From Methodology to Post-Methodology: Teacher Education in Syria

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◻ ABSTRACT ◻

To teach is to teach creatively not to be servile to any methods no matter how powerful they might be. Nobody knows the students more than their own teachers. Nobody knows their needs, interests, desires and background more than their own teachers. More importantly, nobody knows the students' pedagogical problems and the suitable solutions more than the teachers themselves. A priori approaches aggravate the already declining teaching situation. Non-customized methodology suffocates the spirit of teaching. It undermines the learners' centeredness and the teachers' creativity. The one-size-for-all-approach is against the grain of teaching. The same textbook, the same lessons, the same techniques, the same examsand the same assessment are a recipe for cloning not for teaching. To teach is to personalize and to customize. The universal must be localized. The general must be specified. The collective must be individualized and the canon must be de-standardized. What is not relevant must be made relevant. The hauntology of methodology is over. This is the age of post-methodology.

Key Words: (Post)-methodology; One-size-fits-all; Customization; Personalization

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من طرائق التدريس إلى ما بعد طرائق التدريس:
تأهيل المدرسين في سورية

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□ ملخّص □

التعليم إبداع وليس استعبادا لأية طريقة من طرائق التدريس مهما كانت تلك الطريقة قوية . لا أحد يعرف الطلبة أكثر من أساتذتهم ولا أحد يعرف حاجات الطلبة واهتماماتهم ورغباتهم وخلفياتهم أكثر من أساتذتهم. والأهم من ذلك، لا أحد يعرف مشكلات الطلبة التعليمية والحلول المناسبة لتلك المشكلات أكثر من الأساتذة أنفسهم. لذلك فإن المناهج المسبقة الصنع تفاقم المشكلات ولا تحلها وتزيد الانهيار التعليمي الحاصل ولا تعالجه. فالطرائق التي لا يتم تكييفها للحالة السورية سوف تخنق روح التعليم وتنسف أولوية المتعلمين وتقضي على إبداع المعلمين. إن منهاج القياس الواحد او القالب الواحد ضد صميم التعليم. فاستخدام الكتب المقررة نفسها وإعطاء الدروس نفسها بالتقنية نفسها وإجراء الامتحانات نفسها بأساليب التقويم الموحدة نفسها كلها وصفة مضمونة للفشل. إنها وصفة للاستنساخ وليست وصفة للإبداع. التعليم الناجح يتطلب تكييف الطرائق حسب الخلائق. والتكييف تحول من العالمي إلى المحلي ومن العام إلى الخاص ومن الجمعي إلى الفردي ومن النمذجة إلى اللانمذجة. فالطرائق التي ليس لها علاقة بخصوصية الطلبة لن يشعر تجاهها الطلبة بأي علاقة. لقد انتهى زمن الطرائق والتعليم الآن في زمن ما بعد الطرائق.

الكلمات المفتاحية: طرائق التدريس –ما بعد طرائق التدريس.

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As long as the state of denial continues, the crisis will continue. To remain blind to the chronic problems of English language teaching is to remain blind to one of the worst failures of education in Syria. Students spend twelve long years at school and the outcome is catastrophic. The more they are taught, the less they learn. The more they are drilled to repeat, the more they retreat. It is true that they pass the exams with the highest grades but with the lowest standards at the same time. They cannot read properly, speak properly, or write acceptable English. "No like me English," one student wrote. He means "I do not like English." Students are not to blame. The textbooks are not written for them. The teaching methodology is not designed for them. They cannot relate to what does not relate to them. This paper addresses ELT projects in Syria and diagnoses the causes of their unworkability. Second, the paper demonstrates that the solution is an overdue shift from methodology to post-methodology. The fact is that "the teaching situation has institutionalized over the centuries to a point where the personal imperatives, contact with reality, contact with each other, [and] awareness of the purpose of education have disappeared' (Bowers 4).Hence, there is an inevitable incongruity between the unchangeable paraphernalia and the changeable reality. The old craft cannot meet the new demands. There must be a categorical clean break with the one-size-for-all approach in favor of personalization and customization.

