Are Language Teaching Methods Really Dead as Some TESOL Gurus Have Proclaimed?

¿Realmente el método de enseñanza de los idiomas ha muerto tal como lo han declarado algunos gurús de la enseñanza del inglés?

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Up to the last two decades of the 20th century, the era of methods prevailed as a key component, especially in the field of teaching English as a second language. Nevertheless, by the end of the century, many TESOL authorities were questioning the usefulness and scope of methods. Consequently, the idea was declared dead and the postmethod condition emerged. In this reflection article, it is argued that the nature and scope of a method in the teaching field cannot die for a series of reasons. It is concluded that what can be proclaimed is the death of a unique, universal method, but not the death of methods per se, since this is an essential component of any teaching process.

Keywords: approach, language teaching, method, methodology, postmethod

Hasta las últimas dos décadas del siglo xx, la era del método prevaleció, especialmente en el campo de la enseñanza del inglés como segunda lengua. No obstante, a finales del mismo siglo, muchas autoridades en el área de la enseñanza del inglés cuestionaron la utilidad y el alcance del método. Como consecuencia, se declaró su muerte y surgió la idea del postmétodo. En este artículo de reflexión se sustenta que el método educativo, con su naturaleza y alcance, no puede "morir" por una serie de razones. En conclusión, lo que se puede proclamar es la muerte del método único o universal, pero no la del método *per se*, ya que éste es un componente esencial de cualquier proceso de enseñanza.

Palabras clave: enfoque, enseñanza de idiomas, método, metodología, postmétodo

Introduction

The field of language teaching, whether as a second language (L2) or foreign language, has been very productive in the area of teaching approaches, methods, and strategies. In fact, while Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) refer to 15 *techniques* and *principles*, Richards and Rodgers (2014) analyze 16 *approaches* and *methods*. What these authors show is that the language teaching field was dominated by an era of methods in the 19th and the 20th century.

Despite the richness of approaches and methods, around the middle of the 20th century, some voices started to highlight the limitations of the concept of method. Examples of these early voices were Mackey (1965) and Kelly (1969). Additionally, by the 1980s and 1990s, other voices such as those of Stern (1983), Clarke (1983), Pennycook (1989), and Prabhu (1990) warned teachers against accepting teaching methods without a critical attitude because those scholars were doubtful about the support of the nature and scope of methods. Furthermore, methods of language teaching were declared dead by such authorities as Allwright (1991) and Brown (2002) in the 1990s and 2000s. Finally, Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2001, 2003, 2006) supported the emergence of what was called the postmethod condition in order to "restructure our view of language teaching and teacher education" (2006, p. 170).

Although the authorities above have strong arguments for questioning the nature, scope, and application of methods in any sociocultural context, can they really assign the concept of method "to the dustbin" of history (Nunan, 1989, p. 2) and proclaim its death?

The purpose of this article is to support the importance of the role of method in language teaching, whether as an L2 or as a foreign language. The article is divided into the following sections: a brief chronological review of the method era, the method crisis, the counterargument to support the importance of methods, and conclusions.

A Brief Chronological Review of the Method Era

Chronologically, the method era can be classified into six moments: (a) oldest methods, (b) structuralist approaches, (c) cognitive approaches, (d) innovative methods, (e) communicative approaches, and (f) latest trends.

The first group includes the grammar-translation method (GTM) and the oral methods. According to Howatt (1984), GTM appeared towards the end of the 18th century. This method was not supported by any theory of language or learning. Its emphasis was on the teaching of grammar and the development of translation skills. Vocabulary was also important, and it was taught by means of isolated lists of words. In contrast, the oral methods included the series method, the natural method, and the direct method. As the general name of this group implies, they emphasized the oral aspect of a target language. They appeared before the end of the 19th century between the 1880s and the 1990s as a result of the Reform Movement and were promoted by various authorities from Germany, France, and Great Britain who were not satisfied with the level of students' language learning as a result of the use of the GTM (Howatt, 1984; Howatt & Widdowson, 2004). Although there were no definite theories of language and learning at that time, these methods were supported by rationalist principles about child language learning, phonetic principles, and methodology principles. Each one of the previous methods used a series of activities, procedures, and resources to fulfill their oral objectives, so that the students could process the new language without recurring to their mother tongue (Diller, 1971).

