

# ***The Eclectic Method to language Teaching: Clarifications and Conceptual Extensions***

*By*

David Sani Mwanza, PhD

School of Education

*The University of Zambia*

Email: *sanidavidmwanza@yahoo.com*

## **Abstract**

The eclectic method to language teaching is understood to be the use of several methods in one lesson. It is also argued that it is a reaction against a single method owing to the fact that each of the individual methods has strengths and weaknesses. However, there are still a number of questions around the conceptualisation of the method. For example, how many methods should one combine to come up with the eclectic method? Additionally, does the number of methods which one combines have an effect on the overall eclectic method? This paper makes an attempt to answer these two questions and at the same time provide frameworks through which the eclectic method to language teaching should be understood.

**Key Words:** Eclectic Method, Single Method, Simple Eclecticism, Complex Eclecticism, Eclectic Dichotomy, Eclectic Continuum.

## **Scope of the Paper**

The eclectic method is a popular method among teachers all over the world. The concept of eclecticism is applied in many subject areas to refer to a combination of methods, strategies, materials,

content etc. Bearing this in mind, it is imperative to clarify that this paper focuses on the Eclectic Method within the context of English language teaching. The central issue is its conceptualisation as a method of teaching language and by extension, its implications on materiality, classroom activities and other factors which contribute to its scope as a method of teaching language.

### **The Eclectic Method: Definitions, Meaning and Implications**

The eclectic approach was born out of the realisation that each of the individual methods of language teaching had strengths and weaknesses and that no one method was responsive to the dynamic classroom context. Thus, based on the shortcomings of the methods, Brown (2002) argued that eclecticism provides the solution because the approach allows the teacher to select what works within their own dynamic contexts. Gilliland, James and Bowman (1994) stated that the justification for the eclectic approach lies in the weaknesses of the single approach because a single method has a narrow theoretical basis and has a delimited set of activities and is therefore inflexible. Since eclecticism is context sensitive, learning is fun and innovative and the approach works for every type of learner regardless of their social economic background and preferences.

It can therefore be reiterated that the eclectic approach was born as a result of the dissatisfactions of the single method approach. Since, each learning situation is different, methodological prescription is pedagogically unacceptable. The eclectic approach therefore responds to the diversities in the classroom and learning contexts.

By definition, Kumar (2013:1) noted that “the eclectic method is a combination of different methods of teaching and learning approaches”. It can also be viewed as principled eclecticism implying that the approach is characteristically desirable, coherent and pluralistic to language teaching. It also involves the use of a

variety of language learning activities which are mostly different characteristically and may be motivated by different underlying assumptions of language teaching (Al Hamash 1985; Larsen-Freeman 2000; Mellow 2000, 2002).

Gao (2011) stated that principled eclecticism challenges the teacher to ensure that every decision about classroom instruction and activities is based on a thorough and holistic understanding of all learning theories and related pedagogies, in terms of the purpose and context of language teaching and learning, the needs of the learners, materials available, how language is learnt and what teaching is all about. In addition, Gao (2011:1) described the eclectic approach as “not a concrete, single method, but a method, which combines listening, speaking, reading, and writing and includes some practice in the classroom”. He added that the current preferred teaching methods are an integration of Grammar-Translation, structural method and CLT and advised teachers to take advantage of all other methods whilst avoiding their disadvantages. Wali (2009:40) summarised this proposition when he stated the following:

...one of the premises of eclecticism is that teaching should serve learners not methods. Thus, teachers should feel free in choosing techniques and procedures inside the classroom. There is no ideal approach in language learning. Each one has its merits and demerits. There is no royalty to certain methods. Teachers should know that they have the right to choose the best methods and techniques in any method according to learners' needs and learning situation. Teachers can adopt a flexible method and technique so as to achieve their goals. They may choose whatever works best at a particular time in a particular situation

To argue that ‘teaching should serve learners and not methods’ means that teachers should focus on helping learners to learn and not on fulfilling the prescriptions of the methods. When teaching, the goal is learning and that learners should grasp the content. Cognisant that different learners learn differently and have different preferences on what factors and methods promote effective learning, the teacher should consider learner characteristics before choosing the method/s of teaching. In other words, methods should respond to the needs of the learners and not learners responding to the needs or demands of the methods. It is common knowledge that each individual method has suggestions on what learning and teaching is and how therefore, teachers should teach. The problem is that the suggestions made by individual methods are bracket prescriptions which do not consider the actual differences which exist from classroom to classroom and from one learning context to the other. The quote above also emphasises teacher freedom in the decisions about which methods to use and which classroom activities should be adopted to bring about effective learning. The point here is that the learner should be the basis on which classroom decisions should be made.

