Principled Eclecticism in English Language Teaching

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This paper aims at debunking the myth of "method" in teaching English as a second or foreign language by reintroducing the less popular approach to ELT called "Principled Eclecticism." To that end, the main methods proposed in the SLA literature are reviewed and then a redefinition of "principled eclecticism" is made in a way that restricts the teacher to scientific findings on second/foreign language acquisition. As will become clear, the three signifiers of the principled eclectic practitioner as proposed by Cushing-Leubner and Bigelow can pave the way to a coherent theory that takes into consideration Kumaravadivelu's macrostrategic framework. Combined, these proposals challenge traditional teaching pedagogy, and in so doing, incite more research as to what constitutes the main principles of an eclectic approach.

INTRODUCTION

Infants as young as three years old are already experts in their native language (L1). They acquire it unconsciously and with little effort. In contrast, adults generally find it quite hard to learn a second language (L2). However, in some educational settings, L2 learners do achieve near-native fluency. The question of how this learning curve is shaped by both teachers and learners has been the driving force behind most research in ELT. As a consequence, a set of methods has emerged over the years, each claiming to have unlocked the secret to teaching English. Unfortunately, none of those methods have proven to be efficient as a self-contained approach. This is why most foreign language teachers have moved beyond the constraints of methods to experiment with an eclectic approach to teaching, where they choose the practices that work for them in relation to the classroom environment. An eclectic approach, as we shall see, is an indispensable tool for the modern English language teacher.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The quest towards developing an efficient, formal approach for teaching English first began as Grammar-Translation became popular. This method, as the name suggests, promoted writing and reading by translating texts from and into the target language. However, it subsequently became apparent that this method lacked some serious components, as it did not put any emphasis on speaking the language. This criticism came in the form of the Reform Movement, which led to the founding of the International Phonetic Association in 1886.

The ideas of the Reform Movement fueled a number of linguists to develop new methodologies. Upon examining the process of language acquisition in children, some linguists argued for a Natural Approach (later known as the Direct Method) to language teaching. In the Direct Method, no translation was allowed and transmission of linguistic knowledge was done directly in the target language. The Direct Method was afterwards reintroduced as the Oral Approach, with its new principles of selection, gradation, and presentation (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), and became the dominant method in the UK by the 1950s. At the same time, Audiolingualism was being developed in the US and was considered the first scientific method of language teaching for its foundations combined structuralism and behaviorism. The former holds that to master a language is to be able to produce rule-governed utterances based on an understanding of the underlying linguistic "levels" (phonology, morphology, etc.), while the latter views language as a process of habit formation. In practice, the teacher might use dialogues that are memorized and repeated in the hope of students being able to extract the grammatical structures of the target language inductively.

But Audiolingualism was not on the stage long enough to flourish. In fact, teachers and students alike complained about the tedious activities that took all the fun out of learning. Furthermore, in his review of Skinner's theory, Chomsky (1959) demolished the behavioral account of language when he argued that to understand the properties of a language is to understand the internal mental faculties responsible for generating infinite new sentences.

With Chomsky's revolutionary insights into linguistics, the cognitivist view of language reigned in the 1970s. More specifically, a

set of "humanistic" language teaching methods saw the light. They were called "humanistic" because the focus in the classroom shifted from the teacher to the student, whose feelings and individual thinking capacities were finally acknowledged. Among these methods are The Silent Way, Community Language Learning, TPR, and DeSuggestopedia. The latter, for instance, emanates from the works of psychologist Georgi Lozanov, who claimed that students in a foreign language class come equipped with a set of limiting beliefs about their learning capacities. At the core of these beliefs lies the fear of failure and linguistic performance. The resulting attitude, thus, creates psychological impediments to learning, which need to be "desuggested" to free the students to use their full mental capacities (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

The previously mentioned methods are founded on the assumption that if one masters the linguistic structures of a language, one would thus speak it perfectly. In the 1970s, however, many educators challenged this claim. Some remarked that being able to create correct utterances *inside* the classroom does not guarantee that this ability would hold *outside* the classroom (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). A new theory was therefore needed to account for this gap, one that takes into consideration factors other than the speaker's competence, in the Chomskyan sense, including the social context, the culture, and the intentions of the speakers. Hymes's theory of communicative competence provides exactly such an account. It sets the principles required for a speaker to be communicatively competent in a speech community (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) and is the basis upon which the current popular method to teaching English, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), rests. For CLT, the notion of communicative competence is its main goal.