The second group, called structuralist approaches, consisted of the audio-lingual method (ALM) and the audio-visual method (AVM). Their emphasis was also on the aural-oral skills of a language, and they were supported by the principles of learning from the perspective of behaviorist psychology and of language coming from structuralist linguistics. Although they

did not teach grammar directly, their syllabi were carefully sequenced from easier to harder language structures. The ALM appeared by the 1940s in the USA, and the AVM towards the 1950s in France. According to Bastidas (1993), the AVM did not use structuralist linguistics principles about language, but some teaching techniques—such as observation, mimicry, repetition, and memorization—were borrowed from behaviorism. Finally, these methods were characterized by the incorporation of the technology available at that time, such as language laboratories, tape recorders, overhead projectors, films, and slides.

The third group has been labeled the cognitive approaches. They are the cognitive-code learning approach (CLA) and the silent way. The CLA was the result of Chomsky's critical analysis of the Skinnerian neobehavioristic theory of learning and its application on language teaching through the ALM (Chomsky, 1966). As a result, some authors tried to design a new approach supported by principles of cognitive psychology and generative-transformational grammar. The CLA was advocated by Carroll (1966), Chastain (1969), and Chastain and Woerdehoff (1968). In this approach, language learning is a creative and active mental process that allows learners to acquire and use the new language to communicate. Even though the CLA emphasizes the conscious learning of grammar, the learners should understand the rules, select them to fit the context, and use them meaningfully. According to Chastain (1976), a CLA class should include a series of activities that promote meaningful practice, expression of meaning, and meaningful learning. Another method that can be classified as cognitive is the silent way because of its emphasis on the development of the learners' mental powers. According to Richards and Rodgers (1986), the silent way was supported by some principles of cognitive psychology. This method was not based on any theory of language. Its strength is its learning theory, which is learner-centered. For Gattegno (1972, 1976), its inventor, language learning is a

creative process that is facilitated by intensive attention, autonomy and independence, learning to learn, silent periods, self-correction, cooperation, problem solving, and self-discovery. In the silent way, the use of "cuisenaire rods," fidel charts for developing pronunciation and vocabulary, and some reading and writing materials are well known.

The fourth group is composed of community language learning, total physical response, and suggestopedia. These methods were published in the 1960s. Some authors labeled them as innovative approaches (Blair, 1982) and others classified them as humanistic approaches (The British Council, 1982). These methods are characterized by basing their conceptions of learning on psychoanalysis, counseling, humanistic psychology, developmental psychology, suggestology, and yoga. They do not provide any linguistic support for their concepts of language. All of these methods aim at helping students get a good command of the language by lowering their affective filter through a series of activities such as the use of the first language (L1), cooperative work, physical commands and movement, relaxation techniques, yoga, classical music, and so on. In other words, they try to create the best conditions for language learning.

The fifth group is called the communicative approaches which emerged in the 1970s and flourished by the 1980s (Bastidas, 1993, Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Waters, 2012) as a result of questioning some of the principles of Chomsky's generative and transformational grammar, especially those of linguistic competence and performance by such sociolinguists as Hymes (1972), and philosophers of language such as Austin (1969). These authors stressed the role of social context and the notion of communicative competence to explain language from a functional perspective. The approaches included in this group are the situational approach, the communicative approach to language teaching, the natural approach, task-based language teaching, the lexical approach, competency-based language teaching, and content-based