The one-size-for-all perspective is the major cause of the failure in English language teaching. It ignores variety, difference, and uniqueness. It marginalizes needs, desires and interests. It stereotypes learners as if they were one learner. Sarah Mead confirms that the "one size fits all teaching approach is flawed because it assumes all students learn in the same ways" (Mead, no date, Web). To demonstrate the multiplicity of learning, she makes a list of seven learning styles: Aural, verbal, physical, visual, logical, solitary and social (Mead). Using one of these automatically means the negligence of the others, which is exactly what the one-size approach does.It homogenizes the heterogeneous and changes teaching into cloning. This is why Valerie Strauss warns against using it: "the current trend of standardized learningharms the students and the teachers alike" (Strauss,2015, web). The worst form of the one-size practice is the use of drills: Learners become tape recorders or parrots. It is a drill to kill, not a drill to teach. Donn Byrne confirms that in whole class drills "students don't have to think because the teacher is putting words into their mouths" (Byrne 4). No wonder, Strauss calls for de-standardization, and Sarah Meadcalls for differentiated learning.

Instead of the one-size-for-all approach - using the same textbook, the same lessons, the same methods, the same exams and the same assessment for all, the paper calls for personalization and customization. According to the *Glossary of Education Reform*, "The term personalized learning, or personalization, refers to a diverse variety of educational programs, learning experiences, instructional approaches and academic support strategies that are intended to address the distinct learning needs, interest, aspirations, or cultural backgrounds of individual students" (Glossary).This alternative will be the best solution tothe *status quo*.

The Status Quo

Before addressing the teacher education projects in Syria, it must be made clear that all of them have at least one strategic flaw. They are not research-based. Most of them are, in the language of Jack Richards and Theodore Rodgers, "based on assumptions and assertions" (249). There is no research-based package of the suitable syllabus for the Syrian situation. Textbooks are imported exactly as any other commodityis imported without any regard for the Syrian context although the starting point in teaching is a

"careful consideration of the context" in which teaching and learning take place (Richards and Rodgers 248). There is even no clear definition or conceptualization of the qualities or the qualifications of the future teacher as if the intention is to produce an anonymous figure. Does Syria need teachers with native command of English? Does the Syrian school need a teacher who knows or who does not know anything about the learners? Indeed, what happens in reality gives the worrying impression that anyone, I repeat anyone, can be a teacher as if teaching were the job of anyone who has no job.

According to a study performedin 1970 by Denis Girard and quoted by Jeremy Harmer, a good teacher is someone who makes the course interesting, treats students with care, makesthem work and participate, shows patience and inspires self-confidence (Harmer 6). The writer of this paper has conducted a questionnaire on Facebook about the qualities of the ideal tutor. Hundreds of Syrian university students responded and none of them mentioned the tutor's academic qualifications. They focused only on the human characteristics or tutor-tutee relationships. The ideal tutor must be conscientious, dynamic, democratic, fair, friendly, humble, inspiring, motivating, open-minded and respectful.It is obvious from both casesabove that the teacher-learner relationship overrides any other element and is given top-priority by the learners themselves. What happens at our schools – and universities – confirms that most of these learner-desired qualities either do not exist or are trivialized. Ironically, some teachers believe that any learner-friendly approach might be counterproductive. This explains the dominant anonymity at our institutions of education: Nobody knows anything about anybody. It is as if strangers were teaching strangers from behind a wall although both learners and teachers are in the same classroom.

To reform the teaching situation, one must start with the teacher's education or re-education. The teacher's success is the success of teaching and *vice versa*. It is the teacher who is the real manager of the teaching situation. It is the teacher who can make the best of the worst textbook. A properly qualified teacher can motivate the poorest learners exactly as a poorly qualified teacher can demotivate the best learners. More importantly, what is needed is a creative, imaginative teacher who can personalize and customize the courses to respond to the interests of his/her own students. The textbook becomes their own textbook, as if written for the students themselves, by the students themselves and about the students themselves. No wonder, the teacher is called a cultural worker and must be trained to become a cultural worker. "Teachers need preparation to understand and respond to the cultural dynamics that mediate learning and social relationships in the classrooms." (Kozleski and Handy 2).Culture necessitates customization and localization because it is specific to a certain community or society."It is the way people see and interpret the world,organize themselves, and conduct their affairs" (Kozleski and Handy 3). In other words, to teach English in Syria is to Syrianize English and to appropriate it to the specificities of the Syrian teaching situation. This is the crux ofcustomization.

