

Tracing Postmodernism in Language and Literature Pedagogy

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Abstract

Partly drawing on the postmodern theories formulated by Jean-Francois Lyotard, Fredric Jameson and Roland Barthes and partly treading on language theories developed by methodologists, curriculum specialists such as Patrick Slattery and Larsen-Freeman, I contend that postmodern language and literature pedagogy is characterized by the death of teacher, incredulity towards methodologies and blurring the binary opposition between teachers and students. Postmodern pedagogy deconstructs the notion of the teacher as the centre of epistemology, the authority and the controller. Student based learning becomes the focus of the classroom that dislocates the role and place of teacher from the centre of classroom to margin. The postmodern teacher provokes conversation and poses questions to the class. However, students eventually solve the problem as a group, blurring the hierarchical relation between instructors and learners.

Key Words: Pedagogy, postmodern, methodology, eclecticism, pastiche, metanarratives

Suffused with semantic instability, the term postmodern elicits diverse responses from various scholars, critics, and theorists. Although it is normally defined by negative rhetoric such as incredulity, anti-totalization, decentering, indeterminacy, disruption, it is also eclectically used to denote an extension of modernism, a reaction to modernism, a celebration of pastiche, heterogeneity, multiplicity and parody. To Linda Hutcheon, “Postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges-- be it in architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, film, video, dance, TV, music philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics, or historiography” (1).

Contested though it is, postmodernism finds at home with various disciplines such as philosophy, art, literature, politics, religion, cinema, television, and music. In visual art and sculpture, it is usually taken as being a reaction to modern art’s obsession with a clinical purity of form and autonomous abstraction. Connecting postmodernism with lifestyles, Nigel Watson declares, “It was during the late 1980s and the early 1990s that postmodernism and its linkage to our everyday lifestyles first moved from the academic literature and into popular consciousness” (35). In the context of the widespread percolation of postmodernism through different domains of scholarship, I contend that postmodernism reverberates even in language and literature pedagogy, especially in teaching methodology, role of teachers and students, and that postmodern pedagogy is characterized by incredulity towards methodologies, empowering the marginalized students through their active involvement in learning and blurring the binary opposition between students and teachers, practice and theory.

In his highly influential book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-Francois Lyotard defines postmodern as an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (Introduction xxiv). By the phrase, “incredulity toward metanarratives,” he means that knowledge in the postmodern world cannot be legitimated any longer in terms of grand narratives which have shaped the western knowledge till date. Postmodernism in fact displays wariness towards notions such as perpetual progress, specially embedded in the Enlightenment Philosophy, and freedom of the workers from all kinds of exploitation articulated in Marxism. Drawing on Lyotard’s idea of the postmodern, I contend that postmodern pedagogy is marked by an incredulity towards methodologies. While there are significant differences between metanarratives and methodologies, they share a similar structure. In each, all the different areas of knowledge are brought together to achieve a goal that is projected forward into the future as being the answer to the problems facing society. Under a grand narrative, all the social institutions such as education, technology combine to strive for a common goal for all humanity. Likewise, common to each method is the belief that adherence to recipes or methodologies will lead to educational progress or standardization of human beings. However, methodologies, like great narratives, have been incapable of sanctioning learning, progress and knowledge in the postmodern era.

Experts, methodologists and educationists such as M L Tickoo and Diane Larsen-Freeman are beginning to express their distrust towards methods for effective teaching learning activities. “A known reason,” explains M L Tickoo in his *Teaching and Learning English*, “is that years of search for the best method has produced no evidence to show that by itself any method consistently guarantees better learning. Also, once inside the classroom, teachers find it neither possible nor helpful to use a particular method fully or consistently” (348). Tickoo’s assertion of methodologies’ incapability to ensure knowledge announces the death of methodologies. Tickoo further elaborates that “successful teachers rely on what works for them. Even when they follow the tenets of a named method, they modify it substantially. A single method in its pure form is rarely seen at work in a real classroom” (348). Tickoo’s observation of the teaching method has a postmodern resonance, clearly denying that methodologists’ monolithic view--mandating a particular method or approach--will lead to standardization.

Similar view is expressed by Larsen-Freeman who defies the belief that teaching is a faithful following of pedagogic prescriptions. She contends, “Each method put into practice will be shaped at least by the teacher, the students, the conditions of instruction, and the broader socio-cultural context. A particular method cannot, therefore, be a prescription for success for everyone” (182). Larsen-Freeman’s contention is that because methodologies are contingent on the exigencies of the classroom situations and contextual factors, they cannot be universally applied to all teaching learning activities.

