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Reflecting on EFL Teachers' Awareness and Application of Postmethod Pedagogy: A Case in Iran

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ABSTRACT

This investigation was carried out to explore EFL teachers' understating and perception of postmethod paradigm in English language teaching (ELT). It also aimed at EFL teachers' evaluation and implementation of this pedagogy in their profession. To do so, as a qualitative research method, semi-structured interview was applied. Seven Iranian EFL teachers participated in the interview sessions. The sessions were audio recorded for further analysis. The results of the data analysis showed that majority of the teachers were not fully aware of the nature of postmethod pedagogy. In addition, most of the EFL teachers were found to make the least use of this paradigm in their teaching career. The study ends with recommendations for ELT in educational system of Iran.

Keywords: Postmethod Paradigm, Postmethod Pedagogy in Iran, ELT in Iran.

Introduction

Toward the end of 20th century, dissatisfaction with methods raised criticism for a variety of reasons. Top-down criticism, the role of contextual factors, curriculum development processes, lack of research, similarity of classroom practices, overestimating a context before identifying it, being initially distinctive and being indistinctive gradually from other methods, and being exposed to interested knowledge were among the sources of such a wave of criticism (Brown, 1997; Pennycook, 1989; Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Along with the dissemination of postmodernism, scholars gradually questioned the concepts of teaching, method, and best method (Clarke, 1983; Pennycook, 1989; Prabhu, 1990; Stern, 1983). Likewise, Long (1991) asserted that teachers should not worry about the methods, believing that what is going on in classrooms differs from what methods determine and that methods do not shape the framework for teachers to operate.

Further, one could find conformity among scholars on the notion that methods were not planned to suit every classroom and every individual teacher (*e.g.,* Larsen-Freeman, 1986, 1999; Prabhu, 1990; Richards and Rogers, 2001). Hence, teachers are recommended to apply methods fitting their classrooms and beliefs. On the other hand, some other scholars contend that the problems

teachers encounter are not due to the methods themselves, rather they origin in teachers' using of methods in wrong time and wrong place (Larsen-Freeman, 1999, 2005; Liu, 1995; Richards and Rogers, 2001). Highlighting postmethod pedagogy as empowering L2 teachers, Kumaravadivelu (1994) championed the postmethod pedagogy through which more autonomy could be granted to teachers, and motivation is practically raised to search for a consistent and open-ended structure with reference to prevalent theoretical and empirical underpinnings, resulting in proliferation of theories and practicing them on the part of teachers.

As a remedy to the shortcomings of methods, relying on SLA research and pedagogy, Brown (2001) proposed "a principled approach" to English language teaching during "post-method era." Here, English teachers are regarded as technicians, diagnosing learners' needs, treating them via appropriate techniques, and assessing the outcomes of the treatments. This approach comprises cognitive principles, affective principles, and linguistic principles. Brown's approach is analogous to macrostrategies framed by Kumaravadivelu (1994).

Having looked at the impetuses leading to the rise of postmethod as well as considering the significance of paying attention to postmethod paradigm in language teaching, the current study embarked on investigating the present situation of this paradigm among Iranian English teachers. More specifically, there are two questions this study attempts to answer:

1. How far are Iranian EFL teachers aware of postmethod pedagogy?
2. How do Iranian EFL teachers evaluate and apply this paradigm in their career?

ELT in Iranian Schools

Iranian education system has changed over past years. Primary school includes six grades, junior highschool lasts for three years and highschool lasts for three years. No course in English is offered as long as students are studying in primary level. They start learning English while they enter junior highschool. In junior highschool and highschool, Iranian students cover six courses in English, each year one course. There are three course books called Prospect 1, 2, 3 for junior highschool students and Vision Series for highschool level. English teachers are required to follow the materials developed by the ministry of education and no substitution for the materials offered is allowed.

