20. A Way With, a Way Through Methods: a Reflection for EFL Professionals

Ulisses Araujo Silva[80]

Abstract:
This article is aimed at providing a brief reflection on the problem of method on the arena of English as a Foreign Language teaching, with a view to furthering mutual understaning between teachers, coordinators and teacher educators, as well as generating self-understanding by teachers. To do so, the mentality underlying the very idea of method is presented, in the Modern Age and in the context of post-war as well. 20th century's rise of Communicative Language Teaching is then presented; the approach is situated both within its intended purposes and the mindset it was dealt with. Some issues inherent in the concept of methods for language teaching are reflected on, as a possible answer to it – Postmethod - is provided, followed by a suggestion for the teaching of foreign languages. The problem of suffering among teachers and its possible relation to methods is touched upon.

Keywords: English Language teaching; methods; Postmethod; suffering**.**

Resumo:
O propósito deste artigo é promover uma breve reflexão a respeito do problema do método na arena do ensino de Inglês como Língua Estrangeira, a fim de apronfundar a compreensão mútua entre professores, coordenadores e formadores, assim como gerar autocompreensão por parte de professores. Para isso, a mentalidade subjacente à própria ideia de método é apresentada, na Era Moderna e no pós-guerra. O alvorecer do *Communicative Approach* no século XX é então apresentado; a abordagem é situadada dentro de seus propósitos contextuais e do modo de pensar com o qual foi tratada. Algumas questões inerentes ao conceito de método no ensino de línguas são pensadas, assim como uma possível resposta – Pós-método – é oferecida, com uma sugestão para o ensino de línguas estrangeiras a seguir. O problema do sofrimento entre professores e sua possível relação com métodos é tratado.

Palavras-chave: Ensino de Língua Inglesa; métodos; Pós-método; sofrimento.

1.   It is all about methods

Foreign language teachers – English-course teachers in special - are more than accustomed to the scene: after a one-hour or so observation period, the school's coordinator will sit down with them in order to provide some feedback. Whenever it is

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[80] Postgraduate/Specialization student (English Language/Applied Linguistics) at Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro/Brazil. Elementary School English teacher (grades 1 to 9) - Rio de Janeiro City's Department of Education. uliprof@yahoo.com

clear that the teacher has not followed the principles and beliefs underpinning "the method", there is room for improvement, and the teacher's homework is to reflect and work on what is missing in their practice. A time may come, however, when the teacher has been doing their best to teach by the method whereas feedbacks keep more or less negative. In this regard, Kumaravadivelu's comments (1994, p.29) about methods can be useful:

> none of these methods can be realized in their purest form in the actual classroom primarily because they are not derived from classroom experience and experimentation but are artificially transplanted into the classroom and, as such, far removed from classroom reality.

The method-determined mindset is present not only among teachers at language teaching institutions: primary/secondary school teachers of all subjects in general face the challenge of acting the way they are supposed to, which comes from a need to prescribe with a view to both controlling and obtaining results[81]. Once again, it is all about taking a prescriptive, rule-oriented approach grounded upon a feeling of certainty, with the sense that events are going the way they must go. This is especially challenging for those who have knowledge of different perspectives on teaching formally learned or practiced elsewhere. Being oblivious to alternatives may thus be an advantage.

With such a scenario right before our eyes, this article aims at (a) proposing a reflection on the part of teachers so that they look at themselves not as reproducers of methods as they blame themselves for not living up to certain expectations; (b) assisting language institutions' coordinators and teacher trainers/educators in understanding the nature of the very concept of methods, so that they do not end up frustrating their teachers; (c) leading teachers and supervisors (coordinators, trainers, educators) to understand that mistakes in teaching are not necessarily mistakes, but context-sensitive approaches to the classroom; (d) providing an approach that is sensitive to our everyday classroom realities in whatever setting we teach.

2.   An old new dichotomy

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[81] English teachers especially face a greater challenge, given the amount of research – and methods - directed towards the teaching of English, which may leave them literally bewildered before so many rules, prescriptions and suggestions.

Before we question the very idea of method, we need to cast a glance at the mentality that gave rise to it, so that we can move on and critique it as well.