The fact that various methods and approaches have proliferated with the passage of time posits the methodologies’ failure at providing a more effective and theoretically sound basis for teaching. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, the direct method was enthusiastically applied as an improvement over grammar translation method. The audio-lingual method, introduced in the 1950s with a view to providing a way forward, commenced to wane in the decade of 1970. Even Communicative Language Teaching which Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers claim to be “the most plausible basis for language teaching today” (244), cannot be implemented to teaching learning activities any longer in the postmodern or post method era as teaching is not understood as the correct use of the method or approach and its prescribed principles and techniques.

“Communicative Language Teaching,” argues Diane Larsen-Freeman, “aims broadly to apply the theoretical perspective of the Communicative Approach by making communicative competence the goal of language teaching and by acknowledging the independence of language and communication” (121). As the aforementioned Larsen-Freeman statement clarifies, anything that is done in communicative language teaching has a communicative intent. In this approach, learners are expected to use the language a great deal through communicative activities such as games, role-plays, problem solving tasks. In order to carry out these activities, learners have to be divided into pairs and groups. But a teacher would ask a question whether it is possible to follow the recipe prescribed by the communicative approach. The employment of methods or approaches is contingent not only upon the classroom and teachers but also upon students, and

institutional and social constraints. Although the great narratives of communicative approach might be applicable in the highly sophisticated classrooms which have ideal class size, involvement of students into groups and pairs in the traditionally set classrooms and mammoth size of class is an uphill task. Without students' participation in the communicative activities, the objectives of the approach cannot be achieved. The types of decisions teachers make are heavily influenced by the exigencies in the classroom rather than by methodological considerations. In this context a method gets decontextualised.

Moreover, if we consider what Dell Hymes, while critiquing Chomsky's competence, writes about native speakers' knowledge about their language, non-native speakers cannot achieve the goal of the communicative approach --communicative competence. While Chomsky postulates that native speakers have "ability to produce and understand sentences of their language out of context" (qtd. in Traugott 15), Hymes maintains that native speakers know how to appropriately use language in context apart from knowing their grammar. Hymes contends that "there are rules of use without which the rules of syntax are meaningless" (qtd. in Harmer 13). This very native speakers' knowledge of pragmatics is what he calls "communicative competence." His notion rules out the possibility that non-native speakers can achieve communicative competence in second language as mandated by the communicative approach.

The history of language teaching in the last one hundred years has been characterized by a search for more innovative and effective ways of teaching languages. The commonest solution to the language teaching problem was seen to lie in the adoption of a new teaching method or approach. The methods have evolved from the grammar translation method to language strategy training and task based language teaching. Despite all these efforts, the problem has remained the same because methods and approaches lay emphasis more on "howness", "whatness" and "whyness" of certain ideals and beliefs, relegating who, whom, when and where to a margin.

When a particular method cannot be a prescription for success for everyone, postmodern method in language teaching that encompasses learners from heterogeneous cultures embraces pastiche i. e. a medley of various ingredients. Postmodern culture is not a culture of pristine creativity, but a culture of quotations. American Marxist cultural critic, Fredric Jameson notes that postmodern culture is "a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum" (qtd. in Storey 135). Innovations in methods and approaches have proliferated since language teaching commenced but none of them is completely functional. Jameson's world with the impossibility of innovation posits that teachers have no alternatives except drawing on different principles at different times from the multiple sources already existent in the methods and approaches depending on context, classroom and the types of classes they are teaching.

Closely connected with the idea of pastiche is the word eclecticism in the domain of pedagogy, a term used for the practice of using features of several different methods in language teaching, for example, by using both audio-lingual and communicative language teaching techniques. While there are important differences between pastiche and eclecticism, they both have a common ground where they meet together. Common to both is the idea of reiteration of outdated approaches and principles in various realms. Even though eclecticism presupposes choice, the selection of methodologies is made out of dead styles prevalent in the pedagogical world since generation of novel ideas is a distant thing as claimed by Jameson. Defining eclecticism, Larsen-Freeman asserts, "When teachers who subscribe to the pluralistic view of methods pick and choose from among methods to create their own blend, their practice is said to be eclectic" (183). Larsen-Freeman's "pluralistic view of methods" suggests that postmodern pedagogy not only denies the singular monolithic method but also hints at the impossibility of the creation of original strategies in the academic world in which the very nature of language, learning and teaching is dynamic, fluid and mutable.

