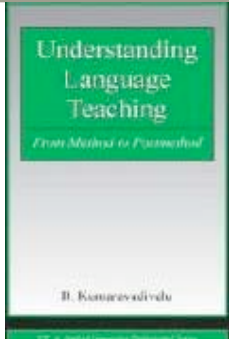


Understanding Language Teaching: From Method to Postmethod

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| Author: | B. Kumaravadivelu (2006) | |  |
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Kumaravadivelu's book on language teaching aims to illustrate "the pattern that connects the various elements of learning, teaching, and teacher education" in language teaching (p. xiii). As can be deduced from the title, the major theme of the book cites the emergence of a postmethod condition in the literature on teaching second/foreign languages. This emerging postmethod state has been commented on by other writers such as Brown (2002), Richards (2001) and Adamson (2004). However, Kumaravadivelu has what I perceive to be a very personalized vision of language teaching and the "postmethod" state of English language teaching. He illustrates this by first grounding the reader in the concepts of language, language acquisition, and language teaching, as well as a comprehensive discussion of methodology in language teaching.

Kumaravadivelu draws upon the themes of earlier writings (for example his previous book "Beyond methods: macrostrategies for language teaching"). He discusses how methods evolved and what their originators were trying to achieve, and then critically evaluates those methods. A theme emerges that methods and predetermined materials and strategies lack the flexibility to be applied to the many varied contexts of English Language Teaching. This failing triggered the present postmethod state, in which postmethod pedagogies can be differentiated from methods by a broader focus, an emphasis on developing teachers' skills, and flexibility to meet students' needs. Kumaravadivelu tackles what he calls the "higher order tenets of language pedagogy" (p. xv). In drawing these themes together, Kumaravadivelu writes in a scholarly but accessible manner and is a wonderful communicator. His discussion and critique of methods is the most comprehensive and detailed I have read.

As noted briefly above, the author's goal is "to explore the pattern which connects the higher order philosophical, pedagogical, and ideological tenets and norms of the language teaching enterprise" (p. 224). Each chapter, and indeed the book as a whole, features the preview-body-summary format, which reflects the author's intention to unearth the "pattern which connects" (p. xiii), in turn giving the book continuity.

The book is divided into three major sections: Language, Learning and Teaching; Language Teaching Methods; and Postmethod Perspectives. The first section (Chapters 1-3) discusses language as system, discourse and ideology, and explores and synthesizes the contemporary literature on adult second language acquisition in formal contexts and its application to teaching. This section is informative and detailed; as such it is a valuable resource for anyone studying the nature of language and language teaching.

The second section (Chapters 4-7) provides "a brief history, description, and assessment of language teaching methods" (p. xvi). These are correlated with the conceptual framework outlined in the earlier chapters. This is another strength of the book. The author categorizes methods as language-centered, learner-centered, and learning-centered, and provides extensive critiques. These critiques are well written, but also of great value are the connections he draws among the various methods.

Kumaravadivelu states directly that he offers a methods analysis and not a teaching analysis. As the author explains, "a methods analysis can be done. ... by analyzing and interpreting what has been written about methods, but a teaching analysis can be done only by entering the classroom arena where a method or a combination of methods is used" (p. xvii). Kumaravadivelu revisits this explanation on pages 157 and 166.

Despite his acknowledgment, if this book has a weakness it is (1) that in section 2 a literature analysis is used to explain the emergence of a postmethod state, and (2) that this postmethod state exists only in the literature (amongst writers, academics, teacher trainers and so forth). Virtually nothing is known of how methods are or were enacted in the classroom, or if indeed they were at all, and the same can be said for the postmethod state. The author uses what little classroom research has been done to demonstrate that it would seem that teachers do not enact methods as they have been prescribed by the methods' originators: "Teachers seem to be convinced that no single theory of learning and no single method of teaching will help them confront the challenges of everyday teaching . . . there is a significant variance between what the theorists advocate and what teachers do" (p. 166). I would argue that the practice of teaching has always been in somewhat of a postmethod state in that teachers have always modified methods, and incorporated them with other methods and pedagogies to suit the teaching context. I believe this gulf between theory and classroom practice illustrates a predicament of language-teaching theory, how far removed theory often is from classroom research and data. Therefore, the deconstruction of methods is mainly an academic exercise. It is not based on the reality of teaching or on the classroom. To me, these chapters are relevant for writers or theorists rather than for practicing teachers.

The third section, Postmethod Perspectives, begins with a discussion of the parameters of postmethod pedagogy. Three frameworks for postmethod pedagogies are then offered: the author's own Macrostrategic Framework, the Three

Dimensional Framework by Stern, and the Exploratory Practice Framework by Allwright. The final chapter discusses the challenges and barriers to postmethod pedagogies.

I found this final section the most compelling reading. Here Kumaravadivelu outlines his vision, noting the positive research contributions over the decades yet acknowledging that contexts are very real determinants of pedagogy. The postmethod condition commends strategies to "advance a context-sensitive, location-specific pedagogy that is based on a true understanding of local linguistic, socio-cultural, and political particularities" (p. 224). An approach to language teaching that embraces such situational criteria is relevant to any teacher's, researcher's or attentive student's awareness of just what is being taught how. While it may go without saying that incorporating such postmethods into teacher training is thus desirable, the author reinforces this need by stressing the links, not always apparent, between pedagogies and ideologies.

As a teacher, I found Kumaravadivelu's book insightful, unique, and at times inspiring. Nevertheless, since most of the book's pages theoretically analyze method and postmethod and are not concerned with how methods are enacted in classrooms, I believe that the book would be most useful for those studying or teaching on courses in TESOL or Applied Linguistics or researching and writing about teaching methods. That said, the book is written with such clarity and without avoiding complex and controversial ideas in the method-postmethod debate that it should have value as well for a much wider audience.

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