



# Language teaching: Myths, methods, macrostrategies

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B. Kumaravadivelu  
Professor of Applied Linguistics  
San Jose State University,  
California  
[b.kumar@sjsu.edu](mailto:b.kumar@sjsu.edu)



# The concern

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“Some Westerners take China to be an economic animal, since we have been unable to explain and show our modern culture to the outside world in an effective and proper way.”

(Yi Junqing, during the release of the 2010 Annual Report on *Cultural Soft Power Research*, Beijing, Feb. 2011).



# The lay of the land

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- Twin processes of economic/cultural globalization.
- China is ahead in one but is behind in the other.
- The report notes the imperative need
  - to increase the use soft power to promote Chinese language and culture;
  - to focus more on current culture rather than on traditional culture.
- Global expansion of Confucius Institutes is satisfying.
  - End of 2004: The first Confucius Institute established.
  - End of 2010: 322 Confucius Institutes in 96 countries.
- Implied call for better methods of teaching language and culture.



# The method connection

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English:

- a language of globality as well as coloniality.
- rode on the back of hard power (colonialism).
- a central goal was linguistic/cultural imperialism.

Chinese:

- aspiring to be a language of globality.
- has to ride on the back of soft power.
- a central goal is cultural understanding.

Language teaching:

- English: The concept of method is a construct of coloniality (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).
- Chinese: Has to go beyond the concept of method.



# Terminology

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- Method and methodology
- *Method*: conceptualized and constructed by experts.
- *Methodology*: what practicing teachers actually do in the classroom.
- *Method analysis* is different from *teaching analysis* (Mackey 1965).



# Plethora of methods

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Nearly twenty methods – a sample list:

- Audiolingual Method
- Communicative approach
- Direct Method
- Grammar-Translation
- Lexical Approach
- Natural Approach
- Silent Way
- Suggestopedia
- Task-based Language Teaching
- Total Physical Response



# Myths about methods

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- Methods are motivated and maintained by multiple myths.
- Accepted as professional articles of faith.
- Five major myths.



# Myth # 1

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*There is a best method out there ready and waiting to be discovered.*

- Profession is preoccupied with (obsessed with?) the search for a magical method.
- The search has reached a dead-end.
- 1990's: critical thoughts on the limitations of method (Allwright, Prabhu, Stern).
- No new method since CLT – introduced more than a quarter century.





## Myth # 2

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*Method constitutes the organizing principle for language teaching.*

- All pervasive; governs the principles of ... curriculum, syllabus, materials, teaching strategies and testing techniques.
- Ignored other factors: teacher cognition, learner perception, societal needs, cultural contexts, political exigencies, economic imperatives, and institutional constraints.



## Myth # 3

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*Method has a universal and ahistorical value.*

- Useful and usable anywhere, everywhere.
- Idealized concepts geared towards idealized contexts.
- Does not yield context-specific solutions.
- Far removed from classroom reality.
- A top-down exercise - common clientele with common goals.



## Myth # 4

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*Theorists conceive knowledge, and teachers consume knowledge.*

- Theorist & teacher = producer & consumer of a marketable commodity.
- Creates a debilitating dichotomy between theory and practice.
- Teachers daunted by theory; experts valorize it.



## Myth # 5

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*Method is neutral, and has no ideological motivation.*

- Method “reflects a particular view of the world and is articulated in the interests of unequal power relationships” (Pennycook, 1989, p. 589).
- Unequal relationship between theorists and teachers; native and non-native speakers; “male theorists and female practitioners.”



# Dissatisfaction with method

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- No method can be realized in purest form.
- Research: Teachers who claim to follow a method do not conform to it; those who claim to follow different methods use same techniques.
- Teachers know that no single method will help.
- They say they are “eclectic.” Not easy.
- They rely on intuition and experience.
- “Method is dead” Allwright (1991); Brown (1995)
- Time to go beyond method.



# Postmethod condition

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- Postmethod condition compels radical restructuring of teaching/tr. ed.
- Seeks an alternative to method, not alternative method.
- Needed: New operating principles.
- Principles of particularity, practicality and possibility



# Particularity

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- Any postmethod pedagogy  
“must be sensitive to  
a particular group of teachers  
teaching a particular group of learners  
pursuing a particular set of goals  
within a particular institutional context  
embedded in a particular sociocultural milieu”  
(Kumaravadivelu, 2001, p. 538).
- Hermeneutic perspective of *situational understanding*.
- Emphasizes local exigencies and lived experiences.