Postmodern pedagogy celebrates the death of the teacher. Student-based learning dislocates the role and the place of the professor from the center of the classroom to the margin. Delineating postmodern curriculum, Patrick Slattery in *Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era* asserts, "The emerging postmodern holistic and ecological models of curriculum dissolve the artificial boundary between the outside community and the classroom. Postmodern teaching celebrates the interconnectedness of knowledge, learning, experiences, international communities, the natural world, and life itself" (175). In order to observe learning as a natural phenomenon, the postmodern professor moves aside and becomes a moderator rather than a director. Student consensus eventually overpowers the role of the deconstructed teacher.

Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* further deconstructs the notion of the teacher as the center of epistemology or the giver of knowledge, the authority and the controller. According to Elbow, "The teacherless class isn't necessarily slower than a regular class but it seems slower. A teacher can give you something to do and someone to trust while waiting for the slow underground learning to take place" (108). Student knowledge becomes the focus of the classroom. The postmodern professor provokes conversation and poses questions to the class; however the students eventually solve the problems as a group. The teacher, hiding behind the podium with a sword-like pointer in hand, is no longer the focus of the class. Khalil Gibran in *The Prophet* stipulates, "If (the teacher) is indeed wise, he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind" (qtd. in Harmer 56). Gibran's commentary on the teacher undermines the traditional definition of teaching as the transmission of information from teacher to student.

The concept of open university, new pedagogical strategies in the form of computer-assisted learning and the use of the internet, and technological breakthroughs have opened up avenues for students into knowledge, undermining the function of the

teacher as the disseminator of knowledge. Like the author of Roland Barthes who “enters into his own death” (1131) when writing begins, the teacher is no more the determiner of the message of a text when teaching learning activity commences.

Likewise, the teacher/student relationship has also been redefined in ways that allow students to draw upon their own personal experiences as real knowledge. Far from being passive recipients, students play agentive roles, participating in activities. Referring to the uneven relationship between teacher and students, Henry Giroux in “Postmodernism as Border Pedagogy,” stresses the necessity not only to “give students the opportunity to speak, to locate themselves in history, and to become subjects in the construction of their identities and the wider society,” but also to “define voice not merely as an opportunity to speak, but to engage critically with the ideology and substance of speech, writing and other forms of cultural production” (417). Advocating for the construction of an anti-racist pedagogy, Giroux posits that students have to understand how to resist oppressive power rather than performing ideological surgery on master-narratives based on white, patriarchal and class specific interests.

Postmodernism expressly challenges and undertakes to subvert the assumptions, concepts, and findings in traditional modes of discourse including literary and linguistic criticism. It dismantles the historical truths created by the people in power about the powerless or the margin. Widely regarded as the founder of the discipline of variationist sociolinguistics, William Labov, in “The Logic of Nonstandard English” postmortems the myth about the black children created by educational psychologists who came up with the findings that Negro children from ghetto area in America “receive little verbal stimulation, to hear very little well-formed language, and as a result are impoverished in their means of verbal expression” (647). Labov argues that the concept of verbal deprivation has no basis in social reality. Having postmortemed the findings of the white educationists whose perpetuation of the myth about the black children had affected the pedagogy of the black community, Labov repudiates that the approach to the interview with the black children was biased and, therefore, foredoomed to failure. Moreover, the tests were devised in the so-called standard English and the social situation created for the test was intimidating to children as a result of which they could not express themselves. When an informal situation was created for the same children, a sea-change was seen-- the children were in a hurry to speak. Labov, referring to the interview conducted by the educationists, asserts:

But the power relationships in a one-to-one confrontation between adult and child are too asymmetrical . . . that the social situation is the most powerful determinant of verbal behavior and that an adult must enter into the right social relation with a child if he wants to find out what a child can do. This is just what many teachers cannot do. (656)

Having probed into the monolithic nature of methodologies, relation between student and teacher, and roles of student and teacher, the study concludes that postmodern pedagogy is the death of methodology, teacher and the hierarchical relation between instructors and learners. The precise focus on a particular method or approach

with the belief that it will lead to learning no longer has credibility in the postmodern pedagogy. When the current knowledge is tentative, partial and changing, methodological prescriptions get decontextualized. New relationships between the teacher and students have developed: teacher's authoritative position as the locus of knowledge has shifted due to the technological breakthroughs, and that hierarchies between races and ethnicities are eroding. Teachers, who decenter themselves as the authorial ego, enable students to value their own opinions and criticisms. When students are allowed authority, everyone in the classroom has a broader epistemological ground on which to travel. When teachers validate student ideas and their texts as valuable records of social history, teachers give students a place to stand in order to view the web of society they are struggling to decipher.

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