



Reflections on Middle School English Education in Hainan Province from the Perspective of Post-Method Pedagogy

Wenjie Wang^{1*}, Lvyue Xie²

¹National Middle School, Baoting Li and Miao Autonomous County, China

²Baoting Middle School, Baoting Li and Miao Autonomous County, China

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Corresponding Author

Wenjie Wang*

Email: wind186@163.com

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Abstract

The talent demand driven by the construction of Hainan Free Trade Port has posed new requirements for English education. However, Hainan Province itself features a weak educational foundation and unbalanced development across regions. Despite undergoing multiple rounds of curriculum and teaching reforms, middle school English education in the province has yet to achieve satisfactory outcomes. To address the existing problems in Hainan's middle school English education, this paper, with reference to the three core parameters of B. Kumaravadivelu's post-method pedagogy—particularity, practicality, and possibility—discusses the unique challenges confronting English education in Hainan, the professional development of teachers and the upgrading of educational concepts, as well as the integration of social factors into classroom teaching to foster students' distinctive identities. The purpose of this study is to explore the enlightenment of the post-method perspective and provide reference for the development of English education in Hainan.

Keywords

Post-method pedagogy; Hainan; Middle school English education; Teacher professional development

1. Introduction

English, as a subject, and English education have long been a source of controversy across all educational stages and regions in China. For decades, proposals to abolish English as a core subject, or even to eliminate the subject entirely, are not uncommon. The “high input” yet “low output” of English education, coupled with the constant changes in teaching methodologies, have inevitably led people to question: Is there an optimal English teaching method?

Kumaravadivelu (1994), a professor at San Jose State University in the United States, synthesized previous language teaching methodologies as well as the criticisms and reflections on the “method” and its value put forward by scholars such as Freeman, Stern, and Allwright, and proposed the language education paradigm of Postmethod Pedagogy. Building on Stern's three-dimensional framework and Allwright's Exploratory Practice framework, Kumaravadivelu developed his own macrostrategic framework by integrating post-structuralist, postmodernist, and postcolonialist thoughts from cultural studies. Unlike the prior trend of substituting one approach for another (i.e., the “alternative method” paradigm), Kumaravadivelu advocated replacing the “method” with a new system or framework, whose core tenets can be encapsulated

sulated in three parameters and ten macrostrategies (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), as illustrated in the following figure:

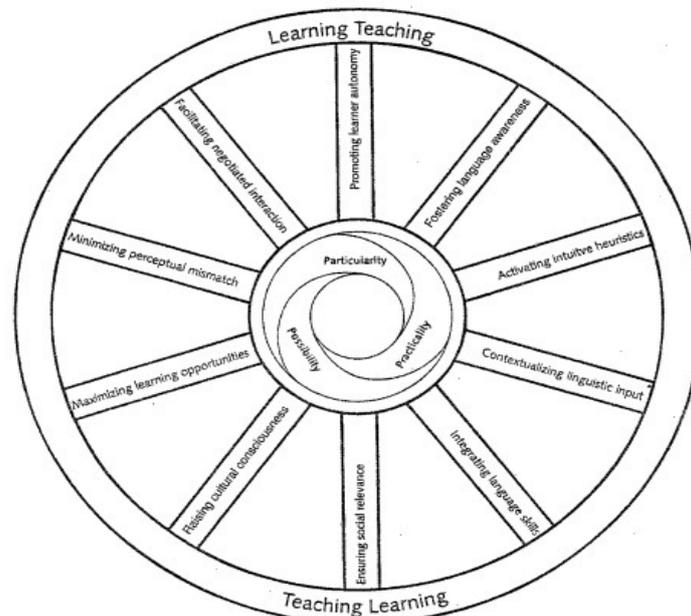


Figure 1 Pedagogic wheel (Kumaravadivelu, 2003:41)

Among these components, the three parameters serve as the foundational core, mutually shaping and influencing one another, with the holistic entity formed by their interactions far greater than the sum of their individual effects (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). To enhance the operationalizability of his theoretical framework, the ten macrostrategies proposed therein can also be extended into a specific set of microstrategies. These microstrategies are designed to facilitate teachers' application in classroom settings and support students in accomplishing language learning tasks.