At the same time CLT was developing, Task-Based Learning emerged as another modern approach to teaching English. Task-Based Learning focuses on doing tasks in an environment that promotes natural language acquisition. It is often associated with the Bangalore Project founded by N. S. Prabhu in 1979, which formed the basis for his *Second Language Pedagogy*. In short, he presents a syllabus that consists of tasks and guidelines for their selection and grading. The most important activities, Prabhu (1987) claims, are "reasoning gap" activities that "involve deriving some new information from given information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns" (p. 46).

PRINCIPLED ECLECTICISM

From Method to Postmethod

If the previous review proves anything, it is that some methods, if not all, have emerged in order to correct the weak spots of other, previous methods. The rationale behind such a move is that if we can only find the right supermethod, teaching English would take place effortlessly. Furthermore, the use of "method" presupposes that teachers do not make a difference (which is not true, as we will see later), and that their role should only be constrained to performing and applying strategies and techniques prescribed by a certain "method." By the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, however, there was a growing awareness that adhering to a single method might not be that effective.

The Postmethod Condition

The dissatisfaction with "method" led many linguists to question this concept and thus offer alternative approaches to teaching English. In 1994, Kumaravadivelu published one of the most popular papers in the literature, a paper in which he urges teachers to embrace a "postmethod condition." In a nutshell, he argues that in order for optimal language learning to occur, teachers need to become autonomous decision makers and use a range of approaches and principles inspired from SLA research and learning theories (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). Also, in the same paper, three attributes that characterize the postmethod condition are defined: the search for an alternative to method, teacher autonomy, and principled pragmatism. All of which we shall understand more comprehensively in the upcoming sections.

A Pluralistic Approach

In this postmethod era, different teachers have developed disparate attitudes towards their work. Larsen-Freeman (2000) distinguishes three positions with regards to teaching English: Absolutism, Relativism, and Pluralism (another version of relativism). What are the differences between them?

On the one hand, teachers who conform to a single method are said

to be in a position of Absolutism. Others, on the other hand, who belong to the Relativist position argue that the choice of a method should vary with factors such as age, context, and language proficiency. In other words, "different methods are suitable for different teachers and learners in different contexts" (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 182). Pluralism, the variation of relativism that is of importance to us, goes a step further. In this case, teachers acknowledge the value of each method (or part of it) and are free to use different methods (or parts of them) in the same context (Prabhu, 1990). When teachers adopt this stance, that is, when they pick and choose their own methods to create their own mixture, they practice what is called "eclecticism." More importantly, teachers who pick and choose in accordance with their own personal philosophy, beliefs, and convictions, are practicing "principled eclecticism" (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Principles of Principled Eclecticism

The motives for integrating eclecticism into English language teaching are numerous. First, to practice eclecticism is to have a mastery of all the major language teaching methods. When applied wisely, these methods are, of course, very effective. Otherwise, they wouldn't exist in the first place. Second, the power of eclecticism is its flexibility and unpredictability. That is, the criteria of choosing between methods cannot be defined in objective terms (although attempts have been made to do so; see Mellow, 2002). This is because the factors − sociocultural, political, and psychological − influencing the decisions of the teacher are themselves unpredictable.

But if effective teaching is possible through the adoption of an eclectic approach, then there are surely some ways to do it that are more effective than others. We cannot simply rely on the teacher's intuitive sense to ensure successful teaching. Indeed, as Stern (1992) points out

> The weakness of the eclectic position is that it offers no criteria according to which we can determine which is the best theory, nor does it provide any principles by which to include or exclude features which form part of existing theories or practices. The choice is left to the individual's intuitive judgment and is, therefore, too broad and too vague to be satisfactory as a theory in its own right. (p. 11)

It follows, therefore, from the previous criticism, that if an eclectic approach is to be credible, and thus worthy of trial in the ELT classroom, its principles have to stem from a rigorous analysis of the scientific disciplines relevant to language teaching, including educational psychology, SLA, and teaching pedagogy.

Fortunately, attempts to define the tenets of an eclectic approach have proven to be very fruitful. Central to this is the new concept of "principled eclecticism." As opposed to its traditional view – mentioned earlier – which gives the teacher the freedom to alternate between methods based on their own individual convictions, the modern view of "principled eclecticism" has a rigid scientific foundation. In practice, the teacher not only seeks to affect eclecticism in the classroom, but also makes intentional decisions, motivated by an apt understanding of theories of language acquisition, cognitive and social-emotional development, and learner investment and autonomy (Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Manzo & Manzo, 1997; Panggabean, 2012).

