



Teacher Research on First Language Use in English Language Teaching

İngilizce Dil Öğretiminde Birinci Dil Kullanımı Üzerine Öğretmen Araştırması

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ABSTRACT

There has been a constant change of methods as organized ways of teaching a second or foreign language. Each method claims to be an improvement on previous methods. They follow a top-down, one-size-fits-all approach to L2 practice. Since each method is fed by a different theory of learning and language, they fail to take a holistic approach to L2 teaching. Language is a complex phenomenon and therefore defining language as merely a tool for expression or communication would be treating language as static and frozen in time with no history or socio-cultural connections. The concept of method offers, at best, a fragmented view of language, and no method is neutral. Each reflects a particular view of the world and is shaped by unequal relations of power and dominance. There is a growing need for an alternative to method rather than an alternative method. This need has paved the way for what is called the postmethod condition. The postmethod pedagogy teaches us as language teachers to stop turning to theorists for the perfect method and develop our personal theories. Guided by postmethod pedagogy, I will present preliminary results of teacher research concerning first language use in my classroom practice. The treatment phase is in progress, and I can only make a preliminary assessment of its effectiveness.

Keywords: Postmethod pedagogy, critical pedagogy, use of first language, second language teaching

ÖZET

İkinci veya yabancı dil öğretiminde örgütlü öğretim şekilleri olarak metot değişimleri aralıksız sürmüştür. Her bir metot öncekilerden daha iyi olduğunu iddia eder. Metotlar ikinci dil eğitim etkinliğine tepeden aşağıya ortak yaklaşımla bakarlar. Her metodun beslendiği öğrenme ve dil kuramı farklı olduğundan ikinci dil öğretimine bütüncül bir yaklaşımla yaklaşmazlar. Dil karmaşık bir olgudur ve bundan ötürü dili sırf bir ifade veya iletişim aracı olarak tanımlamak dili tarih ve sosyo-kültürel bağlantılardan kopuk zamanda donuk ve statik olarak görmektedir. Metot kavramı en iyimser görüşle parçalı bir dil bakışı sunar ve hiçbir metot tarafı değildir. Her biri belli bir dünya görüşünü yansıtır ve eşit olmayan güç ve baskınlık ilişkilerince şekillenir. Alternatif bir metot yerine metoda alternatif ihtiyacı her geçen gün artmakta. Bu ihtiyaç postmetot durumuna zemin hazırlamıştır. Postmetot pedagojisi biz dil eğitimcilerine mükemmel metot için kuramcılarını yönelmeyi bırakıp kişisel kuramlarımızı geliştirmemizi öğretir. Bu makalede postmetot pedagojisinin rehberliğinde sınıf etkinliklerimde birinci dilin kullanımını konu alan öğretmen araştırmamın ön sonuçlarını sunacağım. Uygulama süreci devam ettiğinden etkinliğiyle ilgili olarak sadece ön değerlendirme yapabileceğim.

Anahtar kelimeler: Postmetot pedagojisi, eleştirel pedagoji, birinci dil kullanımı, ikinci dil kullanımı

1. BACKGROUND

In the history of second language teaching and learning, there has been a constant change of methods as organized ways of teaching and learning of a second or foreign language. Each method claims to be an improvement on the previous methods and represents a total rejection of preceding ones. Each places focus on a different aspect of language, language learning, and language teaching as well as offering 'new' and 'improved' classroom techniques or procedures. Some methods are grounded in formal or linguistic properties of language, while others in both formal and functional properties. Despite each method's claim of novelty and fresh approach to language teaching and learning, they all have overlapping features and rather than building on these common features and improving shortcomings of preceding methods, they present themselves as alternative methods. However, something that almost all methods shares is their failure to take into account local linguistic, educational, institutional, social, cultural, and political demands. They follow a top-down, one-size-fits-all approach to language teaching practice (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b). Since each method is fed by a different theory of learning and

language, they fail to take a holistic approach to language teaching and learning. Language is a complex phenomenon and therefore defining language as merely a tool for expression or communication would be treating language as static and frozen in time with no history or sociocultural connections. Language is not only a cognitive biological mechanism, internal to the learner, and a form-based system as Chomsky argues but also a socially based means of functioning in society with meaning potential as Hymes argues (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b). In van Lier's (2004) ecological perspective, language is treated as situated and social activity is placed at the centre of the definition of language. To stress the pivotal place context occupies in language, he argues, "if you take the context away there is no language left to be studied" (2004: 20). Norton and Toohey (2004) also define the language as a social practice that creates and is created by the ways language learners understand themselves, their environment, and their possibilities for future. As a social practice, language serves as an ideological site where relations of power and dominance are established and sustained. Language is system, discourse and ideology at the same time.

