



# What does methodology mean to you?

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consider just why reflective practice is so useful.

When language teachers talk about methodology, do we all mean the same thing? For some, it may suggest a structured plan of how they teach, while for others, it might be an underlying philosophy, a set of classroom techniques or a mere road map that can lead to unplanned destinations. Nunan (1991) defines methodology as:

the study of pedagogical practices in general (including theoretical underpinnings and related research). Whatever considerations are involved in how to teach are methodological.

– David Nunan (1991:2)

He explains that methodology encompasses both theoretical frameworks and the practical procedures teachers

use in the language classroom, including decisions about: content; sequencing; strategies; assessment; learners' needs; and context. Importantly, Nunan (1991) distinguishes methodology from approach and technique as follows:

- **approach:** beliefs about the nature of language and the process of language learning
- **method:** the practical realisation of an approach
- **technique:** a specific classroom activity that implements a method.

From this perspective, methodology can be seen as a bridge between theory and practice, guiding how language teaching is designed, implemented and reflected upon. Richards and Rodgers (2014) reinforce this view, describing

methodology in language teaching as a coherent set of links between theory and practice. Their framework involves understanding the nature of language and learning (approach), setting teaching and learning objectives, designing the syllabus, defining teacher and learner roles, and selecting appropriate activities and materials (design), as well as the pedagogical practices a teacher employs to facilitate learning in and out of the classroom (procedure).

In this short article, we, the authors, first share our own definitions of what methodology means to us as experienced teachers. We then present an analysis of survey responses from 24 peers working in a range of teaching contexts, exploring how language teachers today may define methodology and use it in their everyday practice.

## What methodology means to Chi

For me, methodology is the teaching philosophy that guides my practice. It represents what I advocate for and what I strive to realise in my classes. As a language teacher, I have long embraced communicative language teaching (CLT), with its emphasis on meaningful communication and fluency over mere accuracy. This commitment stems from my own learning experiences. In secondary school in Japan, I was taught English through the grammar-translation method. Although I excelled academically, I soon discovered its limitations; when faced with real-life communication, I was unable to use the language effectively. That disillusionment was a turning point. At the age of 23, I began the process of 'relearning' and, ever since, communicative skills development has been central to both my personal journey and my career as an English instructor.

Over the years, my teaching context has shifted from working with Young Learners to teaching at the tertiary level in Japan. Throughout this journey, I have been deeply influenced by Carl Rogers' (1969) humanistic theory, which emphasises the individual's innate drive for personal growth and self-actualisation. Rogers (1969) believed that people can realise their full potential when nurtured in an environment of unconditional positive regard: one in which they are accepted and valued without judgement. I seek to bring this spirit of trust and respect into my classroom.

More recently, I have been strongly inspired by compassion-based language education (CBLE) (Mercer, 2024), especially in light of the growing prevalence of mental health challenges among university students. Compared to my high school days, today's students often arrive at university with stronger English skills. Yet in a world increasingly shaped by AI and social media, many experience loneliness and a lack of authentic human connection. CBLE feels particularly urgent because it prioritises supportive and inclusive classrooms where wellbeing is valued alongside linguistic and cognitive development (Mercer, 2024).



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Guided by this perspective, I design programmes that meet curricular requirements while embedding compassionate, humanistic practices. Activities such as mindfulness, self-reflection, and self-regulation complement institutional standards and help address students' emotional and social needs. Here are four activities that I incorporate into my teaching:

### ■ Learning journals

Short reflective journals help students document learning, monitor progress and pose questions privately to the instructor. They also provide material

for final self-evaluations. Feedback suggests students find them both useful and motivating.

### ■ Group projects

Collaborative projects such as presentations, blogs and campaign leaflets encourage negotiation, decision-making and shared responsibility. While initially challenging, repeated cycles foster autonomy, agency and engagement.

### ■ Campus walks

Brief outdoor activities refresh learners and stimulate discovery. Students note five to ten new observations on campus, and are often surprised by previously unnoticed features. Sharing these observations sparks meaningful exchanges and energises classroom discussion.

### ■ Grounding practices

The 5-4-3-2-1 grounding practice (name five things seen, four felt, three heard, two smelt, and one tasted) can help students manage anxiety and remain present, particularly before nerve-racking classroom tasks such as oral presentations or quizzes.

Through these practices, my learners and I have become more aware of the central role that wellbeing plays in education. As Mercer (2025) has noted in one of her interviews:

If we, as educators, do not encourage learners to become their best selves and support them in thriving within this chaotic yet beautiful world, what kind of future are we cultivating?

– Sarah Mercer (2025)

For me, this question captures the underlying methodology that guides my pedagogy.