In other words, the goal of principled eclecticism is to "intentionally design learning topics, tasks, and environments that promote efficient development of the second or foreign language across all modalities (listening, speaking, reading, and writing)" (Cushing-Leubner & Bigelow, 2014, p. 249). Within this framework, and based on the works of Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2001, 2003), Cushing-Leubner and Bigelow (2014) propose three main signifiers of the principled eclectic practitioner:

- A promoter of professional teacher autonomy
- An enactor of principled and pragmatic eclecticism
- A seeker of alternatives to a single method

These principles will be explained in more detail below.

Professional Teacher Autonomy

One of the key characteristics of the principled eclectic practitioner is their ability to transcend the usual role of performer to that of a professional and autonomous teacher. Achieving this outcome is not a matter of obtaining a degree or being fluent in the language taught, although these factors should not be discarded, but it is a question of becoming critical toward one's own teaching practice. This developed awareness is important because it impacts the decision-making process of

the practitioner.

There are also other facets that reflect professionalism and autonomy. As an initial requirement, the teacher has to show a capacity to be free from any "academic and administrative constraints imposed by institutions, curricula, and textbooks" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 33). In addition to detaching from these limitations, the teacher has to demonstrate that they are "intentional in instructional and assessment choices" (Cushing-Leubner & Bigelow, 2014, p. 249). Moreover, these choices should be supported with evidence embedded in theories of learning and language acquisition.

Principled and Pragmatic Eclecticism

While the need for qualified autonomous teachers is of extreme importance, it is not the only variable that should be considered when attempting to construct a convincing theory of language teaching: The other piece of the puzzle is a focus on the learners themselves. Students do matter because they shape the practitioner's perspective on their own teaching. In so doing, they help the instructor form a location-specific approach by facilitating the practice of what Widdowson (1990) calls "principled pragmatism."

Principled pragmatism is a balanced approach towards making sound pedagogical decisions. This is to say that in comparing theory, in general, and classroom practice, in particular, the eclectic practitioner is able to balance the two aspects within the parameters dictated by each teaching environment. In fact, this ongoing self-reflection on one's teaching, partially shaped by the students' response and reaction to the teaching they receive, is what Prabhu (1990) calls the teacher's "sense of plausibility": "a personal conceptualization of how their teaching leads to desired learning" (p. 172).

Alternatives to a Single Method
(Kumaravadivelu's Macrostrategic Framework)

Now that we have seen how the interaction between the students and their teacher affects future pedagogical choices, we will zoom in on the decision-making process itself. We will, therefore, try to answer a non-trivial question:

1. On what basis can the eclectic practitioner generate context-specific tasks and practices that foster optimal language learning?

The most influential and satisfying answer to this question, yet, was proposed by Kumaravadivelu (2003) in the form of a strategic framework that consists of macrostrategies and microstrategies. In the upcoming sections, we shall focus exclusively on the macrostrategies because they constitute the engine that puts the pedagogical decision-making process in motion. Also, their successful implementation inevitably gives birth to the microstrategies. Thus, (1) can be rephrased as (2):

2. What are the macrostrategies that the eclectic practitioner can rely on to generate microstrategies (practical tasks, techniques, etc.) that foster optimal language learning?

As a response, Kumaravadivelu (2003) proposes ten macrostrategies for sound pedagogical decision-making, five of which shall be examined next in great detail.

Maximizing Learning Opportunities

I have alluded previously to the idea that SLA researchers are obsessed with finding the right method. If we suppose that their quest would finally pay off, then we also have to conclude that teaching causes learning. This conclusion does not hold, no matter what method is being used. The reason for this, as the reader might infer for himself, is that teaching is an interactional process between two participants: the teacher *and* the learner. This inherent nature of teaching dictates that the contribution of teachers will be limited and that learners control their own learning. It is the responsibility of the teacher, however, to lay the conditions that facilitate learning by collaborating with their students in an attempt to create learning opportunities, both inside and outside the classroom.

Inside the classroom, learning opportunities can be created either through learner involvement or via teacher questioning. The first option simply means that teachers should listen to their students' voices. When learners "invest" in the target language, they reflect their identity and create potential learning opportunities for themselves and their classmates. The second option is straightforward: Teachers are called upon to ask their students questions that spark meaningful classroom interactions.

As for creating learning opportunities outside the classroom, it can be done in two ways. Initially, teachers and students might envisage connecting the classroom to a local community. That is to say, creating learning communities in which members have the same educational goals such as language learning. Alternatively, in this technologically advanced era, teachers can expose their students to the global community via the Internet. One such application is exploring a culture where the language being learned is spoken, say England, if one is learning English.