Since the proposal of the post-method pedagogy, numerous scholars in China have conducted research on its connotations, feasibility, and value. Dong Jinwei (2008) pointed out that this pedagogical perspective offers valuable insights for foreign language teaching in China, while emphasizing the need for teachers to develop context-specific microstrategies tailored to their own classroom realities. Zhang Hong and Wang Qiang (2010) discussed teachers' autonomous professional development in the post-method era, stressing that "genuine educational reform must entrust teachers with decision-making responsibilities and full autonomy in educational practices."

Guided by these theoretical studies, the application and research of post-method pedagogy have been on the rise in China, yet they are predominantly concentrated in research areas such as foreign language teaching in institutions of higher education, teaching Chinese (as a second language), and pedagogical studies. Ma Ruiying (2013) introduced the core tenets of post-method theory, referring to it as a "framework emphasizing openness and creativity," and identified its implications for college English teaching from three dimensions: reflective and autonomous teachers, independent and collaborative learners, and the compilation of textbooks aligned with China's national context. Zhong Caihong and Hu Rongjie (2020) analyzed the strengths and limitations of post-method pedagogy, arguing that in the context of teaching Chinese as a second language, post-method merely "wears a foreign hat"—a metaphor implying its superficial adoption without substantive localization.

Research on the application of post-method pedagogy in middle school English teaching remains scarce; furthermore, existing studies are primarily conducted in relatively developed educational regions and mostly presented as master's theses. For instance, Zhou Xiaolan (2018) investigated the needs of regular high school English learners, taking high schools in Hangzhou as a case study; Zhou Jia (2017) conducted research on reflective teaching among high school English teachers, using a high school in Nanjing as an example; and Fu Rong (2020) explored post-method-based English writing teaching in senior high schools, focusing on students from Liaodongwan High School. However, to date, research on the cultivation of educational concepts, teaching methodologies, and teacher development in Hainan's foreign language education from the perspective of post-method pedagogy remains a gap in the literature. The present study attempts to reflect on the challenges and existing problems in Hainan's foreign language education based on post-method pedagogy, particularly from the perspective of its three core parameters, and to identify the implications for educational development.

2. Unique Challenges Confronting Hainan's Education from the Post-method Perspective

Hainan Province, characterized by its unique geographical location, relatively small population, modest economic scale, and underdeveloped status, ranks fourth from the bottom among all provincial-level administrative regions in mainland China (excluding Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan) in terms of land area, total population, and GDP volume as of 2022. Meanwhile, the development orientation of Hainan Province is significantly shaped by national policies. Currently, the educational development of Hainan Province is confronted with three major challenges, namely the evolving development situation, the disadvantaged academic foundation of students, and the contemporary context.

2.1 Development situation of Hainan province

Endowed with a unique geographical location and functioning as a relatively independent geographical unit, Hainan Province has served as a national pilot zone for development since its establishment as a province. As one of China's earliest special economic zones, Hainan has achieved rapid development compared to its past, yet it has also experienced twists and turns and currently remains at a relatively low developmental level when compared to other regions. In April 2018, General Secretary Xi Jinping proposed the construction of the Hainan Free Trade Port (FTP), paving a new path for Hainan's development. In accordance with the Overall Plan for the Construction of the Hainan Free Trade Port, Hainan Province is scheduled to launch full-island customs closure operations in December 2025, emerging as a new window for China's foreign trade and exchanges.

To intensify opening-up efforts, attract more foreign investment and international trade, and develop high-end tourism, modern services, medical care, education, and other sectors, Hainan's international communications will increase substantially. Consequently, the demand for foreign language professionals in Hainan, particularly interdisciplinary talents with a strong foreign language background, will rise significantly. The education sector bears the responsibility of cultivating talents for national development; therefore, foreign language education in Hainan must align with the needs of FTP construction to nurture socialist builders who possess proficient language abilities, specialized professional knowledge, as well as social responsibility and patriotic sentiments.

Furthermore, influenced by the policy in the high school entrance examination (where approx-

imately half of the candidates proceed to high schools and the other half to vocational schools) and college admission rates, a considerable proportion of students are unable to pursue higher education. As future builders of Hainan, their English education primarily takes place during the primary and secondary school stages. However, compared to regions with advanced international trade such as Hong Kong (China) and Singapore, the overall foreign language proficiency of Hainan's general population—including these educated groups—remains relatively weak. Thus, the popularization and improvement of foreign language competence constitute a key priority in primary and secondary foreign language education in Hainan.