Literature Review

The place of postmethod paradigm has been researched in Iranian context. To explore the implications of postmodernism in teaching English to the speakers of other languages (TESOL) postmodern philosophy, Pishghadam and Mirzaee (2008) carried out a study in Iranian context. They contended that the emergence of postmethod paradigm had been under the influence of the broader paradigm of postmodernism. They believed that "no conceptualization of TESOL as a postmethod language pedagogy" could be conceived without reference to the philosophy of postmodernism (p. 99). In Iran, owing to the centralized system of education where all major and minor decisions are made by state authorities, one can hardly see the prevalence of postmodernism in all levels of education (Pishghadam and Mirzaee, 2008). They concluded that there exists an inclination toward driving students to adopt a "perceived status quo" in Iranian system of education.

Razmjoo et al. (2013) unveiled the feasibility of executing postmethod pedagogy in Iran. Their findings exhibited that there exists a wide gap between the principles of postmethod paradigm and their applicability in the context of Iran. This issue was shown to be true more about the two parameters of possibility and practicality.

Naseri Kaimand, Hessamy, and Hemmati (2016) probed into the feasibility and challenges of postmethod education in Iran. Focusing on the three parameters of particularity, possibility and practicality (Kumaravadivelu, 2001), they elicited Iranian EFL teachers' attitudes on postmethod pedagogy and their findings demonstrated that EFL teachers' own beliefs have a crucial role in paving the way for including postmethod pedagogy in ELT curriculum. As to the challenges, the study showed that the main obstacles discouraging the establishment of postmethod education in Iran included students' paucity of interest in pursuing postmethod strategies, inadequate time allotted to instruction, and predetermined syllabuses.

Foreign studies have also looked at postmethod paradigm from a range of angles. Zhengping (2012) investigated Chinese recently employed EFL teachers' perception and practice of postmethod pedagogy. The results of the investigation revealed that inexperienced EFL teachers did not hold knowledge on postmethod and that they were found to be highly affected by examination-centered education. The teachers were also proved to show a discrepancy between their practice and their beliefs.

In a case study, Saengboon (2013) dealt with EFL teachers' awareness and understanding of postmethod pedagogy in Thai context. The findings suggested that even though the teachers failed to explicate postmethod strategies exactly and in detail, their feedbacks during the interviews demonstrated a significant level of their understanding of postmethod underpinnings.

Motlhaka (2015) scrutinized postmethod pedagogy in South Africa. The inquiry unveiled the fact that postmethod pedagogy takes inclusion of students and empowerment of teachers as vital and pivotal to guarantee that what is going on in the classroom makes a difference with that of out of the classroom context. Further, the study recommended the lecturers to believe in their own powers so that they would be able to build methods for development of their profession.

Methodology

Research Method

This study was qualitative in nature. To collect the data required, the current inquiry applied semi-structured interview.

Participants

The participants of this study included Iranian highschool EFL teachers (n=7). They were 3 males and 4 females. Their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 20 years. Six participants held M.A. in ELT and one of them was a Ph.D. candidate in linguistics. They were teaching in both state and non-state schools in Ilam province, Iran. For anonymity, pseudo names were used for the participants.

Instrument

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, a semi-structured interview was applied to extract the teachers' attitudes and evaluation of postmethod pedagogy in Iranian educational system. As Mackey and Gass (2005) noted, a semi-structured interview is less rigid and while allowing the researcher to utilize a written

inventory of questions as a guide, it can cater for more freedom to digress and search for further information. This study, as stated earlier, sought to reach answers to two questions via an interview.

Procedure

Prior to the interview, a letter of invitation to participate in the interview was sent to thirty English teachers in the state of Ilam through Telegram channel and emails and after two weeks only seven teachers replied positively to the request. They were not informed of the topic of the interview. The interview sessions were held in a language learning institute in Ilam (June, 2017). The sessions were audio-recorded for further analysis. Each interview lasted for 10 to 15 minutes. The recommendations noted by Mackey and Gass (2005) were taken into account to avoid potential problems and drawbacks of the interview. Attempts were therefore made to provide a comfortable atmosphere for the interviewees in the course of the interview. Further, the interviewees' age, gender and cultural background were considered. Moreover, the interview was designed in the form of open-ended discussion so that the participants would be able to add more to the questions raised. Each teacher was supposed to answer the two questions addressed by this inquiry:

1. How far do you think you are familiar with and aware of postmethod pedagogy?
2. How do you evaluate and apply postmethod pedagogy in your career?

