



***Understanding Language Teaching:
From Method to Postmethod***

B. Kumaravadivelu

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Associates (2006)*

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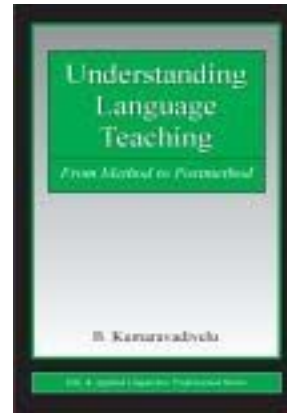
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Currently, ESL/EFL teachers are encouraged to explore what works and what does not work in a certain ELT context, using what Brown (2007) calls an enlightened and eclectic approach/method. This suggests that teachers explore all language teaching approaches and methods since no single approach or method is best suited for all teaching contexts.

Kumaravadivelu has made a significant contribution in this regard in his book on *Understanding language teaching: From method to postmethod* by presenting personal and professional perspectives of ELT methods. This book is fundamentally intended to portray “the pattern that connects the various elements of learning, teaching, and teacher education” in language teaching (p. xiii).

Generally, the book is divided into three major sections: (1) Language, Learning, and Teaching, (2) Language Teaching Methods, and (3) Postmethod Perspectives. In Chapter One, the author fruitfully explores the underlying significance of language theoretically and pedagogically. In this instance, he succinctly touches on theoretical concepts of language as system: how it is phonologically, syntactically, and semantically constructed; as discourse: how language, either spoken or written, fits coherently and cohesively within a communicative context; and as ideology: how language is shaped by macrosocial factors, which impact language structure and use. Thus, Chapter One synthesizes the core features of language to provide language teachers, professionals, and applied linguists with valuable guidelines on language for pedagogical purposes.

In Chapter Two, the author provides an insightful notion of the psychological and socio-psychological perspectives of SLA. These concepts include the available and accessible sources of language; internal and external factors such as age, anxiety, motivation, social context, or educational context; cognitive mechanisms that mediate between and interact with input data such as inferencing, structuring, and restructuring; and output--the body of utterances that

learners actually produce either in spoken or written forms. All of these aspects are important features of adult L2 development and show the complex nature of language learning.

Chapter Three touches on the concepts of input and interaction. In this instance, Kumaravadivelu sheds useful light on form-based (language as system), meaning-based (language as discourse), and form and meaning-based (language as system and discourse) input modifications. Further, he provides three major interactional types such as (1) interaction as a textual activity--how learners modify their linguistic resources to maximize the chances of mutual understanding and reduce instances of communication breakdown; (2) interaction as an interpersonal activity--how learners negotiate and co-construct meanings of the utterances; and (3) interaction as an ideational activity--how learners fit their linguistic and discoursal resources with social, cultural, and political contexts. Indeed, these three types of interaction are inextricably interwoven. Thus, throughout this chapter, the author sees that interaction is dialogically negotiated (Johnson, 2004). From this perspective, language teachers need to take into account communicative and interactional competences in designing language syllabi and teaching materials.

In the second part of the book, Kumaravadivelu provides a brief description of language-centered, learner-centered, and learning-centered language teaching methods in Chapter Four, and then elaborates on each in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven by discussing relevant theoretical principles, classroom procedures, and critical assessments. Chapter Five highlights indispensable historical, psychological, and linguistic factors which shape the language-centered instruction. In Chapter Six, the author outlines the theoretical principles and classroom procedures of learner-centered pedagogies such as Communicative Language Teaching in which the main foci are on learners and communication. In Chapter Seven, the author takes prominent examples of the Natural Approach and the Communicative Teaching Project that fall into the category of learning-centered pedagogy. Thus, the author provides a succinct survey and careful examination of language teaching methodologies derived from linguistic, psychological, and social perspectives of SLA.

In the last part of the book, Kumaravadivelu discusses three features of postmethod pedagogy, including postmethod condition, postmethod pedagogy, and postmethod predicament. In Chapter Eight, the author explores five myths of method:

- (1) *There is a best method out there ready and waiting to be discovered;*
- (2) *Methods constitutes the organizing principle for language teaching;*
- (3) *Method has a universal and historical value;*
- (4) *Theorists conceive knowledge, and teachers consume knowledge;* and
- (5) *Method is neutral, and has no ideological motivation.* (pp. 163-168)

These myths may discourage practicing language teachers to wait for recipes from established authorities on the approaches and methods instead of exploring their own language teaching approaches and methods to better understand “the potential strengths and limitations of particular learners and contexts for learning, and make use of them in adapting learning/teaching procedures” (Saville-Troike, 2006, p. 180).

Next, in Chapter Nine, the author proposes a three-part framework of postmethod language pedagogy: particularity, practicality, and possibility. The first deals with teaching context sensitivity such as people, local knowledge, physical settings, course and institution nature, time, and teaching resources. The second encourages language teachers to “theorize what they practice and practice what they theorize” (p. 173). The last criterion pertains to macro-social factors such as institutional, social, economic, cultural, and political environments which shape identity

formation and social transformation. Together, these ideas encourage the teachers to go beyond methods and promote a self-awareness of no best methods for learning and teaching.

Lastly, in Chapter Ten, Kumaravadivelu discusses possible challenges to the construction and implementation of postmethod language pedagogy, including pedagogical and ideological barriers in which learners, teachers, teacher educators, and policy makers are crucial actors. To overcome these, the author proposes building solid and conducive ELT professional communities and tapping local resources to overcome local problems using local expertise and experience. In other words, the author points out that local culture and knowledge need to be acknowledged as resources, not as limitations (Canagarajah, 2002).

One weakness of the book is that Kumaravadivelu provides purely theoretical and philosophical notions of postmethod language pedagogy. In this respect, readers, particularly practicing language teachers, should make a great effort to put such ideas into practice. Despite this minor drawback, the author provides well-organized illustrations of the fundamental concepts of language, language acquisition and learning, and language teaching along with a comprehensive discussion of language teaching methodology. *Understanding Language Teaching: From Method to Postmethod* also provides significant contributions to the historical development of major language teaching methods pertaining to theoretical principles and classroom procedures, with a critical evaluation of each. In short, the author has eloquently articulated his personalized vision of language teaching, and successfully examined the profession's current transition from method to postmethod language pedagogy by elucidating the relationships among theory, research, and practice. Therefore, this book is a great help for language teacher educators, practicing teachers, and graduate students in gaining a solid theoretical understanding of postmethod language pedagogy and recognizing the idea that the nature of language pedagogy is socially-realistic and contextually-sensitive.

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