According to Weidemann (2001), the justification for the use of eclecticism as an approach to language teaching is its fashionability which is strengthened by the argument of critical pedagogy. Kumaravadivelu (2006) actually warned against relying on methods in their specifications because they do not provide all solutions to language teaching. Thus, he proposed a post-methodic approach to language teaching. Discussing pedagogical parameters of particularity, practicality and possibility as pedagogic indicators of the post-method, she suggested that a language teacher should adopt a context-sensitive pedagogic framework which will be able to respond to special characteristics of a particular teaching and learning context. As implied earlier, within the framework of

principled eclecticism, a teacher is not bound or confined to the prescriptions of a particular method but is free to draw from a vast range of methods and resources to teach a particular topic. In fact, Weidemann (2001:2) noted that the eclectic approach has been so widely accepted that “today, many good teachers use it proudly as a tag to describe their teaching, wearing it almost like a badge of honour”. This means that since learners are different and have different ways of learning, it is helpful to use the eclectic approach because it strives to respond to the diversities and exigencies which normally exist in the classroom. Thus, effective teaching is about flexibility through the use of the eclectic approach.

The eclectic approach has several advantages. It connects classroom experiences to the daily life activities of the learners. This helps learners to understand new knowledge by drawing on what they already know. Thus, learning is not strange because the activities are life-like. Kumar (2013:2) actually stated that “the purpose of advocating for eclectic method is to connect life experiences to the ideas presented in learning of the language. The types of learning activities teachers select are often directly related to their experiences in the real world”. As mentioned above, this helps learners not to look at learning and the classroom as threats but as an extension of the home environment.

In order for the eclectic approach to be appreciated by both the teacher and the learners, the teacher should have thorough understanding of the approach. The teacher should know the various methods and techniques of language teaching, and have the ability to choose appropriately which methods and techniques to integrate in a lesson which can lead to the achievement of the learning and teaching goals. Unfortunately, if a teacher who is supposed to apply the eclectic approach is not well vested in the approach, s/he may struggle to come up with a blend that may be helpful in the realisation of the lesson objectives. This is the reason why Weidemann (2001:8) stated that:

If one can employ a number of methods deliberately to achieve language teaching and learning goals, such an approach may yield a professionally stimulating experience. But if, on the other hand, one uses an eclectic argument merely for the sake of avoiding commitment and playing it safe, never coming to an understanding of the roots of the techniques that one adopts, the only consequence it may have is to dilute the effect of the new.

It can therefore be reiterated that applying the eclectic approach requires teachers' understanding of the approach. Further, it is important that the teacher should not only understand the approach but also how it can be applied in different teaching and learning contexts.

It is important to note that the eclectic approach is not a rigid approach, thus, its characteristics may not be limited to the ones presented in this study. However, an attempt has been made to cover its major characteristics in as much detail as possible.

Ali (1981: 7) listed the following principles of eclecticism:

- (a) Teachers are given a chance to choose different kinds of teaching techniques in each class period to reach the aims of the lesson;
- (b) There is flexibility in choosing any aspect or method that teachers think suitable for teaching inside the classroom;
- (c) Learners can see different kinds of teaching techniques, using different kinds of teaching aids, that help to make lessons much more stimulating and ensures better understanding of the material on the

other hand;

- (d) Solving difficulties that may emerge from the presentation of the textbook materials; and
- (e) Finally, it saves both time and effort in the presentation of language activities.

Since the eclectic approach is constructed by an individual teacher according to the learning and teaching context, it can also be argued that another characteristic of the approach is that it is subjective. This means that what may be called eclectic is dependent on what a particular teacher will come up with depending on the factors affecting the classroom. Teachers have the freedom to choose judiciously what works for them and decide how and what can be integrated in a particular instance to bring about learning. Thus, the subjectivity being discussed here refers to how different teachers will conceive what may constitute the Eclectic method. However, what makes it common is the fact that the goal and basis of eclectic teaching is that learners of different characteristics should access learning with less difficulties.

