

ANDRZEJ KURTYKA \_\_\_\_\_

## Principled Eclecticism in the Post-Methods Era

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The present paper is concerned with the issue of an eclectic approach to teaching foreign languages, which assumes that a variety of techniques, usually associated with diverse language teaching methods and approaches, can be successfully utilized by the teacher to the benefit of the learning/teaching process. The discussion of the so-called principled eclecticism is placed in the context of the “post-methods era,” i.e. the contemporary methodological framework which reflects the current rejection of prescriptive practices characteristic of foreign language pedagogies developed in the past in favour of more descriptive analyses of language curriculum processes nowadays. It is argued that more emphasis should be placed on foreign language teacher training and development in order to make teachers aware of the methodological diversity at their disposal and, subsequently, to assist them in making appropriate and relevant choices in the classroom context.

### Eclecticism in Foreign Language Teaching

Eclecticism in foreign language teaching refers to free choice from a wide range of ideas – not following one system but choosing from a variety of systems what seems to be best or most useful in a particular classroom situation. It assumes that a combination ideas from different, sometimes

mutually exclusive, fields is possible and can be pursued. Further, it assumes that no one theory or approach may give definitive answers to every question concerning learning and teaching. Consequently, as Mellow (2002: 1) states, "eclecticism involves the use of a variety of language learning activities, each of which may have different characteristics and may be motivated by different underlying assumptions." The teacher, if willing to enrich an array of techniques at his disposal, should aim at developing his own teaching style. He can adapt various techniques that suit his teaching style and are effective in his context.

According to Mellow, eclecticism may be seen in opposition to reliance on a single theory, i.e. to fundamentalism or absolutism of pedagogical beliefs, since it can then become mechanistic, inflexible and routine. This understanding refers to the fact that there are many different competing theories and they are frequently mutually exclusive. On the other hand, eclecticism may also be understood as related to relativism and unconstrained pluralism. The relativistic position emphasizes the fact that each learning situation is unique, and the teacher's decisions must always be related to contextual variables. Hence, relativism focuses on differences between teaching contexts, rather than similarities. Unconstrained pluralism refers to using activities eclectically with no single theory or considerations of context; it may be arbitrary, incoherent, naive, uncoordinated, unsystematic, and for this reason it may be guided by rule-of-thumb expediency only (Mellow 2002: 2).

In an early definition of the eclectic position, Wilga Rivers (1968: 21–2) noted as follows:

Eclecticists try to absorb the best techniques of the well-known language teaching methods into their classroom procedures, using them for the purposes for which they are most appropriate. The true eclecticist, as distinguished from the drifter who adopts new techniques cumulatively and purposelessly, seeks the balanced development of all four skills at all stages. . . . He adapts his method to the changing objectives of the day and to the types of students who pass through his classes, gradually evolving a method which suits his personality as a teacher. The best type of eclectic teacher is imaginative, energetic and willing to experiment. As a result, his lessons are varied and interesting.

This understanding is related to the concept of the so-called principled eclecticism as used by Larsen-Freeman (2000) and Mellow (2002). A number of terms and labels exist with reference to this concept; various authors write on effective, enlightened, successful, informed, well-informed, integrative, planned, systematic, or technical eclecticism (Mellow 2002: 1). Principled eclecticism is defined by Mellow (2002: 1) as “a desirable, coherent, pluralistic approach to language teaching,” based on well thought-over strategies implemented in the classroom by the teacher. A number of scholars and educators, such as Earl W. Stevick or H. Douglas Brown, seem to subscribe to this view. Some even suggest their own eclectic approaches to foreign language teaching: for instance, Hector Hammerly offers an integrated theory of language teaching and Robert Blair his own integrated approach.

The appearance of eclecticism can be traced back to the search for one best method of teaching foreign languages (cf. e.g. Stevick 1974). After grammar translation and the direct method which were not based on any scientifically corroborated psychological or linguistic theory, there appeared audiolingualism. It had a scientific basis and constituted the pedagogic application of theories such as structuralism in linguistics and behaviourism in psychology. Next, following disappointment with the ALM, new approaches emerged, e.g. the cognitive-code learning theory (an application of cognitive psychology) and subsequently, the communicative approach (which hailed from sociolinguistics).