Minimizing Perceptual Mismatches

Now that we have explored ways through which learning opportunities are created by the joint effort of the teacher and the student, we arrive at the question of whether these learning opportunities are perceived as such. By now, most teachers and SLA researchers agree that there is a gap between what is being taught (i.e., the input) and what is learned (i.e., the intake). This means that not every learning objective that the teacher has in mind is actually realized and not everything that is learned is intentionally transmitted by the teacher. Consequently, if we want to increase the productivity of learning, we need to reduce the likelihood of perceptual mismatches. But, where do these mismatches come from in the first place?

Kumaravadivelu (2003) identifies ten sources of perceptual mismatches including linguistic ones. A linguistic mismatch arises when the student is not equipped with enough linguistic tools that ought to be at his disposal before starting a task. As an illustration, we can imagine a scenario where the student stumbles upon the abbreviation "M.D." (medical doctor) while reading a text. In this situation, the teacher should not take it for granted that their students know what "M.D." stands for; doing so would constitute a perceptual mismatch.

Lastly, a qualified eclectic practitioner welcomes the challenge of turning a perceptual mismatch into a learning opportunity. They know that the diversity of teaching environments and the differences between students would unavoidably create perceptual mismatches. They also know that if these are identified and managed in time, the desired learning outcomes would eventually follow.

Facilitating Negotiated Interaction

Puzzled by the robust process of first language acquisition, Chomsky postulated that children have a built-in language faculty, a Universal Grammar (UG), that guides them in constructing the grammar of their own language. Whether adults learning a second language still have access to this innate faculty, at least partially, is much debated. However, there is a general consensus in the L2 literature that engaging in meaningful interaction in the target language stimulates the cognitive systems responsible for L2 learning. Thus, according to Kumaravadivelu (2003), one of the responsibilities of the EFL teacher is to promote "negotiated interaction" and there are two ways to go about this task.

First, there are three aspects of interaction that should be incorporated in the classroom: textual, interpersonal, and ideational. While interaction as a textual activity is concerned with the linguistic features that make an utterance understandable for the listener, the goal of interpersonal interaction is to "promote communication between participants" (p. 102). Finally, ideational interaction takes into account the individuality of the students. It is a venue where they can express their ideas, dreams, feelings, and all of the events inspired by their living history.

Second, the other component of a successful negotiated interaction is the "management of learning," which is divided into two types. On the one hand, we can distinguish *talk management* (p. 114), primarily concerned with how the participants in the classroom conduct their conversations. In this case, the teacher may consider using open-ended questions to involve their students in meaningful classroom discourse. On the other hand, there is a need to manage the subjects discussed in the classroom. This is known as *topic management* (p. 119). So, in order for meaningful interactions to take place, the students should be encouraged to pursue discussions on topics that interest them, not their teachers.

Promoting Learner Autonomy

In general, the degree to which learners are actively involved in their own learning is strongly correlated with a higher level of achievement in their educational goals. One manifestation of this active involvement relates to the learner's sense of autonomy, a concept that has been defined traditionally as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). After a thorough analysis of the literature on the

subject matter, Kumaravadivelu (2003) draws the conclusion that there are two complementary views that define learner autonomy: a *narrow* view and a *broad* one.

The narrow view of learner autonomy aims at providing students with strategies and tools that will enable them to take control of their own learning. One attempt to define a system of such strategies was advanced by Rebecca Oxford (1990) in the form of a taxonomy (summarized in Figure 1).
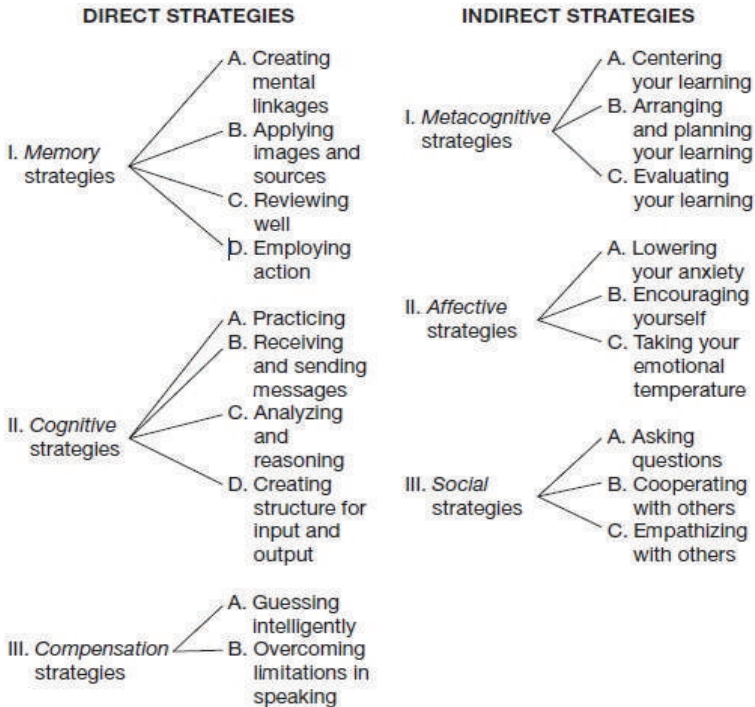
DIRECT STRATEGIES