Modern Age was a stage for the rebirth of Plato's ideas about body and soul: René Descartes brings to the frontline of epistemology the belief that there is a source, a sovereign reference for life, which is the soul[82]. Such an assumption has deep implications for all realms of life – teaching included: as the soul governs the body, there are rules and principles we all are to live/act by, hence a method, brought to light in his *Discourse on the Method* (1637). The concept of method is in itself a dogmatic one[83].

The idea of method revolves around the belief that the right doing will lead to expected results: a series of steps is to be adopted in order to reach a given goal, as certain measures are taken and behaviors are brought about. Cartesian views on knowledge would soon be welcomed by Enlightenment's optimism, which had a strong impact on teaching: explaining for predicting; predicting for controlling; ideal and fixed subjects. Methods are supported by a need to predict and control (KUMARAVADIVELU, 2006, p. 162). Method-oriented pedagogies will bring with them "well-designed, controlled experiments, in keeping with the spirit of objective, scientific enquiry" (PRABHU, 1990, p. 168), which coherently reflects the scientific spirit of Modern Era.

With the birthing context of method touched upon, we can now resort to a useful definition of method: "I use the term inclusively, to refer both to *a set of activities to be carried out in the classroom* and to *the theory*, belief or plausible concept that informs those activities" (*ibid.*, emphasis added). Methods were, as stated by Allwright (2003, p. 4), "intended to determine what should happen in the classroom, and especially to determine thereby the learning that resulted".

3. Away from methods, but still in them

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[82] To Descartes, the terms *soul*, *reason*, *mind* and *spirit* refer to the same concept.

[83] It should be made clear that is spite of the close connection between method and cartesian epistemology, the philosophy of method – to use a catch-all term – overflows into far beyond Metaphysics. Philosophers such as David Hume and John Locke, although empiricists, also embraced the modern subject of knowledge, along with the importance of method, in their own ways. Going into the matter – and its roots back in classical philosophy - would be beyond the purview of this text.

A general dissatisfaction with methods has sprung here and there among English Language teachers, as it has become more and more evident that a single set of principles and beliefs designed by someone in some place will not fit the needs of both teachers and students worldwide. As a result, "they [teachers] are struggling to construct their own professional identities by exercising their own agency" (GONÇALVES; AZEVEDO; ALVES, 2013, p. 57). After all, "it is naive to think that specialists can formulate a good teaching method and then get teachers to implement it in their classrooms." (PRABHU, 1992, p. 225) In this vein, Kumaravadivelu points out that "The concept of method has severe limitations that have been overlooked by many" (2006, p. 162). The author goes on to state that the belief that "Method constitutes the organizing principle for language teaching" is a myth (*ibid*., p. 164). We must also bear in mind that methods are fruits of contexts other than our own: "They describe a certain ideal, based on certain beliefs. They deal with what, how, and why. They say little or nothing about who/whom, when, and where [...]. A particular method cannot, therefore, be a prescription for success for everyone." (LARSEN-FREEMAN, 2010, p. 181).

Rooted in fixed principles, beliefs and expectations, it is clear that method-oriented practices do not take into consideration social, cultural, political and other particularities inherent in any context, which has led over the years to a continual search for the best method. The search for unavailable solutions for teaching has brought us to the awareness that we are all "caught up in the web of method" (KUMARAVADIVELU, 1994, p. 28).

Such a state of an endless quest for "the" method is not bereft of meaning: methods are an expression of a need to control. Dick Allwright (2003, p. 1) states that methods were embraced in English Language pedagogy at a time when certainties and convictions were being shaken, which led teachers and teacher educators to hold on to control. That is when a strong need for planning came into the scene as methods got a hold on the teaching of English: "Language teaching is peculiar, though not unique, in its interest in method" (*ibid*.). Cold War was a battlefield for world leadership, and due to some unknown reason, mastering foreing languages meant international/political leadership, which in turn attracted the attention of psychologists who began to develop competing theories of language and, consequently, language learning. The tone was set

for a since then everlasting association between language teaching and methods. To quote Allwright (*ibid.*):

> US government [...] was desperate to catch up with the Soviet Union scientifically and technically, and because, for some not very clear reason, competence in foreing langauges was seen as conductive to gaining world leadership in science and technology, it was therefore necessary to know which of the two competing theories was 'correct', and which method was therefore the one to be adopted in US shcools[84].