## What methodology means to Andy

When I first came to Japan as a new teacher starting work at an *eikaiwa* (private conversation school), I carried a single method that had been instilled in me during the pre-arrival training in London: Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP). This model offered a simple way to structure my lessons: I could present the target language, have students practise it in controlled activities and then move them into freer production of the language. For a new teacher being thrown headfirst into a full-time schedule, PPP felt like a comfortable security blanket. It did not take long, however, to realise the limitations of relying on just one method. While PPP seemed to work reasonably well for grammar-focused lessons, it often felt mechanical. Moreover, in the production stage, students

frequently omitted the target language altogether, which defeated the purpose of the particular lesson. I soon realised that the language classroom is messier and more unpredictable than PPP's tidy and linear sequence suggested. Instead, teaching requires the ability to think on one's feet, shifting directions to respond to the actual needs of the students as they emerge in real time. This realisation pushed me to develop what I now think of as a personal methodology: preparing carefully but also remaining open and responsive to what may truly work with a particular group of learners at any given moment. It is less about rigid adherence to a method and more about a tacit awareness of what is happening, what is likely to come next and how to respond to challenges that may derail a lesson.

Confirmation of the way I approached my teaching came during my master's degree. In a methodology module, I encountered Prabhu's influential (1990) article: 'There is no best method – why?'. Instead of chasing a universal, one-size-fits-all methodology, or piecing together bits of existing methods eclectically, Prabhu (1990:172) urges us to focus on 'teachers' subjective understanding of what they do'. He described this as a teacher's individual 'sense of plausibility' (Prabhu, 1990:173), an evolving understanding of how our teaching leads to learning. This sense of

plausibility is how we keep teaching real, fresh and alive, rather than reducing it to a mechanical routine. This sense of plausibility develops not only from our classroom experiences but also from the informal exchanges we have with our colleagues in corridors, from discussions in workshops and from the professional literature we read. We take in what seems plausible, try it out in our own classrooms and, if it works, make it part of our own teaching repertoire. For me, it is this sense of plausibility that remains the underlying philosophy that guides my pedagogy. It acknowledges that teaching is never fixed, but always in motion, shaped by learners, contexts and interactions. My personal methodology is an ongoing professional stance of being reflective, responsive and open to what seems most plausible to advance learning in my classes.

## The study

Starting from the assumption that every language teacher carries their own interpretations of what methodology is (shaped by their experiences, training, beliefs and classroom realities) the authors conducted a survey to gain insights into how teachers actually define the term and relate it to their professional lives. 24 responses were received from teachers based in Japan (21), Indonesia (1), Thailand (1) and



Vietnam (1). Of these, 17 respondents currently teach at the tertiary level, while the remaining seven teach at a high school, junior high school, elementary school, conversation school or company; alternatively they work as a freelancer. The central survey question was: 'What does methodology mean to you?'. The survey responses were coded to determine common themes across the data, and six distinct categories or definitions emerged from this process.

### Methodology as a structured plan

Nineteen participants in this survey described methodology as a systematic or structured approach to teaching. For them, methodology is akin to a blueprint or a guide for practice. One respondent explained:

It's a planned and structured way of doing things . . . like cooking where you don't have to follow the exact steps and ingredients and order (Respondent 1).

This perspective aligns with Nunan's (1991) definition of methodology as a principled and organised framework for teaching. Another participant emphasised the individuality of teaching approaches, noting that methodology is:

what you actually do *intentionally* to attempt to facilitate learners acquiring more language . . . every teacher's method is different (Respondent 9).

This response illustrates the understanding that methodology cannot be universally applied; rather, it is a fluid plan shaped by factors such as student proficiency, motivation and classroom dynamics. In this sense, methodology provides teachers with structure and coherence, but its effectiveness depends on how it is adapted for the different types of learners we teach and their diverse, evolving needs.

### Methodology as theory-driven and research-informed

Ten participants explained that methodology was something anchored in theory and research. For these teachers, methodology is not simply a matter of classroom routines but a framework

that connects the practice of teaching with evidence of its effectiveness. As one respondent commented:

methodology is a means to secure some degree of reliability in the resulting knowledge claim . . . a principled, theory-driven approach, supported by research data (Respondent 2).

Another respondent echoed this sentiment, noting that methodology is about 'making theory and practice come together and meet in the practical context of the classroom' (Respondent 5). Again, this perspective resonates strongly with Nunan's (1991) definition of methodology as a study of pedagogy that encompasses both the theoretical underpinnings and the practical procedures of teaching. Richards and Rodgers (2014) likewise emphasise methodology as a coherent link between theory and practice. At the same time, methodology is something that emerges as teachers draw on research and theory aligned with their 'sense of plausibility' (Prabhu, 1990) and humanistic desire to 'create a learning environment that best suits the current needs [of their learners]' (Respondent 22). In this view, methodology is seen as being part of a professional practice that gains integrity from its theoretical grounding but remains responsive to the practicalities and realities of the classroom.

### Methodology as goal-oriented

Another way respondents answered the central survey question of what methodology means to them was in terms of goals, objectives and outcomes. Nine respondents defined methodology by what learners should ultimately achieve. One respondent explained that methodology is:

working backwards from what you want students to be able to do, considering necessary skills and devising activities that will develop those skills and language in an engaging and collaborative way (Respondent 4).