Teacher Education Projects in Syria

In Syria, there are two projects for both the pre-service and in-service trainees. The first, the intermediate Teacher Training Institute (TTI) is for pre-service candidates with A-level only. After two years of training only, they become "qualified" to teach English. The writer of this paper graduated from TTI in 1974 and knows it in detail. TTI offers a number of courses in Arabic. They cover topics related to education, psychology and syllabus design. The English courses include Language, Writing, an Introduction to Literary Studies and Methodology. The graduates' standard is not solid enough to meet the teaching challenges. Their experience lacks definition. The duration of the training is not long

enough to make up for a variety of discrepancies. Indeed, there is a general conviction that the graduates' flaw is their poor command of English. Methodology, which might be considered theirfortedid not save the institute. As long as it was administered directly by the Ministry of Educationin Damascus, it managed to survive. The moment branches were opened in the major cities, and TTI was relegated to the impotent Departments of Education, it started to suffer and to lose credibility. No one has done any research about this catastrophic decline of TTI, which was more than thirty years old.

The second project is supposed to answer for all TTI shortcomings. It is the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), generally referred to as the "Diploma".This is designed for both pre-service and in-service trainees with B.A. in English. After one year of full-time education, they graduate as "qualified" teachers of English for both the Middle and the Secondary schools. PGCE has eight courses: Six in Arabic and only two in English. Hence the trainees' poor command of English will become poorer. Moreover the lack of co-ordination between the universities and the Departments of Education aggravates the situation. Most schools refuse to welcome PGCE students for observation classes for a number of reasons. First, the classrooms are already overcrowded. They cannot tolerate ten more students. Secondly, in-service teachers are not open-minded, do not like to be on display and do not like their teaching to be the subject for criticism. Worse still, the group supervisors are usually the wrong supervisors: No experience and no proper qualifications. The unqualified teacher trainers train the unqualified teacher trainees.The Ministry of Education itself marginalizes PGCE. Few years ago, it appointed more than 10000 full time teachers with zero pedagogical training or teacher education. The damage is almost irreparable.

This is why the English Department at Tishreen University has introduced a new course about teacher education to the fourth-year students. The purpose is to make sure that graduates will be familiar with the ABC of methodology if they choose to embark on teaching. However, one course is not enough. There must be at least two courses, one in each term. They must be also buttressed by observation classes which can be carried out at the National Centre for the Distinguished, which is situated on Tishreen Campus. Moreover, there must be some cooperation and coordination with the Faculty of Education at Tishreen University itself.

The Alternative

Hence an alternative teacher education programme must take all the previous shortcomings into consideration and address them in a new customized syllabus. Adrian Doff, for instance, postulates the following for handling similar problems in a similar teaching situation in Egypt. "To remedy this," he says, "the training material must include a strong language improvement component, closely integrated with the methodology and focused on the content language of the textbook" (68). The course designers should not skate over the identity, and the expectations, of the trainees. As most observers know, trainees have a strong predilection for rote learning anddictatedinstructions. This is the result of years of spoon-feeding and the total absence of problem solving. They have never been called upon to do things by themselves. The only role they play is to be without a role: nothing but repetition. This kind of trainee makes the call for "bottom up" not the "top bottom" approach of D. Nunan almost impossible (Nunan 112).The students' comprehensive participation cannot be counted on at least for the time being. The approach has got to be generally "top down".

The other coordinates which should be taken into consideration are the special conditions of the teaching situation. The trainees are going to "teach in large inflexible

classes with few resources, follow a set syllabus and a textbook, and have little control over the course content or choice of material" (Doff 1). In the West, they do a lot of research about these problems: How to teach large classes? How to make the best of the worst textbook? In Syria, we have the problems but we do not do research although most educators insist on the fact that every teacher must become a researcher.

The argument so far rehearses the questions at issue and charts the "rationale" crucial for coming to grips with the specificity of the course, its trajectory and its objectives (Wallace 14). The rationale dictates a contextualized content, exemplary methodology and a realistic package.Indeed, a number of educators have suggested objectives customized to the situation above. D. Britten, for example, quite rightly focuses on the trainees' inevitable need to "outgrow not only ideas about teaching and learning foreign languages… but also perhaps about the nature of language and what it means to know language" ("Three Stages" 3). To him, this is a precondition without which the trainees will not be able to establish proper communication or to master the proper skills. It is impossible for the trainees, for instance, to teach language communicatively if they are still stuck with the Traditional Grammar Approach. It is also self-defeating to talk about functionality and discourse analysis if the students still believe in the non-arbitrariness of language. To come to terms with the new teaching perspectives, they must slough off the obsolete concepts. In other words, they must do a lot of unlearning before they start learning.