2.2 Disadvantaged academic foundation of students in Hainan

Hainan Province is confronted with new missions in English teaching, yet the overall actual competence of students remains at a unsatisfactory level. Constrained by factors such as geographical location and economic development, the educational undertakings in Hainan lag behind those in other regions of China. With national support, the school-running conditions of various educational institutions have been significantly improved, but gaps persist in terms of teacher quality and teaching philosophies. Within Hainan Province, there are distinct regional disparities in educational resources, development levels, and student quality—Haikou, Sanya, and Wenchang have achieved far higher development than other areas, particularly the Li and Miao ethnic minority regions.

As a crucial evaluation tool for secondary education, the performance in examinations such as the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) largely reflects the overall educational quality. Over the past three years, in the assessments, the average English score of Hainan Province has consistently fallen below 60 points (out of 150), with an achievement rate of less than 40%. Notably, the score rate in objective questions has been significantly higher than that in subjective questions, especially in the “Continuation writing” section, where the achievement rate is only around 25%. Objective English questions are mainly multiple-choice with optional answers, allowing students a certain probability of scoring based on guesswork or partial understanding. In contrast, subjective questions are more capable of reflecting students' true linguistic proficiency. The low scores in subjective sections indicate insufficient comprehensive language abilities among students, which are far from meeting the corresponding national competency requirements.

Beyond the generally low educational level, there are also substantial disparities between schools across different regions of Hainan. Taking the 2025 Tianyi Joint Examination in Hainan as an example—with a full score of 150 and 116 participating schools—only 5 schools achieved an average score above 90 points. Among these, 3 are located in Haikou (including 2 jointly-run schools), 1 in Sanya (a jointly-run school), and 1 in Wanning (a jointly-run school). Schools with an average score above 60 points are concentrated in Haikou, Sanya, Wenchang, and other jointly-run institutions. In contrast, schools in other regions, especially ethnic minority areas, generally achieved comparatively lower scores, which reflects an imbalanced educational development across regions with distinct geographical characteristics.

2.3 The contemporary context

The development of the times and advances in science and technology have brought opportunities to the cause of education, accompanied by concurrent challenges. Under the current international context, we are facing an unprecedented situation unseen in any previous era. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has not been fully eradicated, with globalization and deglobalization contending repeatedly, and persistent increases in unstable factors in the in-

ternational political and economic landscape. Meanwhile, technologies such as computing, the Internet, and artificial intelligence (AI) have posed new requirements for education. Since 2023, AI tools trained on large language models (LLMs), represented by ChatGPT, have demonstrated exceptional capabilities in teaching, translation, writing, scientific research, and other fields. As an academic discipline characterized by both instrumental and humanistic values, the instrumental function of English is increasingly susceptible to replacement by AI. Therefore, teachers must recognize the profound significance of reform: if they adhere rigidly to traditional language teaching methods, focus solely on linguistic competence, and fail to foster students' core competencies in an all-round manner—especially their higher-order thinking skills—the graduates cultivated will lack competitiveness in the age of AI.

In summary, Hainan Province faces dual pressures: internally, the demand for English-proficient talents driven by the construction of the Free Trade Port (FTP) amid relatively underdeveloped educational foundations; externally, the impacts of a grim international situation and technological disruptions such as AI. The development of education in Hainan is distinct from that in other regions and eras, featuring unique local characteristics. The particularity parameter of the post-method pedagogy posits that no single teaching method is universally applicable. Instructional approaches must be localized, derived from teachers' classroom experiences, local students' academic backgrounds, and regional educational realities. Simply replicating others' methods and theories will merely impose an additional burden on teachers without improving teaching effectiveness. Methods effective in other periods may not be applicable today; those suitable for other regions may not work in Hainan; and even within Hainan, appropriate approaches vary across different areas. Thus, the blind promotion of a single teaching method is meaningless, and the pursuit of a uniform pedagogical model across all grade levels and subjects in certain regions is even more inadvisable. The promotion of educational concepts and teaching methods is generally driven top-down by educational authorities and school administrators, as a result of policy-related factors. However, teachers themselves need to fundamentally understand the relationship between teaching methods and practice, develop their own educational philosophies, and promote their professional growth.

3. Teachers' Professional Development from the Perspective of Post-Method Pedagogy

As organizers of teaching activities and practitioners of pedagogical theories, middle school teachers have long faced a predicament characterized by insufficient theoretical guidance and the disconnect between theory and practice, which hinders their ability to effectively guide teaching practice. Deficiencies still exist in teachers' self-construction and renewal of educational philosophies, selection of teaching methods, and professional development.