instruction. As the name implies, all of these approaches were designed to develop the learners' communicative competence. Consequently, their theoretical foundations are based on sociolinguistics, speech acts, semantics, second language acquisition, corpus linguistics, educational standards, syllabus design, among others. These approaches use a variety of activities, tasks, and materials to promote interaction, negotiate meaning, and share information. Typical types of communicative activities are information gap, opinion gap, information transfer, mingling, cued dialogues, role plays, picture strip stories, drama, games, and so forth (Bastidas, 1993). Examples of tasks are jigsaw, opinion exchange, decision making, problem solving, and so on (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Finally, in the 21st century, two tendencies are spreading around the world in language teaching: content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and emerging uses of technology in language teaching and learning (TLTL; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Although CLIL is being used to teach foreign languages in some European countries, most of the European experiences relate to the integration of content and language learning for teaching regional or minority languages and official languages. This means that CLIL is mostly a type of innovative methodology in the field of bilingual and plurilingual education (Eurydice, 2006). TLTL cannot be considered a language teaching approach or method. However, it is the latest trend that deserves special attention in our field. TLTL is a source of a variety of digital resources for teaching and is a means of enhancing students' language learning (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Examples of technology tools are computers, cell phones, tablets, digital cameras, projectors, printers, video beams, among others. Examples of information and communication technology (ICT) are software applications, operating systems, web-based applications, computer language learning software, search engines, and so on. Some of the advantages of the use of ICTs in language

teaching for students are: instant access to the use of authentic oral and written language, synchronically or asynchronically; using computers and cell phones to work both independently and collaboratively; organization and participation in online or virtual communities; autonomy in what the students want to learn; monitoring their progress by using programs that allow them to test their language knowledge; communication with e-pen pals, both orally and in writing in real time; learning a new language wherever and whenever they want to; and motivation to learn a new language by themselves (Chouthaiwale & Alkamel, 2018).

This review of teaching methods and approaches shows many strengths that this area has contributed to support the field of language teaching methodology (LTM). First, it shows that there has been a long-lasting tradition of searching for new methods and approaches as was shown above. Second, many authorities around the world have looked for new ways to change, innovate, and reform the teaching of second or foreign languages. Third, there has been an increasing effort to support the methods with a variety of beliefs, principles, and theories coming from a diversity of disciplines, the most relevant being linguistics, psychology, pedagogy, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and sociology. Fourth, the richest component of methods has been the procedural one, which accounts for the great number of activities, tasks, and techniques implemented in classes internationally. Fifth, all of the methods took advantage of the technology available in each period of time with the most innovative one being the new ICTs. Finally, although none of the methods are ideal, comprehensive, or not appropriate for every context, their proponents have tried to provide teachers with more effective ways of teaching L2 or foreign languages so that learners could reach the highest levels of language proficiency.

Despite the previous strengths of the method era, by the middle of the 20th century, some analysts of language teaching methods voiced their concerns about

the limitations of the concept and scope of methods, the exaggerated claims of the proponents of methods, and the teachers' uncritical acceptance and application of them in any context (Kelly, 1969; Mackey, 1965; Stern, 1983). These critical views had been stated at that time even though in 1963 Anthony (1963/1972) had attempted "to lessen a little the terminological confusion in the language field" (p. 8) by proposing the use of three terms organized hierarchically: *approach*, *method,* and *technique*. In his own words: "The organizational key is that techniques carry out a method which is consistent with an approach" (p. 5).

The Method Crisis

The crisis of method in the field of LTM was declared by the 1990s. For example, some well-recognized authorities affirmed that the concept of method should "[be laid] to rest" (Brown, 2002, p. 11), "not . . . exist at all" (Jarvis, 1991, p. 295), be assigned "to the dustbin" of language teaching history (Nunan, 1989, p. 2), and that a "requiem" should be written for the "recently interred methods" (Brown, 2002, p. 14). Some reasons for the previous assertions could have been that the word method meant "so little and so much" (Mackey, 1965, p. 139), the existence of methods was unhelpful (Allwright, 1991), the concept of method had lost its significance (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), and that the concept of method is "shrouded in a veil of vagueness, despite its central importance" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 162).