In contradistinction to Britten, M.J. Wallace does not insist on displacement, discontinuity or cleanbreak. He recommends a number of targets all of which fall within the category of improving or expanding what is already available. He suggests that the course must develop the trainees' fluency, sensitize them to the functions of language, and encourage self-evaluation. The enactment of these broad objectives entails that the probationers should grasp the language system, understand the theories of language teaching, internalize methodology, appreciate literary texts, analyze the context of the teaching situation and undertake some independent, research like work (See Wallace 143-45). This is why Richards and Farrell include "journal writing" among the new eleven procedures necessary for teacher learning (ix-x). Once the objectives above are integrated into the teaching situation, it becomes obvious that the education programme must avoid all the shortcomings of the earlier projects by addressingthe following objectives.

The first objective is a good command of English: the four skills and textual analysis. For some, this might sound slightly overstated, but *a teacher with a poor command of English is a great paradox.* This objective, once realized, will inject the trainees with the necessary self-confidence and will be so reassuring to both learners and clients.

The second objective of the education package is that it must include the approaches to ELT so that the trainees will be able to make up their own eclectic choice. The theory guarantees status, cohesion and systematicity.One indication of the degree of professionalism is the extent to which "the methods and procedures … are based on a body of theoretical knowledge and research…" (Richards 209). Richards and Rodgers confirm that the criteria for the best approach are always feasibility, compatibility and applicability (246).

The third objective is methodology and post-methodology. The education programme must introduce the trainees to the methodology of teaching not as sacred protocols but as arguable, negotiable and adaptable mechanisms.It is true that methodology increases teachers' awareness and injects them with the necessary professionalism but not to the degree of slavery to the methods. Jack Richards and Theodore Rodgers confirm that

"the history of language teaching in the last hundred years has been characterized by a search for more effective ways of teaching…" (244).This search confirms that the best method is not available yet. It is important to add that Richards and Rogers make a strategic distinction between "approaches" and "methods", which is very helpful for teacher education(246). Methods are good for beginners but approaches, as they point out, are more suitable for experienced teachers. As will be seen later on, teachers must proceed from methodology to post-methodology.

Thefourth objective is familiarizing the trainees with the theories of learning so that they can have a better understanding of the learner, language acquisition, and the learning strategies. One of the major consequences, for instance, will be a radical change in the teacher's attitude towards the handling of errors in a way that will put an end to errophobia (Al-Issa 1995). Another will be the realization of the priority of motivation and the necessity of self-directed, autonomous learning. More importantly, the teacher must discover the learner's desires and needs. No needs, no English. As Tom Hutchinson and Alan Water confirm, "All courses are based on a perceived need of some sort" (53). The more teachers know the learners, the more successful teaching will become. The wall between the teacher and the learner must be pulled down.

The last objective is encouraging the trainees to change from teachers into teacher-researchers. Their task is not limited to the mechanical application of what they learn at the PGCE or education courses.As Richards and Farrell confirm, "the field of teaching is subject to rapid changes" (vii). More importantly, training is not a universal package given once in a lifetime. It is "a process that takes place over time rather than an event that starts and ends with formal training or graduate education" (Richards and Farrell 3). Teachers always need something new to meet the new challenges. Not everything "teachers need to know can be provided at pre-service level" (Richards and Farrell 1). This is why the term "education" is used instead of training. Training is just an "event" whereas education includes both "training and development" (Richards and Farrell 3). It is a non-stop ongoing process.

The focus here is not only on the workshops and the conferences organized by the Ministry of Education. These might help,but the problems will persist until the teacher becomes his/her own researcher. Good Teachers know how to discover problems, diagnose them and how to seek solutions for them. Exactly as students are learners, good teachers are also good learners. Both sides learn at the same place. Richards and Farrell say: "Classrooms are not only places where students learn – they are also places where teachers can learn" (2). The best teacher is the best learner. Teachers can learn by turning new problems into new research topics. Indeed, one of the eleven procedures "that can be used to facilitate professional development in language teaching" according to Richards and Farrell, is "action research" (ix-x).

This procedure will help teachers arrive at what Richards and Rodgers quite rightly call the "post-method," that is to a stage or a phase 'Beyond approaches and methods" (250). Some people believe that "because approaches and methods have played a central role in the development of our profession, it will continue to be useful for teachers and student teachers to become familiar with the major teaching approaches and methods": Once useful, always useful (250). Such a perspective will enslave teachers to the mainstream theories. It will impede their appropriation to the specificity of the teaching situation. There will be no proper contextualization to the needs and desires and the coordinates of one's classes: No contextualization, no language. Geoffrey Broughton says, "Every utterance, to be language, has a meaning, relating to and part of its context" (41).

