

APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND THE METHOD'S PROBLEMATIC *IDENTITY*¹

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ABSTRACT: This study, qualitative interpretive in nature, and inserted in the area of Applied Linguistics, aims at discussing some relevant articles on the concept of method of teaching. The six articles that constituted the data were analyzed and, as a result, it was unveiled that the discussion on the concept of method has gone through three clear-cut phases and that, currently, the area suggests a shift from the concept of method to the concept of approach of teaching.

KEYWORDS: Applied Linguistics; method; concept.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, it is still common to observe language schools, websites and instructional materials that advertise the “best method” for learning a foreign language. Besides, some so-called methods promise miracles: it seems that learning a language has become as simple as swiping a credit card in order to get a certain product. The idea is that, once you choose a specific (and successful) method, you will be able to learn any language at a very short period of time. In this sense, it is possible to conclude that the term “method” has been used in everyday language with very different meanings. Similarly, the concept of method can be considered problematic even in the Applied Linguistics area, since it has been defined, discussed and criticized by different Applied Linguists since the 1960's. After all, what is a method? Is there a best method? Even though these questions have been asked for a long time, there are no single answers for them. This suggests that these are extremely important issues which still need to be problematized, since they can be the starting point for systematic reflections and discussions on teaching-learning processes.

Based on that, this study analyzes the ways in which the concept of *method* has been defined, discussed and criticized throughout time by different Applied Linguists. The idea is that *method* has always been an unstable and complex concept. In this sense, this work aims at

¹ *Identity* here is a metaphor used as an attempt to explain the difficulty in defining and conceptualizing the term method. As the Cultural Studies specialist Stuart Hall (1993) explains, the postmodern concept of “*Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.*” (p. 222). In this sense, the idea is that method has always been an unstable, complex (and, as a consequence, problematic) concept, just like *identity*.

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** Idem.

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discussing, from a critical perspective, some relevant articles in the field to unveil the method's problematic *identity*. In other words, we will try to provide a more comprehensive, chronological and indeed logical way of understanding the concept of *method* and other important concepts related to it for the Applied Linguistics area of study.

This article is organized in three main parts. In the first one, the method used in order to achieve our main objectives is presented. The second part, subdivided in three sections, encompasses the data analysis and results of our study. At last, our conclusions are presented.

2. Method

In order to achieve its main objective, that is, problematizing the concept of method in order to discuss it from a critical point of view, this study of bibliographical nature selected six articles on the investigated issue. The selection was made based on the required readings for the Teaching Methodology discipline of the English Language Arts undergraduate course at the Federal University of Santa Catarina, which was taken by the authors in the first semester of the current year.

The following articles, after being grouped according to their chronological publication, were reviewed: Allwright's (1991) *The Death of the Method*; Anthony's (1963) *Approach, Method and Technique*, Almeida Filho's (1993) *Dimensões Comunicativas no Ensino de Línguas*, Prabhu's (1990) *There is no best method - Why?*, Richards and Rodgers' (1982) *Method: Approach, Design and Procedure*; and Kumaravadivelu's (1994) *The Postmethod Condition: (E)merging Strategies for Second/Foreign Language Teaching*.

Following a qualitative-interpretive analysis, firstly all of the articles were individually summarized by the authors. Then, each summary was presented to the group, discussed and debated in order to draw conclusions or even ask relevant questions regarding their main issues. After that, similarities and differences were identified in the texts and three categories emerged from the analysis. The articles under scrutiny were then categorized in three different phases, as we will show in the data analysis section. Finally, the findings led the authors to present their main conclusions based on the required readings for the Teaching Methodology discipline and try to establish some connections from them to the teaching practice.

3. Data analysis

The analysis of the data revealed that the method's problematic *identity* can be understood, metaphorically (and historically as well), as having three clear-cut phases. The first one would be "The Tower of Babel", a phase in which applied linguists and theorizers tried to define some important concepts to the area without achieving "proper communication", as each one spoke "a different language". The method(s) also went through a process of "Identity crisis", which can be defined as the second phase. Important works of this period would include Prabhu's article (1990) and Allwright's (1991) plenary paper. As a result of this "crisis", different works were published aiming at providing the "(re)vision and (re)signification" of the method's *identity*. This last phase would include the writings of Kumaravadivelu (1994) and Almeida Filho (1993).

3.1 The Tower of Babel

As we previously mentioned, in Applied Linguistics, even nowadays, different terms have been used by different authors with different meanings to refer to what teachers do in theory and in practice. (Re)conceptualizing these terms in order to promote a better

understanding among scholars has been a major concern of several applied linguists for a long time. The idea is that, if applied linguists could all speak the same language (instead of living in the Tower of Babel), it would be much easier to conduct research and discussions in this field of study.

Edward M. Anthony (1963), in his seminal article “Approach, Method and Technique”, tries to clarify the difference between a philosophy of language teaching, at the level of theory and principles, and a set of derived procedures for teaching a language, by proposing a model for that. According to Da Silva (2009), Anthony’s model is hierarchically organized in three levels: approach, method, and techniques. In the first level, the highest and the most abstract one, lies *the approach*, guiding assumptions of language and language teaching and learning; in the second, *the method*, a plan for teaching based on the guiding assumptions; and, in the third, *the techniques*, procedures to put the plan for teaching, based on the guiding assumptions into practice (p. 48). Since teaching techniques are procedures to put into practice a teaching plan which is based on guiding assumptions on language and language teaching and learning, by observing teachers’ practice, it is theoretically possible to access teachers’ approach of teaching and try to understand why teachers teach the way they do, claims Da Silva (2009).