As time passed, a disappointment with the teaching of language by means of methods focused on the teaching of structures began to give place to a more social view of language[85], which paved the way for the rise of Communicative Language Teaching, intended to be an approach: "a number of suggestions for classroom activities derived largely from practical experience, all of which came eventually to be referred to variously as either 'the communicative approach' or 'the communicative method'" (*ibid.*, p.2).

The focus on communication rather than on structures devoid of context begins to shift attention away from methods. Teachers were then supposed to "get communication going on the classroom and the language learning would take care of itself" (*ibid.*). Time shows, however, that CLT is full of vices and is not able to fulfil its promises, and also: "the main reason why CLT has been discarded and replaced by other teaching paradigms was its inability to fit various contexts" (DIDENKO; PICHUGOVA, 2016, p.2), the same issue pointed out elsewhere regarding methods (BELL, 2003; KUMARAVADIVELU, 2001)[86].

Although CLT aimed at being an answer to the tradition of method, voiced around as an approach, it was treated as a method: a single way of solving the problem of teaching people to speak English, the difference regarding methods being that its focus was on real life communication rather than on structures alone; a set of principles that will guide the teaching process with a view to bringing certain results about[87]. CLT was

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[84] Allwright's comments refer specifically to US context as far as the teaching of languages in concerned. This does not mean that nothing was going on on the other side of the Atlantic, though.

[85] Such debates took place, above all, on the arena of the teaching of English as a Second/Foreign Language. For details and practical examples of different methods and apporaches in the history of English language teaching, see Larsen-Freeman, 2010.

[86] For a good review of strengths and weaknesses of CLT, see Didenko & Pichugova (2015).

[87] Bell (2003, pp. 326-327) provides three definitions of method: "Smorgasbord of Ideas", "Prescription for Practice" and "Organizing Principles".

a kind of step away from methods at the same time it was an expression of the method mindset. It was not long before it began to show signs of inadequateness, with Eastern cultures being an example of how careful teachers need to be when implementing an approach orchestrated elsewhere (ELLIS, 1996).

Teachers are, usually, trained at English Language teaching institutions according to beliefs and principles alien to themselves (teachers). Ideally, difficulties can be overcome by following teacher's guides instructions and techniques presented at seminars, workshops, training sessions and pre-service programs (MOITA LOPES, 1996, p. 180): classrooms are seen as *loci* of certainties rather than those of a search for knowledge (*ibid*., p. 184). The problem is, however, that if one is not aware of the theoretical language background underlying such practices (*ibid,* pp. 180ff.), they may find themselves at a loss or even in an inner struggle, as they try to strike a balance between what they see is right and what is demanded from them. Also, it is the very knowledge of the theoretical nature behind certain practices imposed upon teachers that may lead, too, to suffering on their part, which is what we now shift our focus to.

4.   Suffering may be around

A possible – not necessary, I must hightlight – corollary of method-oriented environments is the suffering of teachers. To understand that, it is interesting to cast a glance at the concept of "emotives": "emotional gestures and utterances" and "their capacity to alter the states of the speakers from whom they derive" (ZEMBYLAS, 2005, p. 469)[88]. The term makes reference to emotional expression, being a way of understanding teachers' behaviors within institutions, since they (emotives) constitute the expectations of a community towards an individual (REDDY, 1997, p. 333); they are expected performances. Emotives can end up having "profound effects on one's identity, one's realtionships, one's prospects" (ZEMBYLAS, *ibid*.). A teacher may face conflict when there is a difference between what they sense is best and how they are supposed to act, in what Reddy (*ibid*.) calls "intense ambivalence", which in turn may lead to suffering on the part of the teacher. Behind such an issue lies the fact that communities have their

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[88] The author is referring to Reddy (1997, pp. 331ff).

own behavior standards, to which individuals are supposed to comply; if they do not, suffering may arise (ZEMBYLAS, 2005, p. 473). Such concepts are of paramount importance if the well-being of teachers is sought after. It must be emphasized, though, that the practice of methods will not necessarily lead to teacher suffering, nor will a method-free environment cancel the possibility of suffering on the part of teachers[89].

5.   A step beyond, in fact

With the turn of the century comes a change in perspective: "The 2000s introduced the post-method era: a shift from using methods in the purist sense to recognizing that the nature of language learning is complex and non-linear" (GALANTE, 2014, p. 58). To Postmethod we turn now[90].