The notion of eclecticism seemed to make more pedagogic sense along with the appearance of innovative methods and approaches in the 1960's and especially 1970's, e.g. the Silent Way, Community Language Learning, Suggestopaedia, Total Physical Response (cf. e.g. Larsen-Freeman 2000, Richards and Rodgers 2001). Unfortunately, those new methods and approaches failed to inspire teachers. Their originators claimed that only faithful adherence to their own one method would ensure learning success. As Richards and Rodgers (2001: 247) note, the methods and approaches were then typically prescriptive, or top-down, based on the regime of the teaching process, with learners being only passive recipients subordinated to it. This in truth fundamentalist attitude was even ridiculed by Alan Maley (1984) in one of his articles entitled “I Got Religion – Evangelism in Language Teaching.” In addition, those methods lacked solid scientific basis and they frequently did not

take into account the context of learning, e.g. the cultural context. For instance, Community Language Learning seems to work best in Asian cultures, as they are more collectivistic and focus on groups, as opposed to Western cultures, which stress individuality (for the discussion of individualism and collectivism as cultural constructs, see e.g. Triandis 1995).

Following the disappointment with finding the one best method, there emerged a certain awareness or understanding that each method, be it traditional or innovative, has its strengths and that they can be used to enhance a given teacher's strategies in the classroom. As a result, as Tarone and Yule (1989: 10) state it, "there has emerged a general movement towards eclecticism," which would not be limited by the rigidity of one given theory.

The interest in methods waned towards the end of the 1980's. The innovative methods have disappeared, but the mainstream Communicative Approach is still followed as a valid theory of language learning and teaching.

## What Remains from the Methods Era

Despite criticism of methods, there are several tendencies or concepts which remain or have developed from the heyday of methods and now enrich current pedagogic practice. They include such principles as:

- engagement of all learners in the lesson,
- learner-centred teaching,
- enhancing learner participation, e.g. by stressing pair/group work,
- focus on learners' responsibility,
- tolerant attitude to mistakes,
- developing learners' confidence,
- focus on learning strategies,
- responding to learners' difficulties and building on them,
- promoting learner co-operation,
- focus on both fluency and accuracy,

- addressing learners' needs and interests (Richards and Rodgers 2001: 251).

Generally speaking, nowadays each teacher in developing his individual approach to teaching, or a personal theory of practice, focuses on the areas such as: his role in the classroom, the nature of effective teaching and learning, the difficulties learners' face and how they can be addressed, successful learning activities, and the structure of an effective lesson (Richards and Rodgers 2001: 251). All those concepts and areas of interest come to the fore in the process of, first, teacher training, and, second, professional development. As Richards and Rodgers (2001: 251–2) notice, even without realizing that he or she does, every teacher follows and forms beliefs and principles of their own theory or approach to language teaching, which is enhanced by reflection, critical questioning, observation of classroom processes and the like. The teacher's conceptualizations of language, roles of learners and roles of the teacher are placed within a wider belief system, which embraces such issues as human nature, culture, society, education, etc. This understanding of teacher training and development seems to suggest that there is much more to them than the knowledge of methods and approaches. Nevertheless, this knowledge may be claimed to enrich pedagogic reflection and enhance professional development.

## Criticism of the Eclectic Position

The crisis of methods, which turned out to deliver disappointing solutions to language pedagogy, has led to emergence of a post-methods era (Richards and Rodgers 2001: 244; Kumaravadivelu 1994). Kumaravadivelu (1994: 29–31) characterizes the so-called post-method condition as a chance to redefine current pedagogic theory and practice with reference to several issues. Firstly, since there is a mismatch or contradiction between method as conceptualized by theorists and method as realized by practitioners, we need to search not for an alternative method, but rather for an alternative to method. Secondly, he places emphasis upon the need to focus on teacher autonomy, i.e. to recognize the teachers' potential to know how to teach, but also to know how to act indepen-

dently (autonomously) within the constraints imposed by institutions, curricula and teaching materials. Thirdly, Kumaravadivelu claims it is necessary to focus not on eclecticism (limited by the concept of method) but rather on the so-called principled pragmatism, which Widdowson (1990: 30) links with the fact that "the relationship between theory and practice (in other words: ideas and their actualization) can only be realized within the domain of application, that is, through the immediate activity of teaching." In other words, principled pragmatism refers to every teacher's subjective understanding of their own teaching, which is formed through experience, education and consultation with other teachers (Prabhu 1990: 172–3).

