

## BOOK REVIEW

**Lal, C A., and Neeraja R (Eds.). (2021). *Teaching English in the Post-Method Era: Challenges, Possibilities and Solutions*. Bodhi Tree Books and Publications: Trivandrum (pages 190). ISBN: 9788194563235.**

*S Mohanraj*

Conducting conferences and seminars in the academic world is a common, everyday affair. Most of these proceedings are often forgotten, and the participants return home with a piece of precious paper to submit it to their institutions for an additional API score. Do such conferences serve their real purpose? This is not a question to answer, but a problem to reflect on and find out what is wrong with our academics.

Most conferences fail to have follow-up programmes. Far worse, even teacher education workshops do not plan for a sustained follow-up programme and this has resulted in wasting our resources and irretrievable man-hours. Under such circumstances, when we find instances of recording the proceedings and passing them on to posterity in book form is a worthy example to follow. The book under review is one such instance.

The editors are serious-minded academics who have planned this book with care and the review will dwell on some aspects of the book.

A four-day International Conference was organised by the School of Distance Education, University of Kerala in November 2019. The participants were given adequate guidelines to prepare and present their papers based on the seminal research conducted by Kumaravadivelu on Post-Method Era. Kumaravadivelu has suggested ten Macro

strategies. These strategies have been designed to promote learning (rightly called “learning-centered strategies”). Before arriving at these strategies, Kumaravadivelu delineates the theoretical framework for using them. The present conference looks at the implications of such research in four broad areas:

- a. Challenges to Language Learning in India in the Post-Method Era;
- b. Pedagogy in the Post-Method Era;
- c. Communicative Approaches in the Digital Age; and
- d. Educators in the Post-Method Era.

When we look at these sections, one may find the third section as an odd member. Whether this is true or not, I leave it to you to decide at the end of this review.

Let me begin with the organisation of the book. The book has twenty-eight papers (chosen from many more that were presented in the conference) and shared among the four sections mentioned above. The first section has eight papers, the second and the third have seven papers each, while the last section has six papers in it.

The book begins with a brief introduction by the senior editor which provides the context for publishing this volume. This is followed by a brief but an erudite note from Dr. Kevin Balchin of Canterbury Christ Church

University, the UK. In his short note, Dr. Balchin tells us how several methods have come into practice, each claiming itself to be the 'best'. Scholars around the world have questioned such claims and it was Kumaravadivelu who suggested that the time has come when we need to look beyond methods. He postulates three principles which have been summarized succinctly by Dr. Balchin: "... how we might move 'towards a Post method pedagogy', based around three pedagogic parameters: **particularity** – emphasizing that pedagogy must be sensitive to the local context; **practicality** – encouraging teachers to put their own theories into practice; and **possibility** – tapping into the socio-political consciousness that students bring to the classroom and its potential as a catalyst for identity formation and social transformation. These parameters, together, point towards an enhanced decision-making role for teachers." This makes for a good beginning to read the book.

The first section discusses the language learning and teaching situation in India. This has always been a challenging task for we have learners with varied backgrounds, teachers with differing levels of competence, and the facilities available in schools forming a cline from almost non-existent facilities to rich schools with all gadgets in place for the asking. Eight papers in this section look at some of the problems and these can be listed as follows: teaching tribal children (marginalized sections of the society), teaching students with weak competence (switching over from mother-tongue medium instruction to English medium instruction); frequent changes in curriculum; societal influences on learning English; and mandating the use of technology without

providing adequate training. It is difficult to look at each paper individually and comment on its content. (In fact, all the papers have undergone such scrutiny, and that is not the job of a reviewer.) I shall look at one paper in detail to give you an idea of the care that has gone in selecting the papers for their quality.

The paper I have chosen for the purpose is 'Difficulties of English Language Learners in Transition from School to College: A study'. There is a need to provide a bit of background information here. We are used to playing the blame game – the primary teacher blames the parents for sending the children to school without adequate preparation, the high school teacher blames the primary teacher and the college teacher blames the school teacher. It is wiser to ask the question, 'What can I do with the raw material I have on hand?' The two authors, Jeya Gowri and Ilankumaran, have asked themselves this question and the resultant research has thrown open several possibilities to help learners cope with the transition. Transition is a natural phase in everyone's life. This could be easy or traumatic. Given the sharp rural-urban divide, the transition is often difficult to cope with.

The problems of the students in learning language (especially English) during this transition phase are looked at from four different perspectives – physical, psychological, pathological, and incidental. The first of the three are more crucial than the last one. The problems arise because the learners are not trained to cope with these problems. A sympathetic teacher would need to help the learners. In a mixed class, a learner with weaker competence tends to be ignored; this could affect the self-esteem of the learner.