# Practicality

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- Broadly, theory and practice dichotomy.
- Narrowly, teacher's ability to monitor teaching.
- Edge (2001): “the thinking teacher is no longer perceived as someone who applies theories, but someone who theorizes practice” (p. 6).
- Union of action and thought.
- Prabhu (1990): teachers' *sense of plausibility*.
- van Manen (1977): teachers' *sense-making*.





# Possibility

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- Critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire & others.
- Teacher/learner experiences are shaped by broader social, economic, and political environment.
- “Language teachers cannot hope to fully satisfy their pedagogic obligations without at the same time satisfying their social obligations” (Kumaravadivelu, 2001, p. 544).



# Postmethod pedagogy

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- Calls for:
  - A clear break with method.
  - A coherent framework.
  - A well-defined set of ideas that guide classroom activity.
- One possible option:  
macrostrategic framework.



# Basic assumption

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“We cannot prepare teachers to tackle so many unpredictable needs, wants and situations; we can only help them develop a capacity to generate varied and situation-specific ideas within a general framework that makes sense in terms of current pedagogical and theoretical knowledge.”  
(Kumaravadivelu, 1992: 41).



# Macrostrategic framework

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- Macrostrategies: General plans derived from theoretical, empirical and pedagogical knowledge.
- Microstrategies: Location-specific classroom techniques generated by teachers; informed by macrostrategies.
- Framework lays the conceptual foundation for postmethod pedagogy.
- Any actual postmethod pedagogy has to be constructed by teachers themselves.



# Macrostrategy # 1

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*Maximize learning opportunities:*

Create learning opportunities & utilize learning opportunities created by learners.

Both teachers and learners are managers of learning.

Not limited by (a) teachers' agenda,  
(b) teaching materials, or (c) curricular constraints.



## Macrostrategy # 2

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*Minimize perceptual mismatches:*

Recognize potential mismatches  
between teacher intention and  
learner interpretation.

Cognitive, linguistic & communicative  
mismatches are among the most  
crucial ones.



# Macrostrategy # 3

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*Facilitate negotiated interaction:*

Focus on meaningful learner-learner, learner-teacher classroom interaction in which learners are entitled and encouraged to initiate topic and talk, not just react and respond.

Interaction not only creates learning opportunities but it constitutes learning itself.



# Macrostrategy # 4

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*Promote learner autonomy.*

Narrow view: learning to learn.

Equip learners with the strategies necessary to self-direct their own learning.

Broad view: learning to liberate.

Enable learners to recognize and overcome social, political & historical impediments to progress.





# Macrostrategy # 5

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*Foster language awareness:*

General language awareness: formal and functional properties of the language.

Critical language awareness: the insidious power of language - how it can be used/abused/misused for narrow political and ideological purposes.



# Macrostrategy # 6

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*Activate intuitive heuristics:*

Provide rich textual data so that learners can infer and internalize the underlying rules governing grammatical usage and communicative use.

Language learning is a voyage of discovery; not memorization of prescriptive rules.



# Macrostrategy # 7

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*Contextualize linguistic input.*

Language usage and use are embedded in social, cultural and historical contexts.

Connect with realities that make up those contexts.



# Macrostrategy # 8

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*Integrate language skills.*

Separation of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills is artificial and counter-productive.

Integrate them holistically across the curriculum as well.



# Macrostrategy # 9

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*Ensure social relevance:*

Be sensitive to the societal, political, economic, and educational environment in which learning and teaching take place.

Connect language learning to identity – individual, social, national.



# Macrostrategy # 10

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*Raise cultural consciousness:*

Treat learners as cultural informants so that they are encouraged to engage in a process of classroom participation that puts a premium on their power/knowledge, on their subjectivity and identity.

Develop global cultural consciousness by focusing on not just learning *about*, but also learning *from* other cultures.



# The Challenge

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- The field of language teaching methods is full of false prophets and true believers.
- Method is built on epistemological sand; we need context-sensitive postmethod strategies.
- Several ways of responding to the challenge.  
Macrostrategic framework offers one possible way.
- Reflect on the framework. Use it. But use it as a raw material to construct a relevant postmethod pedagogy.
- The challenge is to construct a postmethod pedagogy that will enable you to explain and show modern Chinese culture to the outside world in an effective and proper way.



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