001) arguments for a *postmethod pedagogy* lead in a very similar direction. Also in his conviction there is a necessity for the rupture of the “reified role relationship between theorists and practitioners by enabling teachers to construct their own theory of practice” (2001:537). Practitioners in the roles of teachers, students, teacher trainers, leaders of teaching institutions should act as co-explorers. How they can actually convert themselves into “reflective professionals” in times of *postmethod pedagogy* I would like to demonstrate below in a concrete teaching context at a Japanese university.

5. The application of *postmethod pedagogy*

Beforehand some words about the teaching environment we are dealing with. The Japanese University system has, during recent years been subject to quite radical changes. New guidelines about the teaching of foreign languages in universities in Japan have brought Liberalization through Deregulation. This leads to the fact that universities now have to think more intensively about curricula decisions (Backhaus/Schart 2003:67).

These times of change may seem confusing but they do in my opinion also offer a big

opportunity. Even though the ministry of education gives in its guidelines about the goals of higher education (新しい時代における教養教育の在り方について) some general outlines such as for instance to form people with a broad understanding of the world, it still remains very vague how this goal can actually be reached. What can be clearly understood out of this is, that the ministry giving aims of language teaching does not just refer to linguistic needs but also to students sociopolitical consciousness. In order to aid students “quest for identity formation and social transformation” (Kumaradivelu 2001:537) one way to go is to give them responsibility. And how to actually put this into practice is now the duty of every teacher and each institution. For example an institution of Foreign Language Education, looking for a curricula that suits both the aims of the ministry of education and institutional needs as well those of the teachers and students can in my opinion only succeed if they consider the local linguistic, socio-cultural and political particularities (Kumaradivelu 2001: 537). I must add my conviction that in order to respect the needs of everybody involved in this social process, there is only one possible way. A democratic approach to decision making that bears the “subjective theories” of all the persons involved in mind.

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