Can a teacher become a counsellor? The tertiary learner is no longer a child; the learner is either a teen or a young adult. Can the teachers continue to treat the learners as children? College classes tend to be larger than school classes. This accounts for a greater mixed ability class, with students exhibiting different styles and strategies of learning. The teacher is likely to be 'monotheistic'. Can the teacher modify the teaching strategies to cater to mixed classes? In reviewing the paper, I have posted a set of questions. Each question deserves a major case study and multiple solutions. The two young scholars have attempted to provide answers to most of my questions in this article. The rest of the articles problematize a pedagogic issue and attempt an answer. The answer is not final, it is subject to scrutiny, and it needs to change with change in the situation. This is a caution one gets from time to time while reading the book.

The second section has seven papers in it and the major focus is on pedagogy. Pedagogy has existed for long – we have reflected on past practices and garnered its principles recently. The aim of all pedagogy is to help a learner discover knowledge. The success of such an exercise is seen in the learner being able to cope with life and its oddities. The seven papers take a close look at some of the innovative classroom practices and suggest some practical tips to a teacher to transact the teaching process successfully. Just as in the previous section, I will choose one paper to comment on, and leave the rest for you to read.

The paper I have chosen is 'Alienating the Boundaries of a Traditional Classroom: A Study of the Adaptation of a Multi-Relational

Method'. The two young scholars, Ashish Mathai and Jesna Jose, have substantiated the need to go beyond methods at the beginning of the paper. The stiff competition that exists between and among the methods to prove their superiority is futile. Is there a way out? Can we allow the learners to interact with each other and discover knowledge for themselves? This forms the basic premise on which the paper is built. What does it entail to make students interact with each other? What activities can be designed for this purpose? How to make the learners aware of the source of knowledge rather than handholding them to knowledge? These questions remind us of the well-known Chinese proverb – '*Give a man a fish, you have fed him for a day; teach him fishing, you have fed him for life.*' This is not an altruistic statement, it is a statement that should make us reflect, and so does the article.

The conference was held in November 2019 and before the book was published, there was a major shift in the lifestyles of people around. The pandemic had tamed the world to stay indoors and by force adopt the technology mode of delivery. The third section which has a focus on practices adopted by Communicative Language Teaching discusses how closely CLT is connected with proper use of technology. The seven papers in this section cover a wide range of topics from social media platforms, to using films, graphic narratives, games and activities and collaborative learning.

I shall look at 'Testing/Texting Ur Patienz': Teenage English in the Digital Era'. Honestly, I was attracted to this paper by its title – the way it is conceived is attractive

and so is its development. Here is a brief reflective summary. That the world is changing fast is a well-known fact. It is equally true that the youngsters adapt themselves to the changes much better than the elderly people. The teachers belong to the second group and are perhaps envious of the former. Hence they often look down upon innovations – we call this ‘*the generation gap*’. This exists in our classrooms and is there ways by which we can make our teachers a little more tolerant. The language of texting need not be taboo. (Crystal admits this as an evolutionary process.) It communicates, but there are certain limits beyond which it cannot be accepted. Is it possible for a teacher to grow ‘younger’ and try to decipher the language of the teens? This is an important question that the paper answers and in a very interesting and subtle manner. Each paper in this section brings into light an innovation that a conservative will snigger at. Is this a move away from the methods? Does this section fit into a book with Post-Method Era framework? This was a question I asked at the beginning; you get the answer now.

The last section of the book is addressed to teacher educators. Teacher educators are the biggest hurdle in introducing changes. Can we change them – the teacher educators? The six papers in this section discuss how teachers can be made responsible for the work they do. This ties up with the modern concept of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in asking the teacher to recede from the platform and allow space for the learner to perform. The various roles a teacher can play (remember Tony Wright’s book – *Roles of Teachers and Learners*), and the value of reflection in teaching, form the themes of

different papers. (The fifth paper in this section which discusses MOOC strategies should rightly belong to the third section, but this should not matter.)

I shall briefly look at one paper ‘Anxiety in Learning Language: The Teacher’s Role in Reducing it’. Anxiety is a common feature among learners and the levels of anxiety vary from time to time – the first day of the school to the last day of assessment (examination) the degrees of anxiety a learner experiences are detrimental to the entire learning process. A teacher needs to adapt the role of a parent/counsellor and help the learner overcome anxiety. What are some of the strategies best suited for such work? Does it affect our teaching time? In responding to these questions, the authors (three scholars) discuss the causes of anxiety, types of anxiety and the roles the teachers can play. The entire article reads like a good narrative (not an expository essay) and that carries the day for them. The rest of the articles in this section are equally interesting.

What makes a book worthy of reading? A book should stand the test of time i.e. one should feel like re-reading it. It should find a pride of place in your library. You should stretch your hands to grab it when you are in doubt. If these purposes are served, a book is worth its name and weight in gold. The book under review has all these qualities and I warmly recommend it to all colleges of education. I also congratulate the editors for thoughtfully putting the papers together and bringing them to light.

**Dr. S Mohanraj**, ELTAI, Hyderabad; (Formerly) Professor, English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad.

**Email:** mohanrajsathuvalli@gmail.com