The concept of method offers, at best, a fragmented view of language, and no method is neutral. Each reflects a particular view of the world and is shaped by unequal relations of power and dominance, a position taken by critical pedagogists. Kumaravadivelu (2006: 67) argues:

The concept of method has only a limited and limiting impact on language learning and teaching, that method should no longer be considered a valuable or a viable construct, and that what is needed is not an alternative method but an alternative to method. This growing realization coupled with a resolve to respond has created what has been called the postmethod condition.

With his postmethod perspective, Kumaravadivelu (2001: 538) rejects "the concept of method as the organizing principle for L2 teaching and teacher education" and takes a holistic approach to L2 practice that aims to encourage a context-sensitive, location-specific pedagogy with the parameter of particularity, to break the dichotomy of theorists as producers of theory and teachers as consumers or implementers of theory and instead urge teachers to develop their own personal theory of practice with the parameter of practicality, and to promote student empowerment and social transformation through identity formation and awareness of discursive and ideational aspects of language with the parameter of possibility.

The postmethod pedagogy teaches us as language teachers to stop turning to theorists for the perfect method and develop our personal theories. This does not mean we should take bits of classroom techniques or procedures from different methods as we see fit, which is called being eclectic. Instead, we ought to carefully diagnose our methodology to see what works and what does not, treat it with improvements or changes, and assess the end result. One way to run this cycle of diagnosis, treatment and assessment is to be constantly engaged in teacher research. This way we might avoid ending up with a methodology that is randomly eclectic and develop a "principled" or "enlightened eclectic" methodology (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b: 169). Based on teachers' insights, intuition and experiential knowledge, teacher research helps teachers develop their theory of practice that will guide and improve their practice. It helps teachers "theorize from their practice and practice what they theorize" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b: 173) and become reflective teachers. How can language teachers put principles of postmethod pedagogy into operational practice? Kumaravadivelu (2003) offers a macrostrategic framework that provides teachers with macrostrategies and microstrategies. He defines macrostrategy as "a general plan, a broad guideline based on which teachers will be able to generate their own situation-specific, need-based microstrategies or classroom techniques" (p. 38). Macrostrategies can be put into practice in the classroom through microstrategies. This framework is helpful since it presents teachers with broad guidelines that enable them "to develop the knowledge, skill, attitude, and autonomy necessary to devise for themselves a systematic, coherent, and relevant personal theory of practice that is informed by the parameters of particularity, practicality, and possibility" (40).

Guided by postmethod pedagogy, I will make an attempt here to diagnose a particular aspect of my own teaching practice as a language teacher. The treatment phase is in progress, and I can only make a preliminary assessment of its effectiveness.

2. FIRST LANGUAGE USE IN L2 TEACHING

Utilizing students' first language in second and foreign language education has been considered a taboo for decades without much questioning. Proponents of the exclusive use of the target language use generally compare second language acquisition to first language acquisition and argue that since children are exposed to only the first language as they acquire L1, the target language should be the only language L2 learners are exposed to as the additional language is acquired (Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009). Therefore, they see no communicative or pedagogical value of including learners' first language in L2 teaching. This comparison between L1 and L2 learning is influenced by *direct method*, which emerged in the late 19th century. The method rejects the use of translation as a tool to learn a second of foreign language and places a focus on listening and speaking skills, which later became popular in audiolingual and communicative teaching approaches (Cummins, 2008). Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) is often put forward to legitimate the target language only teaching as L2 input is equated with target language mastery.

Atkinson (1987) counts four causes for the prevalence of a monolingual approach to L2 education: the association of first language use with translation and thereby grammar translation method, the teacher education native speaker teachers received in English-speaking countries such as Britain, the USA, Canada and Australia, the influence of Krashen's input hypothesis, and the idea that English can only be learnt by speaking English. Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) point to the communicative approaches to language education as the reason behind teachers' reluctance to make use of learners' first languages.