Along with the new tendency to do away with the concept of method, there appeared several strands of criticism concerning the eclectic position, some of which follow. First, eclecticism offers no criteria to determine which is the best theory or procedure in a given situation. The teacher has to rely on intuitive judgement, which is vague and may be downright incorrect (Kumaravadivelu 1994: 30). Second, speaking philosophically, in the attempts to find the appropriate method or approach in a given situation, one is in fact seeking truth. In seeking truth one may consider elements of any theory as "equally likely to be true or untrue" and as a result there is a strong possibility that the eclectic approach is merely a "blend of the untruthful parts of different methods as there is of its representing the truthful parts" (Prabhu 1990: 168). Third, Marton (1988: 86) stresses methodological consistency in the teaching process by saying that "[l]ogicians dealing with the concept of efficiency tell us that any purposeful complex activity consists of a set of actions which must be consistent with one another." Fourth, mixing many methods and approaches may lead to conflict. If there are conflicting approaches, e.g. staunch support of drills and fluency activities, we may have contrary results to those we wish to have (Weideman 2001). Fifth, eclecticism may in fact discourage teachers from reflecting upon their own teaching since they apply any procedure that "works" to obtain immediate results (Weideman 2001). Sixth, some teachers, having learnt of new "tricks" (techniques or methods), integrate them too quickly into their own style of teaching to remember about the rationale for those techniques (Weideman 2001).

## Advantages of Principled Eclecticism

Even staunch supporters of the eclectic position have to agree that numerous teachers follow their intuitions in selecting particular procedures rather than consider carefully their appropriateness first, and as a result their teaching turns out to be erratic and inefficient. However, this does not mean that many other teachers, regardless of whether they select techniques intuitively or intentionally, are indeed erratic and inefficient. The efficiency criterion can be satisfied and verified by e.g. evaluating the progress that the learners make.

As regards consistency and subjectivism, no matter what theorists say to the contrary, practising teachers do tend to develop their own idiosyncratic teaching style, if only by choosing to use the procedures which appeal to them or have proved efficient in class with their group of learners. From this point of view, the techniques that the teachers employ are consistent with one another in that they contribute to developing their own individual style of teaching. One has to agree though that the average teacher is not given any theoretical guidance as to what criteria to apply when selecting and combining different techniques from different methodologies. Providing guidance seems to be the task of teacher training, in pre-service and in-service settings alike.

In addition, methodological purists would argue that the learners do not derive much profit from the lesson since they have to shift from one teaching strategy to another. This certainly may be evident in the case of blind eclecticism based on chaotic application of classroom procedures, but perhaps not when, for instance, the teacher makes an attempt to take into account and cater for different learning styles in the group.

Regarding the arguments in favour of the principled eclectic position in foreign language learning, one may find several strong points. First, many methods are similar to one another, or they attempt to improve upon them by striving to “strengthen their weak points” (Weideman). Seen in this perspective, e.g. the Audio-Lingual Method (which seeks to develop all four skills) is an eclectic combination of grammar-translation (chiefly focused on reading and writing) and the direct method (focused on speaking and listening). Seeing similarities and differences between methods and procedures that derive from them provides the teacher

with a broader perspective on language teaching (Weideman 2001). Secondly, a somewhat obvious argument is that the eclectic position keeps the teacher “open to alternatives” (Weideman 2001), aids him in his professional development, and prevents routine and self-complacency. What follows, the eclectic position provides more techniques and procedures at the teacher’s disposal. In this way, the teacher may try out and apply more efficient procedures, if only to enrich his or her repertoire of techniques related to the communicative methodology, which is nowadays the dominant approach. Thirdly, by adopting the principled eclectic position, the teacher may develop as a professional, e.g. through reflective practice that precedes and/or follows a particular teaching experience.