He adds that, "foreign language should always be taught and practised in a contextual form" (42). No matter how goodmethods and approaches might be,they will not work unless contextualized. No matter how productive they are, they might be counter-productive unless customized. There is a difference between adoption and adaptation. It is the difference between the alien and the local, the Procrustean and the personalized or inflexibility and flexibility. Mary Bart defines customization as "flexing a course to meet the learner interests and increase engagement and motivation" (Bart, 2010, web).

Customization and personalization are not just asking the learner about his/her name or the name of his/her parents. They are, as David Johnson points out, more than personal details. He says, "we really need to know what their [the learners'] interests are, what their personal views are and what makes them tick" (Johnson, 2015, web). To know what makes learners "tick', teachers should remember the problems of teaching in the Syrian situation.

The students are the teacher's students,but the approaches and the methods are not. The objectives areteacher's objectives,but the instruments are not. This incongruity undermines the whole process. If the approaches and the methods are not, in the parlance of tailors, made to measure, they will be incommensurate with what they are used for. This is why Richards and Rodgers call for individualizationand customization and why Sarah Mead, as already mentioned, calls for differentiated learning.This is also why this paper callsfor a clean break with the one-size-fits-all approach and for an immediate Syrianization of ELT.

Such Syrianization or customization, as the BBC "Teaching English" demonstrates, "makes language learning relevant to learners". It allows them to "express their own ideas, feelings, preferences and opinions" (BBC, 2006, web). More importantly,personalization, as Cheryl Krueger reveals, will help "students to enhance critical thinking skills across thecurriculum" (Krueger, 2001,Web). In other words, personalization, as Robert J. Freund, argues, "can help to overcome the efficiency-paradox of developing and delivering education" at the same time (Freund, 2003, web).

This is why teachers need a necessary shift from what is not their own to what is their own: Post-methodology. Richards and Rodgers explain the required transformation: "teachers and teachers in training need to be able to use approaches and methods flexibly and creatively based on their own judgment and experience" (250).Teachers must have*sapereaude and* self-confidence to modify and rewrite the mainstream approaches and methodsand to liberate themselves from the hegemony of the gurus of English language teaching. They need someone to motivate them to "transform and adapt the methods they use to make them their own" (250). Novice teachers cannot do it. They like to apply literally the ABC of methodology. It is the experienced teacherswho can "develop an individual approach or personal method of teaching, one that draws on established approach or method, but also uniquely reflects the teacher's individual beliefs, values, principles and experiences" (251).

In other words, the transformation from top-down to down-top practice is necessary for healthier teaching. As Richards and Rodgers point out, the top-down perspective is restrictive, limiting and flawed. The roles of teachers and learners … are generally marginalized". They "must submit themselves" to the "regimes" of the method. There is no place at all for "learner-centeredness" or "teacher creativity" (247).

Conclusion: SCHOOLS WITHOUT TEACHERS

While Syria is still busy with teacher training and teacher education, the world is going to witness, in September 2018, the opening of the first "self-directed learning"

school. It is "The Sudbury school" in Ireland, and it is established by Maura Duignan and Gayle Nagle."Students from 5-18 years of age will have complete independence in their own education" (Walsh, 2018, Web). The idea is that children must be given the chance to "realise their own modality of learning and the trust to explore it" (Walsh).The one-size-fits-all is a failure. The mainstream education is not successful for all the students. As they say, 30% thrive, 30% survive and 30% fail. Self-Directed Learning is the alternative. It is inspired by learners themselves with no imposed curriculum. More importantly, it is "founded on freedom, trust, respect and responsibility" (Walsh Web). The learners will follow their own interests and will do whatever they like with their time without any interference.Fifty years ago, Leonard Newmark warned against meddling with learning in his invaluable article, "How Not to Interfere with Language Learning (Newmark 160). The outcome of non-interference will lead not only tothe customization of education but to complete personalization: "shifting the course from teacher-directed to learner-directed' (Bart, 2010, web). The problem with adults is that they want learners to learn like adults although the best way to learn, as Jack Rawlins argues, is to "learn like a baby" (Rawlins 3).

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