I. Memory strategies
- A. Creating mental linkages
- B. Applying images and sources
- C. Reviewing well
- D. Employing action

II. Cognitive strategies
- A. Practicing
- B. Receiving and sending messages
- C. Analyzing and reasoning
- D. Creating structure for input and output

III. Compensation strategies
- A. Guessing intelligently
- B. Overcoming limitations in speaking

INDIRECT STRATEGIES

I. Metacognitive strategies
- A. Centering your learning
- B. Arranging and planning your learning
- C. Evaluating your learning

II. Affective strategies
- A. Lowering your anxiety
- B. Encouraging yourself
- C. Taking your emotional temperature

III. Social strategies
- A. Asking questions
- B. Cooperating with others
- C. Empathizing with others

FIGURE 1. Oxford's (1990) Strategy System.

There is also more to the narrow view. A strategy that might work for one student need not necessarily be the right one for another student. Learners are, therefore, called to identify strategies that suit their personalities. This process is known as *learner training*.

In its broad view, learner autonomy is said to be "liberating." We have already touched upon the idea that there are often some barriers

that one might encounter on the path to learning. When discussing DeSuggestopedia, for example, we mentioned that students might have some psychological difficulties. But, in educational spheres in general, these barriers could also be of a sociopolitical nature in which they need to be overcome through critical thinking and intellectual growth. Once this is done, the individual is "liberated" to achieve their full human potential.

Fostering Language Awareness

Language, too, can have a sociopolitical dimension. It is indeed a vehicle for exercising power and control. To understand how this is done, students need to develop *critical language awareness* (CLA). There are several practices that can foster CLA. To begin with, teachers can select reading materials that intellectually challenge their students and get them to think about the underlying meanings intentionally hidden behind the words. Such pieces of discourse might include newspaper articles, for example. Moreover, teachers can encourage their students to respect different points of view about a topic, while at the same time, gently guiding them to reflect on beliefs and ideas that they take for granted. In parallel, to complement CLA, the term *general language awareness* is used when the focus is on the language as a structure in itself.

The Rest of the Picture

There are five more macrostrategies that the eclectic practitioner can implement in the classroom. The first one is "activating intuitive heuristics," which refers to the way the teacher designs lessons the students can relate to and find useful in their daily lives; when we see things from the students' perspective, we are more likely to help them learn intuitively. In addition, "contextualizing linguistic input" is a macrostrategy that aims to link practices and classroom discourse to the relevant context. It also emphasizes the teaching of other subdomains of linguistics such as semantics and syntax. Also, when students use all language modalities to construct meaning in the classroom, they are said to "integrate language skills." The last two macrostrategies are "raising cultural consciousness" and "ensuring social relevance." The former stresses the link between culture and language. Students are therefore encouraged to choose culturally relevant topics that appeal to them and

that they can discuss in the classroom. The latter concerns the learner's goals and aspirations. Why are they learning English? And how can the teacher help them get there? Finally, ensuring social relevance entails that students stay faithful to their native language; multilingualism is highly valued.

CONCLUSIONS

The difference between a productive language course and an unsatisfying one ultimately rests in the hands of the teacher. When the teacher is highly qualified, they can meet the demands that diverse teaching environments call for. Conversely, when the teacher relies on predetermined packages that come in the form of methods, they set themselves up for failure. Hence, the principled eclectic approach presented here serves the purpose of guiding the practitioner, whether novice or experienced, along the right path. If, as the acclaimed journalist Malcom Gladwell (2008) states in his book *Outliers*, it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert in one's field, then we better place ourselves at the right starting point.

The modern portrait of the English teacher is a very promising one. For not only does the teacher determine the content of the course by designing concrete microstrategies, but in doing so, they obtain valuable feedback from their students, which in turn, leads them to self-reflect on, and analyze, the effectiveness of their own teaching. This exploratory and investigative character of teaching, when practiced continuously, creates the circumstances and conditions under which more effective learning is accomplished. In this regard, the teacher will always be guided by the sense of what is and what is not plausible. So perhaps, as the method era is gradually dying out, the value that will make a notable impact in the future is that of creativity. A creativity in a sense that reminds one of the essence of language teaching, namely, in Widdowson's (2012) words, "the art of the possible" (p. 636).

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