As indicated by Jack Mezirow (1990: xvi), reflection has three functions: to guide action, to give coherence to the unfamiliar phenomena, and to reassess existing knowledge. Mezirow (1990: 367) refers to the so-called reflective learning, which embraces remembering the experience, attending to feelings about it by sharing them with others, and reevaluating the experience, for instance from the perspective of existing knowledge. In Mezirow’s (1997: 5) view, every human being needs to understand the meaning of their experience, but nowadays “we must make our own interpretations rather than act on the . . . judgements . . . of others.” These interpretations and judgements are made thanks to critical reflection on experience, which leads to enhanced awareness and an autonomous change of specific beliefs, assumptions or attitudes (Mezirow 1991: 167). By reflecting also upon the teaching procedures employed – apart from all other issues that undergo reflection, like curriculum processes, evaluation, classroom management and the like – the teacher grows as a professional with enhanced perceptive judgement. Theoretical and practical knowledge of various methods, approaches and procedures seems invaluable and important. Combined with the teachers’ reflection, the eclectic position may also teach them a certain level of discernment – i.e. to notice more around them, to ensure more deliberate participation in teaching events, and to gain better insights into classroom processes.

In an attempt to do away with the concept of method, David Nunan (1989: 2) sought to help teachers “develop, select, or adapt tasks which are appropriate in terms of goals, input, activities, roles and settings, and

difficulty." Regardless of what Nunan intended, his attempt can also be interpreted in favour of the eclectic position; it may also provide teachers with the necessary knowledge of how to adapt tasks and procedures that originate in this or that method. It should be stressed that principled eclecticism may be possible at the most practical level, i.e. teaching technique, or, in other words, task, procedure, activity – adapted for a particular classroom purpose and context.

## General Guiding Principles

The above discussion brings us to a method-free or method-neutral presentation of Kumaravadivelu's macrostrategies for language learning (1994, 2003). Although the author is a staunch opponent of eclecticism, his taxonomy of strategies can nevertheless be used as a provisional, general framework of reference for an eclectic teacher, regardless of the fact whether the macrostrategies in fact refer to bottom-up or top-down classroom processes. These macrostrategies reflect current developments and trends in language teaching methodology. They may constitute criteria of appropriacy and relevance when a particular technique or procedure is either being evaluated post factum or considered for adaptation in the classroom context. In addition, they may serve as guiding principles in reflection upon teaching processes in general.

The macrostrategies are a foreign language teacher's guidelines which emphasize the fact that it is advisable to apply techniques and procedures which:

- 1) maximize learning opportunities – by taking into account the learners' proficiency level, needs, or flexible lesson planning;
- 2) facilitate negotiated interaction – by involving the learners in all classroom events, and by allowing them to take initiative;
- 3) minimize perceptual mismatches – between the teacher's intentions and learners' interpretations;
- 4) activate intuitive heuristics – to enable the learners to infer grammatical rules from context, as self-discovery promotes better learning outcomes;

- 5) foster language awareness – to sensitize the learners to the nature and formal properties of language and its role in human life;
- 6) contextualize linguistic input – to present language in its entirety with its syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features;
- 7) integrate language skills – because this demonstrates language as it is really used, i.e. holistically;
- 8) promote learner autonomy – to make learners aware of their learning strategies and responsible for their linguistic progress;
- 9) raise cultural consciousness – to show the role of language in its sociocultural context and promote intercultural understanding;
- 10) ensure social relevance – to sensitize the learners to societal, political, economic and educational aspects of the learning process (Kumaravadivelu 1994: 33–42; 2003: 39–40).

## Concluding Remarks

Not all techniques and procedures will stand the test of efficiency, relevance and appropriacy. But the test is conducted by the teacher independently, autonomously, through his or her reflection, decision-making, and implementation of a particular technique in the classroom context. It can be argued that such guidelines should become part of teacher training and teacher development curricula. In this way they could enable the teachers to evaluate their own teaching and, simultaneously, contribute to developing their own theories of practice as well as provide useful criteria for adoption or rejection of various procedures that they might have at their disposal as followers of principled eclecticism.

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