Akbari (2008) claims there are political/economic dimensions to the exclusion of L1 and mentions native speakers' inability to use their students' L1 as another reason. The rationale Akbari offers as to why L1 ought to be utilized in L2 learning and teaching is adequately convincing. He argues L1 is part of students' identity and that it needs to be respected if we, as language teachers, are to empower them. Akbari's argument is backed by Canagarajah (2005), who criticizes the argument that L1 interferes with and impedes L2 learning and states the skills and linguistic awareness students developed in their L1 are easily transferable to L2, and this could aid positive affect as well as the formation of multilingual self. Canagarajah (2005: 941) cites Skuttnab-Kangas, who ties the exclusion of L1 in L2 classrooms to discursive and ideational aspects of language as well as relations of power and dominance, arguing:

An ELT pedagogy based on English-only in the classroom can lead to the gradual devaluation of L1 and decline in proficiency. It can convey to students the inequality of languages, with a low estimation of their L1. This unequal relationship of languages in the ESL classroom can get reproduced outside. This can lead to the vernaculars declining in currency and status, with English continuing its hegemony worldwide.

Cook (2001) suggests the decision to use L1 should be made considering four factors: efficiency, learning, naturalness and external relevance. Cook, however, cautions L1 use should not come at the expense of L2 use. Teachers report feeling guilty when they revert to learners' first language during L2 teaching, yet but Cook offers the following suggestions for including first language (46):

- to provide a short-cut for giving instructions and explanations where the cost of the L2 is too great
- to build up the inter-linked L1 and L2 knowledge in the students' minds
- to carry out learning tasks through collaborative dialogue with fellow-students
- to develop L2 activities such as code-switching for later real-life use

Although the argument above is more valid in contexts where L2 is taught as a second language, it applies, to some extent, to foreign language contexts as well. I personally used to think the reason why L1 was kept out of L2 classroom was scientific and rooted in research. However, my recent readings in

postmethod methodology, especially by Kumaravadivelu, in critical pedagogy of Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire, and in critical discourse analysis of Norman Fairclough and others made me realize L1 can actually play a role in L2 teaching and learning in affective, discursive, sociocultural, and identity-formation aspects. First language is part of students' identity and one of the fundamental human rights. The use of L1, furthermore, can lower anxiety level of students, and can even help solve problems related to disciplinary matters.

3. TEACHER RESEARCH

On grounds of these arguments, I recently started using my students' first languages (most of them are bilinguals) in matters related to classroom management and certain school formalities and procedures. I also sometimes make short explanations when I notice they struggle with abstract vocabulary and difficult grammatical structures as suggested by Akbari (2008). Following this modification to my classroom practice, the students' interaction with me, especially concerning non-instructional matters showed a marked increase. Before that they avoided enquiries as they lacked linguistic competence to do so, and this, I observed, raised their anxiety levels and occasionally led to frustration. Over the years I have been observing that students, particularly those at low level of English, avoided interacting with the teacher, probably because they felt inadequate in terms of English proficiency. More often than not they would stop talking when they could not remember the accurate word or phrase. They felt frustrated, lost interest and only participated in pair or group activities, avoiding one-on-one communication with the teacher. The students were not the only who felt frustrated and inhibited.

Harbord (1992: 354) suggests a number of target language strategies L2 teachers could use rather than reverting to L1: "visual prompts, mime, and evoking situational context to create a need for the item in question (for eliciting), together with paraphrase, definition, and multiple exemplification." Despite being useful strategies, they run the risk of simplifying the input to the point where it stops being authentic. Furthermore, they help with conveying the message to the students, but fall short of having any significant effect on student output. Students who are discouraged from turning to their first languages for help when they are cognitively challenged during L2 use may lose interest in productive skills and may be less willing to communicate.

As language teachers we need to constantly evaluate our teaching practices to see what works and what needs to be modified. This requires taking a reflective approach to our teaching, in which teachers "collect data about teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a basis for critical reflection about teaching" (Richards & Lockhart, 1996: 1). My evaluation of the data I collected over the years about my classroom practices regarding the target language use led me to believe L2 only approach inhibits student-teacher communication. While this paper is only a preliminary report on my use of students' first language to facilitate L2 learning, the findings so far seem promising.

4. CONCLUSION

The possibility of demotivating students just for the sake of using solely L2 is too big a risk to take. Instead, a more liberal use of L1 could enhance the communication and comprehension between the teacher and students. Macaro (2004) argues for the optimal L1 use with a focus on the quality of first language use rather than quantity. The exclusion of students' L1 is not defensible from socio-cultural perspective either. More than half of the world's population is either bilingual or multilingual, and codeswitching is a reality in many communities. The students I am teaching are mostly bilinguals and use their both languages regularly in their day-to-day lives. Helping L2 learners move between languages and communities ought to be an objective for L2 teachers. Canagarajah (2005: 941) warns against the consequences of inhibiting rather than promoting multicompetence in L2 learners: "Teaching English without reference to the first language of the students may disempower them in the multilingual life in the postmodern world." However, it should be noted that the use of students' L1 does not mean it could replace L2 as the language of instruction.

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