Another emphasised the importance of manageability. This is done by teachers considering the big picture of what students are expected to achieve and

'breaking the important course objectives into manageable tasks and assessments' (Respondent 7).

Several respondents also linked methodology directly to maximising student learning and achievement. As one put it, it is 'a way of teaching to maximise the learning outcomes' (Respondent 18), while another described it as 'the way a lesson is carried out to ensure learning is accomplished' (Respondent 19). These perspectives highlight a strong orientation towards effectiveness and purpose, with learning objectives positioned at the heart of methodology. In this sense, methodology is about creating a clear path that helps learners progress from A to B, ensuring that one's pedagogical practice leads to tangible learning results.

### Methodology as tacit, flexible, adaptive and context sensitive

Seven respondents commented directly that methodology is not rigid or uniform, but flexible and evolving. It is shaped both by professional learning and the specific demands of the classroom context. One teacher mentioned that methodology had become 'less explicit' (Respondent 17). Rather than following a specific method, this teacher sought to balance meaning-focused input and output, fluency development and language-focused learning, while remaining open to new ideas gained from workshops and colleagues. Another respondent acknowledged that methodology can often operate below the surface, noting that they had forgotten the 'well-defined definitions for methodology' (Respondent 16) and needed to look them up in order to complete the survey.

These reflections suggest that methodology is a tacit, living process that adapts to the realities of pedagogic practice. It is a responsive stance that is adjusted to the diverse and somewhat unpredictable nature of the classroom. Ultimately, the success of a methodology may depend on how well teachers implement and adapt it within their particular educational settings.

### Methodology as personal beliefs and philosophy

Four participants defined methodology as a deeply personal construct, shaped by

beliefs, experiences and values. Rather than a fixed set of techniques, it is often viewed as a philosophy or mindset that emerges over time. One respondent described methodology as an approach:

to teaching/learning . . . based on beliefs; the teacher's research/ experience should inform one's personal methodology (Respondent 3).

Another emphasised the role of individuality, calling it:

a process by which a teacher chooses and implements educational approaches and activities that suit his/her teaching style and (more importantly) enhance learners' achievement and enjoyment (Respondent 11).

Borg (2003) supports this view, emphasising that methodology is closely tied to teacher cognition: the knowledge and beliefs that guide practice. Similarly, the apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) highlights how teachers' prior experiences as classroom learners often shape enduring beliefs about teaching. Together, these perspectives show that methodology is not uniform but may emerge from an educator's unique personal and professional history, influencing classroom strategies, decision-making and teacher-student relationships.

### Methodology as reflective practice

Finally, four respondents framed methodology as something that evolves through ongoing reflection and professional growth rather than as a static body of knowledge. For these teachers, methodology often operates tacitly until reflection brings it into focus. One teacher commented on creating lesson plans without explicit consideration of methodology (Respondent 14). Instead, an implicit understanding, shaped by continual cycles of teaching and reflection, helped them decide what would work to achieve the lesson objectives. Teachers also mentioned drawing inspiration from workshops and informal exchanges with colleagues to reflect on their teaching and refine

their methodology (Respondent 17). Another respondent warned that 'teaching without methodology' risks the classroom becoming routine and uninspired (Respondent 21). Reflecting on this difference, they concluded that methodology is what enables them to better support their students.

In this final category, methodology is seen as a process of learning by doing and reflecting on action. In Schön's (1983) terms, teachers act as reflective practitioners and reshape their methods through cycles of practice and reflection. In this way, methodology is not only adaptive (as seen in category 4) but also developmental, deepening through continuous professional growth.

### Conclusion

In this short paper, we have described what methodology means to us as authors, as well as to 24 survey respondents. For Chi, it is grounded in communicative language teaching, Rogers' (1969) humanistic education and Mercer's (2024) compassion-based pedagogy, with an emphasis on wellbeing that guides her teaching. For Andy, his understanding of methodology has emerged from an early reliance on PPP, later shaped by Prabhu's (1990) call to develop one's 'sense of plausibility' in order to remain responsive to what actually works in the classroom.

The survey findings reinforced a diversity of ways that teachers define methodology. It can be seen as: a structured plan; a framework that emerges from research and is theory-driven; a goal-oriented entity; a tacit and adaptive approach; an orientation grounded in personal beliefs and philosophy; or a process that develops as we engage in the practice of teaching. In this way, methodology cannot be reduced to a single meaning. Rather, it is a multifaceted construct shaped by teachers' experiences, contexts, research, values, beliefs and aspirations for their learners. In the end, what matters most is not the labels we give to our methods, but the quality of what happens when teachers and learners come together in the classroom. Once the door is closed and the bell sounds to signal the start of the lesson, this is where the real work and the real magic of teaching begin.

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