Kumaravadivelu observes that "methods go through endless cycles of life, death, and rebirth" and "we now seem to have reached a state of heightened awareness – an awareness that as long as we are caught up in the web of method, we will continue to get entangled in an unending search for an available solution" (1994, p. 28). It is this awareness that is leading to Postmethod, a perspective that is a fruit postmodern epistemology (BELL, 2003, p. 330), as opposed to method, an offspring of Modern Age. It has become more and more evident that the construction of alternative methods has been exhausted[91], as the underpinnings that have supported methods for decades are perceived as out of place, the idea that methods have a universal value being one of them (KUMARAVADIVELU, 2006, p. 165).

Departing from fixed ideas and preconceptions about teaching and learning, postmethod pedagogy is sensitive to linguistic, cultural, social, political variables and so

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[89] Zembyla's article shows much light on the reality of teacher emotion, suffering in special.

[90] Of course a growing dissatisfactin with methods had been on the way before the 2000s: Kumaravadivelu's *The Postmethod Condition: (E)merging Strategies for Second/Foreign Language Teaching* (see references) dates to 1994. Dick Allwright begins working on Exploratory Practice in the early 1990s, naming it Exploratory Teaching. In 1983, Stern proposes a Postmethod pedagogy with *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching.* For more, see Kumaravadivelu, 2006. The rise of Communicative Language Teaching is believed by some to be due to disappointment with audio-lingual and grammar-translation methods back in the 1960s. CLT was a step away from the tradition of methods, since it brought to the forefront of pedagogy the importance of communicative needs, that is, it was learner-sensitive.

[91] Allwright cites Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Total Physical Response and Counselling Learning as examples of attempts at overcoming the difficulties inherent in method-oriented pedagogies (2003, p.2).

forth[7192]. We turn now to the essentials of postmethod pedagogy: particularity, practicality and possibility (*ibid*.,pp. 171ff).

Particularity

Any teaching/learning endeavor must pay heed to the local idiosyncrasies at play. A certain teacher is teaching a certain group of students: "The parameter of particularity emphasizes local exigencies and lived experiences" (*ibid*, p. 171). If a teacher is not sensitive to such variables, they may end up building barries instead of bridges in the classroom: not all students will welcome the idea of talking about their homes, for instance. Nor will everyone be fond of manipulating grammar.

Practicality

Teachers' classroom attitudes are to be valued, but not just while they simply put into practice what somene else – a theorist – has designed. From the perspective of practicality, "they [teachers] ought to be enabled to theorize from their practice and practice what they theorize" (*ibid*., p. 173). The parameter of practicality flows from that of particularity: a teacher sensitive to their context will naturally perceive that pre-established beliefs and procedures may not fit that context. Teachers are then invited to look attentively at their classrooms, see what students are calling for, theorize their practice and then practice what they see is pertinent. Teachers know that a certain task which worked perfectly well for a certain group may not work for another, and that is an excellent opportunity to ask themself why, as they devise new ways of action.

Possibility

Flowing from the parameters of particularity and practicality, the parameter of possibility sheds light on the importance of the experiences people bring into the classroom, which go far beyond "learning English". A "participatory pedagogy" is at

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[92] Kumaravadivelu (2001, p. 537) makes his concerns clear. A postmethod pedagogy aims to understand "local linguistic, sociocultural, and political particularities". Other autors have taken steps forward, considering identity as well as affective and cognitive variables (GALAN TE, 2014, pp. 59 ff).

issue (*ibid*., p. 175), when teachers and students come together to shape the teaching/learning experience, allowing students to also be part of the making of classes and not just receivers of procedures.

In the realm of possibility, Postmethod pedagogy recognizes that language, society and subjectivities go hand in hand. A pedagogy of possibility is about that it-has-worked feeling teachers get when they tap into students' lives by stopping and listening to what they have to say, not necessarily in words, something different from imposing a set of principles and practices.

6.   Sense of plausibility

A concept that belongs in the same realm and mindset as those of Postmethod pedagogy is *sense of plausibility*. Its reality goes in concert with Postmethod.