In conclusion, there were not only reasons for a crisis of method in LTM, but enough arguments to sentence the methods to death, just at the start of the new millennium (Brown, 2002). Kumaravadivelu (2006), in fact, corroborated this when he wrote:

> And particularly the ambiguous use of the term method, and the multiple myths that are associated with it, have contributed to a gradual erosion of its usability as a construct in language learning and teaching, prompting some to say that the concept of method is dead. (p. 168)

The previous assertions are very dangerous for the language teaching practitioners. For example, preservice language teachers could infer that there is no need to study the language teaching methods in their TESOL courses, and the in-service language teachers might think that the issues of method are not important to consider when they plan their language courses and their daily or weekly lessons.

The Counterarguments to Support the Importance of Method

In spite of the arguments stated above by the well-known and respected TESOL authorities, the question is: *can we really affirm that a language teaching method can die?* In this section, it is argued that there are convincing reasons to demonstrate the essential role and importance of methods, not only in language teaching, but also in teaching any other discipline. Some of the reasons why it cannot be affirmed that a language teaching method can die are the following.

Method is a concept that is supported in various disciplinary fields. Starting with philosophy, it is well known that philosophers used a variety of methods to pursue knowledge. For example, Descartes used the concept in his famous work *Discourse on Method* (1637/1968). He used the etymological meaning of "methodos," coming from Greek, which was equivalent to a path, a track, or a road to pursue knowledge. Classical examples of methods in philosophy are methodic doubt, argument, and dialectics. Another discipline where the study of a specific type of knowledge is important is epistemology. This type of knowledge is called scientific knowledge or science in general. According to Piaget (1970), epistemology uses the following methods: method of direct analysis, the formalizing epistemological method, and the genetic method. Finally, statistics, as a branch of mathematics, uses a variety of methods to collect, organize, analyze, and interpret data. The

main methods used to analyze data are descriptive and inferential statistics.

Methods are the main object of study of a general discipline called methodology. This is an old discipline closely related to epistemology and logic. It is defined as the critical study of methods to solve complex, theoretical, and practical problems (Morles, 2002). According to Morles (2002), there are different types of methodologies, such as research methodology, planning methodology, teaching methodology, methodology of technological and industrial production, and so on. As stated above, methods are the main component of the structure of methodology and are defined as a set of systematic and orderly operations, procedures, and instruments employed to look for solutions to problems.

In research methodology, methods have always played a salient role in the process of collecting and analyzing data. In this area, methods are conceived of as a set of rules, procedures, strategies, and techniques to collect and analyze data in order to study physical and social reality. Methods are the path to building scientific knowledge and that is why to do science, one needs a scientific method. Methods are also necessary in science to validate knowledge. Examples of specific research methods are observation, interviews, questionnaires, surveys, experiments, and so on (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014).

Methods are very important in the field of general didactics. In fact, one of the main components of the objects of study of general didactics is methods. This serves to answer the question, how do teachers teach? The other objects of study of general didactics are students, the teachers, the objectives, and the contents of the subjects. According to de Mattos (1974), methods are the rational organization of activities and resources in order to reach objectives efficiently. This means that a good method can facilitate students' learning. This area includes a variety of teaching methods such as deductive method, inductive method, direct instruction, inquiry-based learning, discovery learning,

differentiated instruction, personalized learning, flipped learning, and so on.

In the process of learning and teaching, method is an essential component. A method is a bridge between learning and teaching. In fact, according to Mayer (2008), in educational psychology a method is not only a component of teaching, but also an object of research. "How can we tell whether instruction [teaching] affects learning?" (p. 8); three approaches to research on teaching methods have been used: the behaviorist, the cognitive, and the contextual. Furthermore, in order to be effective learners, students need to apply the appropriate learning strategies, which are part of a method.