Richards and Rodgers’s (1982) article *Method: Approach, Design and Procedure* is a study which proposes an analysis of Anthony’s model. In this article, the authors claim that Anthony’s model lacks a framework for a systematic description and comparison of methods. Thus they propose a different model setting the concept of *method* as the overarching term under which lie the concepts of *approach, design and procedure*.

From Richards and Rodgers’s (1982) perspective, *approach* refers to assumptions, beliefs, and theories about the nature of language and language learning, which operate as referential points and provide the theoretical foundation of what teachers do in the classroom. *Design*, on the one hand, specifies the theories of language and learning to both the form and function of instruction materials in instructional contexts. *Procedures*, on the other hand, comprise the classroom techniques and practices, consequences of a particular approach and design.

Even though Richards and Rodgers’s model provides a framework for the description and comparison of methods, their proposal is not very innovative, in the sense that they seem to use different terms to talk about very similar concepts. What Richards and Rodgers’s model seems to propose is “to re-set method as the overarching term, trying to re-establish the prestigious status of the concept of method, since their ideas on approach remain pretty much the same as Anthony’s” (Da Silva, 2009, p. 49).

3.2 Identity crisis

Dick Allwright, in the article *The Death of the Method*, based on a plenary paper for the Méthodologie Structuro-Globale Audio-Visuelle (SGAV) Conference at Carleton University, which took place in Ottawa, in May 1991, provides a personal and historical view on the concept of “method” which is, in his own words, “the central methodological issue in our field [Applied Linguistics]” (Allwright, 1991, p. 1). In this plenary paper, Allwright (1991) discusses the “unhelpfulness of the existence of ‘methods’, as separately labeled, and separately marketable, entities” (p. 1). To meet his objective, the author presents studies which tried, in some way, to contribute to clarify the concept of method, and advances on the discussion of the concept of method throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The discussion is organized in four decades: the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s, and the 1990s. The author also comments on his suggestive title. According to him, the (possible) “Death of the

Method” is not, in fact, “the central methodological issue” (p. 9). The article makes it clear that specialists in Applied Linguistics do not seem to be concerned, currently, with conceptualizing method or even looking for an ideal language teaching method; they are far more concerned with describing and analyzing to try to understand what happens in the language learning process so as to theorize according to real classroom experiences.

In the last decade, the 1990s, in line with the ideas regarding the unhelpfulness of the existence of methods, in the article “There is no best method – Why?”, Prabhu (1990) claims that, more important than the choice between methods, is the understanding of the teaching that teachers do. It is important that teachers operate with some personal conceptualization instead of implementing a mechanical teaching. The author introduces, then, the concept of *the sense of plausibility*, a “kind of subjective comprehension, sense, intuition of how learning occurs and teaching causes and keeps it” (p.1). That is, an active and alive teaching that creates a sense of involvement for both the teacher and the student. In this sense, Allwright (1991) explains that the concept of method as “unitary/unified set of principled answers to all the main questions of how language is to be taught, must surely now be seen as highly problematic” (p. 7).

3.3 Identity re-vision and re-signification

After shifting from one language teaching method to another for years, in a pointless attempt of trying to find the best one, and, later on, even arguing that there is no such thing as a best method (see Prabhu, 1990), the Applied Linguistics area now faces a “period of robust reflection” (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, p. 27) on the role of second language (L2) teachers in what Kumaravadivelu calls a *post-method condition*, in which the conventional concepts of method started being questioned.

As Allwright (1991) points out, the focus nowadays is not on the method that is being used, but on “what’s happening in the classroom” (p. 5). Language teachers and researchers began to realize that by investigating the experiences which occur in the classroom, it is possible to find ways of understanding and systematizing these events in order to improve the L2 teaching and learning process.

In other words, the post-method condition enables practitioners to “theorize from their practice and practice what they have theorized” (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, p. 30) in an autonomous fashion. However, for many years, the situation was very different. Theorizers, who did not know the reality of a classroom, would create “knowledge-oriented theories” (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, p. 29), which were often responsible for generating idealized teaching methods, while practitioners, who had little power in this area, would end up adapting those theories and methods for the reality they lived in.

An example of this period of reflection, according to Da Silva (2009) and Greggio (2009), is Almeida Filho’s (1993) model: “The procedures of the analysis of the approach of teaching” to understand either the relation between theory and practice or the articulation of language teaching and learning. These procedures, which encompass the description and the analysis of teachers’ approach of teaching, may unveil teachers’ concepts of language, language teaching and language learning that underlie their practice and explain, illuminated by theories, why teachers teach the way they do. By being aware of their approach of teaching, claims the author, teachers may engage in continuous personal and professional development.

4. Conclusion

Based on this bibliographical research, it seems to be clear that the concept of method is still problematic in the sense that each definition has improved it, but a consensus has never been reached.

However, specialists in this field do not seem to be concerned, currently, with conceptualizing method or even looking for an ideal language teaching method; they are far more concerned with describing, understanding, and reflecting upon what happens in the language learning process so as to theorize according to real classroom experiences. In this sense, the current trends in this area are related to describing, analyzing and explaining why teachers teach the way they do and learners learn the way they do in order to make informed decisions and take purposeful actions.

After all, there is no recipe for teaching and learning – just like the *method's* problematic *identity*, these are issues that need to be discussed, (re)defined and adapted depending on contexts.

It is also important to acknowledge that, although Applied Linguistics has shown that there is no single method for teaching and learning, different methods – no matter how bizarre they may seem – are still widely used.

At last, more attention should be given to continuing education for teachers in service through active involvement of universities in extension programs.

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