Sense of plausibility is a term coined by Prabhu (1990, p. 172) to indicate the sense teachers have that teaching is taking place. In other words, teachers know what good teaching is, and it is this knowledge that the author calls "sense of plausibility". A teacher's sense of plausibility may be more or less explicit, more or less wholly formed, but it is determinant of their engagement in the profession, making the job productive. When teachers are really involved in teaching, they do not just perform mechanical tasks: they do "real" teaching instead (*ibid*., p. 174), not treating the classroom as a "a simple factory machine" (ALLWRIGHT, 2003, p. 4). It is very important to note that a good or a bad method is not at stake, but involvement: "The question to ask about a teacher's sense of plausibility is not whether it implies a good or a bad method but, more basically, whether it is active, alive, or operational enough to create a sense of involvement for both the teacher and the student" (PRABHU, 1990, p. 173). The difference between "real" and mechanical teaching is at stake; mechanical teaching is the result of routinization, as opposed to engaged teaching. It follows that "The enemy of good teaching is not a bad method, but overroutinisation" (*ibid*., p. 174), which leads us to state that we are not proposing a sudden breaking away from methods, which would be an inconceivable attitude to many of us, but dealing with those in a new light. Nor have methods to be left: this is a very personal, indivudual-specific issue.

7.   A possible way into Postmethod

Since the issue of method has been laid out, Posmethod has been presented and the notion of sense of plausibility introduced, we can now move on to offer one of Postmethod pedagogies as an illustration and also as a suggestion for teachers[93].

First of all, we need to resignify the notion of planning. In a method-shaped vein, planning is about modeling, predicting and controlling, and it may seem that once we call the notion of method into question, we are making a break with planning. This could not be further from truth.

In fact, planning is traditionally associated with the method we subscribe to, and that means that we plan to control and predict. Teachers then adhere to some notion of prescription, according to the method they are supposed to follow and that is when lesson plans step in. Contrary to a prescriptive view of classroom interaction, a descriptive stand may be taken: that of understanding, which is in agreement with a Postmethod teaching philosophy, with plenty of room for the sense of plausibility.

We teachers are then invited to leave the prescriptive, cause-and-effect perspective on planning behind and embrace a descriptive approach (ALLWRIGHT, 2003, p. 3)[94], an attitude that totally agrees with a Postmethod mindset. Some questions may be useful in here: who are my students? Where do they come from? What do they expect from life? What are their names? This last question gains a whole knew meaning within a Postmethod framework.

Such a posture may frighten some teachers, since it may end up leading to a loss of control, but how are we to put into practice the parameters of Postmethod if we simply pour a set of principles and practices onto our students? What is the point in controlling if we do not know how our class has impacted the group? A better approach could be co-constructing the lesson with students as it is clear to us that they are engaged in fact and

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[93] Kumaravadivelu (2006, pp. 185ff) indicates three Postmethod frameworks: The Three-Dimensional Framework, Exploratory Practice and The Macrostrategic Framework.
[94] Allwright himself would rather use the term "understanding" instead of "descriptive", but he admits how hard it is to overcome the prescriptive *versus* descriptive terminology.

not simply following our pre-ordained orders and instructions[95]. The scenario that gave birth to some still deeply rooted beliefs among teachers is no longer around and that is why we are invited to rethink planning.

The practice of planning for understanding is one of possible Postmethod approaches to language teaching, called Exploratory Practice. In it, we do not ask questions like "How can I get my students to do collaborative work?". Instead, we are encouraged to think in terms of "Why": "Why are students refusing to work in groups?", for instance. Such questions are very dear to EP. They are what EP practitioners know as "puzzles" (MORAES BEZERRA; MILLER, 2015, p. 94). Such a turn in the type of question we ask points at a very important issue in EP, which is quality of life, for when we try to understand what goes on in the classroom at the same time we do not impose ourselves, we are already taking both our and our students' quality of life into consideration[96].