In educational planning, a priori decisions about method are very important. In any human endeavor, planning is necessary to guarantee success, and that is why educational institutions plan their activities every year. Medina-Rivilla and Mata (2009) affirm that the basic components of planning are didactic objectives, contents and competencies, activities and resources, and evaluation. The procedures, activities, and resources are the main elements of a method. Teachers need to plan the use of varied, appropriate, and useful methods so that the students understand and apply the contents of the school syllabi, reach educational objectives, and develop the competencies planned in advance.

Decisions about method are also essential in the process of lesson planning. This is a corollary of the importance of decisions regarding method in institutional planning stated above. According to Harmer (1983), "the best teachers are those who think carefully about what they are going to do in their classes and who plan how they are going to organize the teaching and learning" (p. 218). Previous questions about selection, orderly organization, sequence and pace of contents, activities, and resources to accomplish the lesson objectives and to develop the students' competencies refer to method. According to de Mattos (1974), a method establishes a practical relationship between procedures,

resources and activities, and the students' learning objectives or results.

The nature, constituents, and stages of what you observe in a lesson or class are the essence of method. Whatever happens in class is the result of a teaching and a learning method. This means that even if teachers cannot teach a class as planned, what they do in class represents a method. In other words, a method is an inherent characteristic of a lesson.

The quality of the students' learning an L2 or a foreign language might depend on the effectiveness of a good teaching method. Although students can learn a new language by themselves, teachers are needed to serve as mediators in an L2 or a foreign language lesson. To accomplish this, teachers should design and implement active, varied, flexible, and motivating methods to facilitate students' language learning. For instance, de Mattos (1974) states that when teachers teach a subject with a good method, the contents of the course work become rich, suggestive, and effective. This way the students' minds will be energized, inspired, and open to new study and life. In contrast, when teachers use inappropriate methods, the subject can become dry, irrelevant, and not motivating for the students.

Methods have always played a significant role in LTM. As soon as people began to teach classical languages to children at home, they started to use techniques, procedures, and resources, which are the main components of a method. The same happened to early teachers who taught classical languages at school. Little by little teachers and people interested in language teaching accumulated and organized their procedures, activities, and resources to support methods and approaches. This process has been described and organized in such works as the one written by Kelly (1969), who traces the development of language teaching between 500 BC until 1969, to cover a period of 25 centuries. LTM has been a very dynamic, productive, innovative, controversial, cyclical, popular, and unpopular field of teaching methods.

This has been demonstrated by method analysts such as Mackey (1965), Diller (1971, 1978), Richards and Rodgers (2014), Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011), and Kumaravadivelu (2006). Finally, if a method is an important component of general didactics, it should also be important in language teaching didactics because both types of didactics deal with the process of teaching and learning.

Interest in language teaching methods is resurfacing in the 21st century. Despite the existence of some discrediting voices against language teaching methods, there is a tendency in the 2000s to support their value due to the knowledge and the experience of some language teaching authorities, such as Block (2001, as cited in Bell, 2007), Larsen-Freeman (2001, as cited in Anker, 2001), Bell (2003), and Adamson (2004) and the results of some research by Bell (2007). Block (as cited in Bell, 2007), for example, has argued that

> While method has been discredited at an etic level (that is, in the thinking and the nomenclature of scholars) it certainly retains a great deal of vitality at the grass-roots, emic level (that is, it is part of the nomenclature of lay people and teachers. (p. 142)

In addition, Bell (2007) did a qualitative study with four groups of teachers (145 students in an MA program in applied linguistics at an American university and 16 students in a preservice certificate program at the same university). The objective of the study was to assess Block's claim that "whereas the notion of method no longer plays a significant role in the thinking of applied linguists, it still plays a vital role in the thinking of teachers" (p. 135). Data were collected by means of interviews, discussion board postings, autobiographies, and teaching journals. Results of the study indicated that "teacher interest in methods is determined by how far methods provide options in dealing with particular teaching contexts. Rather than playing a vital role in teacher thinking, teacher attitude towards methods is highly pragmatic" (p. 135).