3.1 Educational philosophies

Constrained by their educational backgrounds and job responsibilities, primary and secondary school teachers often occupy a subordinate position in terms of pedagogy and methodologies, while educational experts and scholars stand in a dominant position. Specifically, experts formulate or propose theoretical frameworks, which teachers are expected to implement in their teaching practice—yet teachers can only passively accept such theories. As frontline practitioners of teaching theories, teachers are compelled to adopt new theories and methodologies under the pressures of policies and administrative promotions amid successive rounds of educational reforms. Hainan Province, serving as a national pilot zone for development, has participated in four rounds of foreign language education reforms, including the new college

entrance examination (Gaokao) model launched in 2019. As Chen Xiangming (2003: 110) argues, “Teachers have become consumers of knowledge, passively consuming the knowledge produced by experts. The richer and more complex educational research outcomes, the simpler and more rigid teachers’ thinking.” Teachers themselves are unable to question or innovate upon existing theories, nor can they implement practical and effective teaching methods tailored to the actual dynamics of their classrooms.

Beyond domestic experts, countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada — endowed with the advantage of English as their mother tongue — possess greater authority, with their English teaching theories and methodologies occupying a dominant position globally. Teaching methods developed based on foreign theories exhibit significant discrepancies from the actual classroom contexts of domestic teachers, making it difficult for teachers to apply them effectively in practice.

Although educational administrative departments organize various training programs on teaching theories and methodologies for frontline teachers, most teachers still struggle to develop their own systematic educational theoretical frameworks.

3.2 Teacher training

To promote teachers’ professional development, educational authorities schools have organized various training activities aimed at disseminating new educational philosophies and facilitating the implementation of teaching reforms. Currently, except for a handful of teachers who have access to training programs such as exchanges and academic visits, most teacher training initiatives in Hainan Province mainly include online lectures, online training programs, offline seminars, workshops, and master teacher studios. The training content features insufficient focus on enhancing educational philosophies; instead, it primarily involves educational experts and scholars indoctrinating frontline teachers with educational theories or sharing teaching methodologies. Teachers who actually participate in these programs still passively accept what have been given while many merely engage in the training to fulfill tasks and obtain credits without devoting genuine effort to mastering the content. Coupled with the lack of effective assessment mechanisms, these training programs have not yielded as many results. Teachers still have few opportunities for effective two-way communication with educational experts and insufficient understanding of methods to promote self-improvement and professional growth.

3.3 Teachers’ professional growth

Affected by the realities of teaching practice, the guiding role of theoretical knowledge for middle school teachers has gradually weakened since they embarked on their careers. Their self-development and professional growth largely rely on various teaching skills training, the transfer of experience and skills from senior colleagues, and continuous self-experimentation. However, the experience gained through these training programs, learning processes, and trials lacks systematicity, failing to effectively facilitate teachers’ professional growth. While many teachers smoothly transition from novice teachers to proficient teachers and further to competent teachers, very few progress to become expert teachers or master teachers, which stems precisely from the lack of in-depth reflection and summarization of their own teaching practices, as well as the failure to theorize their experiences and approaches.

The practicality parameter of post-method pedagogy emphasizes that teachers’ educational philosophies should be derived from the summarization and reflection on their own teaching

practices, thereby truly achieving “theorizing practice and practicing theory.” Kumaravadivelu (1994) argues that action research, based on classroom discourse analysis, self-observation, and self-evaluation, can enhance teachers’ research capabilities, improve practical effectiveness, and enable the formulation of corresponding micro-strategies in line with its macro-strategic framework. Compared with other research methods, action research features a relatively low threshold and strong operability, making it a crucial means for teacher development. Nevertheless, currently, there is a scarcity of action research in primary and secondary schools in Hainan, and no context-specific educational philosophies have been formed that align with the actual teaching conditions of schools and originate from teachers’ own practices.