Data Analysis and Results

Following the termination of the interviews, this researcher transcribed the audio-recorded sessions for analysis. Data analysis was treated on the basis of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008)

moving from data to theory and extracting patterns out of the accumulated data.

Results

The present study examined Iranian EFL teachers' cognizance and awareness of postmethod pedagogy as well as their perception and evaluation of this paradigm in association with teaching profession. What follows is the results of the data analysis.

Research Question 1: *How far do you think you are familiar with and aware of postmethod pedagogy?*

As for this question, analyzing the data led to three major categories including those Iranian EFL teachers who were little aware of the advent of postmethod pedagogy in language teaching, those moderately aware, and those fully aware of this paradigm. As instance, Ali said,

Well, I'm not utterly aware of this expression, but I know that methods were not able to satisfy the instructors, so nearly in 1990 the methodologists tried to change the ways used in teaching and in 1994 Kumaravadivelu posed his idea as postmethod and this new era started.

Reza also pointed to his shallow knowledge of postmethod "To some extent I know that postmethod was a reaction toward the methods ...". The stance taken by Kiana showed her moderate awareness of this paradigm "I should say I am familiar enough with postmethod emerging out of scholars' opposition against the drawbacks of methods". The points made by Mehdi revealed his high knowledge of postmethod underpinnings. He mentioned the impetus for the start of postmethod and the three parameters framed by (Kumaravadivelu, 2001),

This is the era of postmetod pedagogy i.e. gradually moving from earlier methods to the recent ones, no method or anti-method or even eclectic techniques.

Kumaravadivelu first criticized all the methods and highlighted their limitations more than their positive aspects to be considered for teaching. Little by little, he introduced his postmethod pedagogy. I believe that the developers of methods and approaches didn't take into consideration the requirements of language teaching perfectly. Kumaravadivelu introduces his postmethod pedagogy with his famous sentence "What is needed is not an alternative method, but an alternative to method". He emphasizes that any postmethod pedagogy should consider 3 pedagogical parameters: First, particularity, a context-sensitive pedagogy based on a true understanding of local linguistic, sociocultural, political.........particularities; Second, Practicality, encouraging or enabling teachers to theorize from their practice and practice the desired theories; and the last one is possibility that is a bit difficult to implement in my opinion. It is related to the importance of considering the local social forces.

Research Question 2: *How do you evaluate and apply postmethod pedagogy in your career?*

Analyzing the data with respect to the second question of the study demonstrated three major themes uttered by the interviewees including their overall evaluation of postmethod pedagogy in ELT, the instances of postmethod strategies they applied in their career, and the main obstacles to execute postmethod underpinnings in ELT.

Maryam was the only English teacher who expressed her alienation of postmethod simply saying *"To tell you the truth, I am not following postmethod as I am not friendly with it".* In the word of Shima, postmethod has certainly been effective in language teaching and brought about changes to the context of pedagogy, including their beliefs, values, understanding of the nature of language learning as well as new ideas in material development. As a different outlook, to Mehdi, although in nature postmethod can work in different contexts, its effectiveness primarily depends on the knowledge of the teacher. He highlighted teacher's plausibility to be of primary importance in postmethod pedagogy. Further, as to the benefits of postmethod, Reza referred to the needs analysis and paying attention to both learners and teachers. Postmethod was evaluated as beneficial in ELT since it does not make teachers rely on the predetermined materials and content (Sara). Another positive aspect of Postmethod pedagogy in the evaluation by Kiana underlined the freedom provided by postmethod which would enable teachers to act independently in every area of language teaching and this makes postmethod pedagogy intriguing.

As the second outstanding pattern, we analyzed the data to explore the instances of postmethod application by Iranian EFL teachers participating in this study. Except for two cases who stated that they were not following postmethod in teaching English at school, the rest were found to apply its framework, either partially or as far possible. Without pointing to specific cases, Shima said, *"I also try to include, as far as possible, the strategies of postmethod in my career".* The same statement was made by Mehdi, "In my profession, I suppose I apply postmethod strategies". In some cases, the teachers said they applied postmethod in their conversation courses since the teacher has more freedom to experience and evaluate the trend of teaching and that he would not have to follow the prescribed syllabus (In Sara & Kiana's words).