Conclusions

The TESOL authorities previously mentioned—such as Allwright (1991), Brown (2002), Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2001, 2003, 2006), and Nunan (1989)—have had strong arguments regarding the limitations of the method era of language teaching. There is no question about the inexistence of the ideal, unique, and universal "one size fits all" method to be applied in any sociocultural context. In addition, there is no perfect approach or method, and consequently, their promoters have exaggerated their claims about the innovation and superiority in comparison to other methods, the effectiveness in facilitating students' learning of a new language, and so on. Finally, it is certainly true that method is not the solution to the complex problem of learning an L2 or a foreign language effectively around the world.

Another critique that goes back to the 1960s refers to the use of a variety of terms in language teaching (Anthony, 1963/1972) and to the vagueness of the concept of method (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Mackey, 1965). To solve these difficulties, Anthony (1963/1972) proposed the use of the terms approach, method, and technique. He also defined method in accordance with its etymological meaning: "Method is an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language to students" (p. 6). In addition, in an effort to systematize and evaluate the knowledge and experience accumulated in the method era, other authors proposed other terms to support the concept of method. However, their efforts seem to have created more confusion than clarity. For example, Richards and Rodgers (1982) expanded the concept of method to include *approach*, *design*, and *procedure*. Stern (1983) converted the method into a *theory of teaching*, and Larsen-Freeman (1986) presented methods as composed of *principles* and *techniques*. Finally, Kumaravadivelu defined method as a *construct*. In conclusion, instead of going forwards, we have gone backwards in relation to the conceptualization of method in such a way that Mackey's (1965) concern continues to be valid:

As a result, much of the field of language method has become a matter of opinion rather than of fact. It is not surprising that feelings run high in these matters, and that the very word "method" means so little and so much. (p. 139)

The problem with the previous arguments is that the TESOL gurus sentenced the concept of method to death. According to them, the concept of method has lost significance, is unhelpful, has no substance, and "has little theoretical validity and even less practical utility" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 170). Metaphorically, what they have done is "throw the baby out with the bathwater."

The answer to the question that motivated the writing of this article, "can we really affirm that a language teaching method can die?" is a resounding "No" for the following reasons. Firstly, method is a construct that has been substantiated in a variety of disciplines, such as philosophy, epistemology, statistics, and so on. Secondly, method is the object of study of a traditional discipline called methodology. Thirdly, method is essential in research methodology. Fourthly, method is a key component of two related disciplines to LTM: general didactics and educational psychology. Last but not least, method is an inherent component of the teaching and learning process. Everything teachers and students do from the start to the end of a language lesson is the result of method.

Referring to the nature and scope of method, one suggestion is to maintain the idea used in general didactics. In this discipline, the word method comes from the Latin word *methodus*, which means "way of teaching" and was expanded with ideas or orderliness and regularity in order to reach an end. That is, method is a means to an end. Consequently, the didactic method has been described as the rational and practical organization of procedures, activities, and resources to accomplish learning objectives effectively and efficiently (de Mattos, 1974). In addition, a method should be supported by

theoretical principles of language learning, language teaching, and the role of the sociocultural context. Finally, a method should be adapted to the educational aims, the contents of a course, the types of students, and to the institutional and external sociocultural context (Medina-Rivilla & Mata, 2009). Finally, the attempts to explain the complex problem of learning an L2 or a foreign language successfully should be assigned to theories of language learning, and not to methods of language teaching.

Despite the criticism stated above against the methods in TESOL, one cannot ignore some of their strengths. The results of the analysis of methods indicate that some of them are based on sound theoretical principles of language learning and teaching, while others have developed and applied a variety of activities and procedures. Some have been well designed, and still others have and are just now taking advantage of the advances in the new ICTs. The lesson for language teaching practitioners is that we cannot throw all of this knowledge and experience into the dustbin of history, but should use them, at least, as a source of enlightenment to design and implement our methods of teaching an L2 or a foreign language in our everyday classes.

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