The practicality parameter of post-method pedagogy shares similarities with the research on practical knowledge conducted by Chen Xiangming’s team at Peking University. Through studies on excellent primary and secondary school teachers, the team identified that these teachers possess practical knowledge, which they defined as “teachers’ understanding of education and teaching formed through reflecting on and refining their own educational and teaching experiences, and manifested through their actions” (Wei & Chen, 2018). However, the research objects of their team were mainly excellent teachers rather than novice teachers. In response to external doubts regarding this, Chen Xiangming (2018) stated, “The reason for exploring practical knowledge among outstanding senior teachers is that this group possesses the awareness and ability to reflect and accumulate, resulting in relatively rich and stable practical knowledge.” This indicates that excellent teachers have more abundant practical knowledge compared to novice teachers. For novice teachers to grow into excellent educators, an important pathway lies in strengthening action research, observing and reflecting on their classroom teaching activities, refining their ideological understanding, and using this to improve their teaching and form their own unique practical knowledge. This also points out a new direction for the professional development of middle school teachers in Hainan: compared with training on educational philosophies and teaching methods, more practical approaches such as action research and case study should be prioritized in training programs. These methods will assist primary and secondary school teachers in developing their own theories through practice, forming practical knowledge, improving classroom teaching, and achieving personal growth simultaneously.

4. Connotations of Classroom Teaching from the Perspective of Post-Method Pedagogy

Language serves not only as a carrier of culture and consciousness but also as a tool for their dissemination. Kumaravadivelu (2006: 200) argues that in the process of language learning, there exists no purely linguistic environment that is completely unaffected by social, political, historical, cultural, and other factors. Therefore, in the teaching process, teachers must take into account the learning needs of language learners and the social context in which language teaching takes place, correctly handle the relationship between teaching and other influencing factors, leverage the inherent advantages of language education in addressing values and ideological issues, and cultivate students with distinct personal identities. Faced with the special educational situation and needs in Hainan, teachers can make improvements at the following three levels:

4.1 Enriching the connotations of classroom teaching

In addition to existing textbooks and classroom activities, teachers can expand the connotation of classroom teaching and activities in response to the demands of social development and

students' educational needs. Hainan's unique geographical environment, historical culture, as well as the distinctive humanistic elements of various regions, can all be integrated into classroom teaching. The construction of the FTP requires interdisciplinary talents with strong language application capabilities; therefore, classroom teaching should also strengthen the cultivation of students' language output competence and pragmatic competence, so as to truly meet the needs of students' personal growth and social development.

4.2 Emphasizing ideological and political education in curriculum

Currently, in the English curriculum standards implemented in primary and secondary schools in China, language learning is conducted based on discourses. Through discourse learning, students are required to master cultural knowledge and identify and judge the attitudes and values embedded in discourses (Ministry of Education, 2022). When selecting teaching materials, teachers should not only focus on linguistic knowledge but also incorporate ideological and political education elements, thereby implementing ideological guidance. Teachers should guide students to establish correct values through discourse learning, develop a proper understanding of socialism, Chinese civilization, and world civilizations, adopt a critical attitude towards foreign cultures, and cultivate students' cultural confidence and institutional confidence. Ultimately, this approach aims to truly cultivate talents needed for China's socialist modernization drive and the construction of Hainan FTP.

4.3 Cultivating students with Hainan's distinctive traits

Language learning also enables students to gain a better understanding of themselves. Kumaravadivelu (2001) argues that language education not only presents challenges for learners but also provides opportunities for them to continuously pursue autonomy and construct their self-identity. Through language learning classrooms infused with Hainan's distinctive historical and cultural connotations as well as local humanistic elements, coupled with the subtle influence on students' ideological awareness, Hainan students will develop their unique identity characteristics, evolving into individuals embodying the distinctive traits of being "healthy and optimistic, eager to learn and progress, diligent and honest, and civilized and humble."

5. Conclusion

There exists a contradiction between the demand for talents driven by the construction of Hainan Free Trade Port and the current development status of English education in Hainan Province. Despite undergoing multiple rounds of educational reforms, Hainan has achieved limited results in most cases. Kumaravadivelu's post-method pedagogy reflects on the concept of "method," and its three core parameters—particularity, practicality, and possibility—hold strong guiding significance for the development of English education in Hainan. Foreign language education in Hainan should formulate corresponding teaching strategies based on the specific circumstances of educational institutions at different levels. Meanwhile, teachers' instructional methods ought to be grounded in the actual dynamics of their classrooms; through approaches such as action research, teachers can reflect on their practice, develop their own practical knowledge, and achieve professional self-development. In classroom teaching, social development needs and students' individual demands should be integrated into curriculum elements. Ideological guidance should be conducted through language learning to help students form unique identity characteristics and cultivate talents required for national construction.

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The author(s) declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Ethics Statement

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