The third major theme discovered in the data turned around the obstacles the interviewees believed to have slowed down the feasibility of postmethod in Iranian educational system. Generally speaking, the majority of the teachers put their finger on the present educational system in Iran as the primary source of problem in implementing postmethod pedagogy in its true sense. More detailed explanation of the issue by the interviewees revealed that what makes postmethod hard to practice is the textbooks that drives the teachers to act in a limited way and rob creativity and interests from them (In Shima's word). Maryam complained about inadequate time allocated to teaching English at schools. Another major barrier to execute postmethod in Iranian educational system, according to Mehdi, is inflexible testing system, leaving the least room for teachers to use the latest trends in language testing. Dearth of teacher education was considered a potentially debilitative element to disseminate and normalize practicing postmethod paradigm in ELT in Iran, a point hinted by Ali,

I do believe that we as English teachers need to have more in-service training course so that the latest changes in our profession will be transferred to teachers. One way, I imagine, to propagate postmethod pedagogy and encourage English teachers to approach it is through such courses held for them. So, they can be familiar more with what and how of this new trend in language teaching.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study targeted at the awareness, evaluation and practice of postmethod pedagogy among Iranian EFL teachers in highschool level. Even though the results of this study are not supposed to be generalized safely due to the small size of the participants, they are likely to provide the readers with novel aspects and that they could pave the way for more in-depth studies to dissect the issue.

Initially, the results support the fact that for different reasons, active EFL teachers in Iranian educational system mostly still do not hold a clear and thorough picture of what postmethod paradigm is. This very finding is in congruence with a number of research attempts carried out on the same issue (Naseri Kaimand *et al.,* 2016; Pishgadam & Mirzaee, 2008; Zhengping 2012). This paucity of awareness of the paradigm on the part of the teachers suggests that the status quo of educational system can be considered as the major debilitative factor for postmethod pedagogy to be welcomed and understood by English teachers.

With reference to the overall evaluation of postmethod pedagogy by Iranian EFL teachers, the findings clearly endorse the effectiveness and profitability of postmethod pedagogy although most teachers held rather superficial knowledge of this paradigm. This finding shows that even if new paradigms are not established in ELT in Iran yet, the teachers at least can embrace their arrival and we need to think of removing the barriers.

Another theme emerging out of the data concerned the instances of postmethod applications in English classrooms. In spite of the fact that some teachers focused on their applying postmethod strategies while teaching, the instances they referred to made it clear that postmethod pedagogy is little used in the course of instruction by English teachers. This poor application of the pedagogy is another evidence of the gap between postmethod underpinnings and their application in ELT in Iran (Razmjoo *et al.,* 2013).

Finally, in line with (Pishgadam and Mirzaee, 2008), the present study proved

that although Iranian EFL teachers are willing to apply postmethod in their teaching profession, implementing this pedagogy would be hardly feasible owing to the present barriers mainly stemming from the restrictive educational system.

The findings yielded by this investigation unveil the fact that the English teachers in Iranian context are mostly not well aware of the nature of postmethod paradigm. Further, practically speaking, most of these teachers make either no or the least application of this paradigm in English teaching profession. EFL teachers in Iranian context are highly recommended to deepen their theoretical knowledge of postmethod pedagogy and make endeavor to use its strategies in English language teaching in schools. The findings of this study should be generalized and interpreted with caution as the number of the participants was limited.

Based on the teachers' viewpoints and perceptions on the present educational system in Iran, it is suggested that those who are in charge of making major decisions in education and curriculum smooth the way for making the system more flexible and adapted with the latest trends and changes in ELT.

The last but not the least, one neglected area in ELT in Iran, as emphasized by Naseri Kaimvand *et al.* (2014), which stands close to the previously stated point, is the poor situation of teacher education in Iran. It needs to be constantly treated to provide English teachers with ongoing course of changes in ELT and help them enhance and update their knowledge of the profession.

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