Within the realm of EP, we are not to set our classroom lives – and planning – aside: "[teachers and learners] use their normal pedagogic activities to search for deeper understangings of their teaching (and learning) lives in language classrooms" (*ibid.*, p. 91), which is in concert with the fact that a classroom is not a place into which some prescriptive lesson plan will be poured out: our aim is to plan for understanding as we welcome what goes on. EP is "a socio-cultural approach to education and to classroom life" (*ibid.*, p. 92): it is conceived and done on the very ground of the classroom. EP-oriented lessons will count on Potentially Exploitable Pedagogic Activities – PEPAs -, activities designed for uderstanding and reflecting on the puzzles thought of. Such activities "offer language learning opportunities as well as opportunities for the development of reflexivity about the puzzles in question" (*ibid.*, p. 94). Tasks, exercises, acitivities, however we lable our classroom procedures, will be conceived of as opportunites for underserstanding, and not with the single purposes of simply teaching or practicing some structure; classroom activities are then seen - and understood - in a new

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[95] This is what Allwrigh referes to as "planning, focussing on the macro level and leaving the micro-management level to work itself out in classroom interaction" (2003, p. 5). Our planning will, thus, focus on the macro level, as we think of ways for making understanding possible.

[96] As a matter of fact, EP is not just about techers, but about students becoming involved in the understanding of classroom life as well.

light.   Exploratory Practice is about "an opportunity for generating understandings" (BEZERRA, 2012, p. 64)[97].

Since the basics of Exploratory Practice are understood, we can have a look at its seven principles: "(1) put quality of life first; (2) work primarily to understand language classroom life; (3) involve everybody; (4) work to bring people together; (5) work also for mutual development; (6) do not let the work "burn you out"; (7) make the work a continuous enterprise" (ALLWRIGHT, 2003, p. 8).

To close, I would like to briefly shed light on the importance of these two terms: *understanding* and *quality of life*, in which and around which Exploratory Practice is rooted[98]. *Predicting* and *controlling* are no longer key words: *sensitivity*, *uderstanding* and *quality of life* are where our eyes are called to be on.

8.   Final remarks

The adotption of methods, so obvious and common-sense in our profession, is not a product of chance. Rather, it comes from a certain moment in History not so far away, the rise of Modern Age. Cold War played an important role in the maintenance of methods, especially in English Language teaching pedagogy, which led to a need for planning and controlling both on political and educational levels. As Americans had a leading role in the development of English Language learning, their political motivations ended up leaving a mark on the field. The moment has been overcome.

Once it is understood that, broadly speaking, contexts originating and maintaining method-based approaches to classroom no longer exist, we can then move on to inquire about what approaches our times are both calling for and leading to.

The new times we have been through since then call for new perspectives in the realm of pedagogy, and langauge teaching is not an exception. The exhaustion of the

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[97] In the original, "uma oportunidade de gerar entendimentos".

[98] There is more to EP than I have outlined here – like the stages for carrying out EP research - but going into such specifics would be beyond the scope of this text, which is to assist language teaching professionals in understanding and reflecting on their own practice – and that of their supervisees - with possible changes of mind. Those interested in going further into the matter are invited to consider Allwright, Moraes Bezerra & Miller and Kumaravadivelu (see references).

comes and goes of methods is then questioned. Postmethod begins to be thought of and orchestrated before the 1990s, being more pronounced in the 2000s.

Postmethod pedagogy is not to be perceived as an iconoclastic one, with teachers within institutions with firm beliefs about teaching and clear methods refusing to abide by such principles. The knowledge of Postmethod comes to assist us in understanding that our percepetion of being right or wrong may oftentimes be due not to faults on our part, but to the fact that we are no longer in a world of fixed subjects. Nor are we right in the middle of the post-war tensions between the US and URSS; we might be trying to cater to our students' needs and taking into account our own reality, which was not thought of in the process of designing the methods we teach by. Secondly, such knowledge will also assist supervisors (teacher educators, teacher trainers, coordinators) in their evaluation of classroom teachers, so that together they can – supervisors and supervisees – attempt to strike a healthy balance, walking in step with each other.

Besides being of help for professionals within institutions with clear agendas for the teaching of foreign languages – English in special -, getting into contact with Postmethod will surely be a perspective to be embraced fearlessly by teachers at institutions which allow them to follow the teaching philosophies they find more suitable, without a guilty conscience, knowing that they are theorizing their real-life, context-sensitive practice, as they more openly stand on their sense of plausibility.

Far from being "the" Postmethod approach – which would be a contradiction -, Exploaratory Practice is one of the existing possibilities of being a Postmethod teacher, which will help teachers – and those around - to both understand and see Postmethod pedagogy in practice, as quality of life in the classroom is fostered.

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