In addition, in the teaching and learning of English as a second language, L1 and L2 connection is inevitable. In education, the importance of learners' first language in the learning of the second language cannot be over emphasised. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, learning a new language (L2) is facilitated by what the learner already knows (L1). Hence, L1 aids L2 learning (Kumaravadivelu 2006). Stern (1992:283) noted that "it is the nature of linguistic and communicative competence that ...L1 (or the second language previously learnt) is the yardstick and guide to our new L2". Language and culture are related. Hence, most learners in Zambia practice the culture associated with their first language (normally a Zambian language). This becomes helpful when learning a second language which is English in the context

of Zambia. Hence, teachers should not completely ignore the role of the first language in second language teaching and learning. In support of this proposition, Stern (1992:283) noted that learners' first language and culture "deeply bound up with our personal lives. A new language and culture demand a personal adjustment". Kumaravadivelu (2006) advised that this adjustment should be gradual.

While the recognition of first language is an important factor in the teaching and learning of a second language as part of the eclectic approach, the extent of its recognition needs clarification. Drawing on L1 in L2 teaching and learning may be more emphasised at lower grades in Zambia. However, there are less able learners in high school or senior grades who would benefit if some of the concepts in English can be explained using a local language if doing so in English is proving difficult to such learners. Some learners may also fail to express themselves or participate fully in communicative activities in class due to their deficiency in English. Instead of such learners being quiet in class, the teacher can allow them to speak by tolerating code switching and code mixing whenever they can. In the process, they can be helped by either the teacher or the learners to learn new vocabulary which would improve their communicative abilities in English. In other words, I wish to submit that the eclectic approach uses both the intralingua and the cross lingual approaches. Stern (1992:286) noted that " the emphasis on an intralingual or crosslingual strategy should be decided in relation to the goals of the learners, their previous experience in the L2, the context in which the programme takes place and the ability of the teacher to function intralingually or crosslingually". In terms of classroom application, the strategy can either be more intralingual or crosslingual depending on the factors stated above. However,



there are teachers who deliberately follow the intralingual strategy exclusively. To such teachers, Stern (1992:298) advised that it is important “to allow certain well-defined periods in which the use of L1 is allowed so that questions can be asked, meanings can be verified, uncertainties can be removed, and explanations given which would not be accessible to the learner in L2”. This is probably the reason why Kumar (2013) argued that the eclectic approach helps learners even from the rural area who do not speak English in common language usage to learn it and pass the objective examination. However, while L1 and L2 connection cannot be questioned, Kumaravadivelu (2006) warned that a judicious balance is needed in this case between L1 and L2 so that learners do not entirely depend on L1 instead of making the attempt to develop an independent relationship with L2 verbal connections. What this means is that the use of L1 in L2 teaching should be done cautiously because if done anyhow, learners may not develop the necessary required skills in the target language. Hence, they should be encouraged to learn the target language (English) while drawing on the learners’ L1 only when it is necessary to help learners learn the second language.

From the above, three characteristics of the eclectic approach have been identified. These are that eclecticism recognises the role of L1 in L2 teaching and learning, that both intralingual and cross-lingual strategies are applied and that the eclectic approach is subjective. However, for all these three features to be realised, it follows that the eclectic teacher should be knowledgeable and versatile about language and language teaching.

Another characteristic is that the eclectic approach is situational or context specific. Hence, the understanding and application of the eclectic approach should be localised or

contextualised to teaching and learning contexts. Naturally, the eclectic approach recognises that every teaching and learning situation is different, and therefore requires a different approach so suit the prevailing conditions. This also means that every global idea or conceptualisation of the approach should be understood and interpreted according to the local conditions of the classroom. This does not mean that global principles of language teaching are not important but that their usefulness should be appreciated context by context. Actually, Kumaravadivelu (2006:198) noted that “global principles [are] for general guidance but their implications need to be worked out for local everyday practice”. In other words, while global theorising of the eclectic approach is crucial, its interpretation and application should consider the characteristics of the learners, teachers, topic, teaching and learning goals and the culture of the learners, the school and the community in which language teaching and learning occurs. Thus, Alwright (2000) suggested that it is better for teachers to carry principles of language teaching from context to context than carrying principles across contexts.

When discussing post-method pedagogy which in practice translates into what is called the eclectic approach in this paper, Kumaravadivelu (2001) cited in Gao (2013:3) contended that post-method pedagogy is characterised by “(a) a focus on a context-sensitive language education based on a true understanding of local linguistic, socio-cultural and political particularities (2) enabling teachers to construct their own theory of practice and (3) emphasising the socio-political consciousness in order to aid the quest for identity formation and social transformation”. The scope of context includes learners’ characteristics, teacher characteristics, and goals of teaching/learning, the school, politics, economy and the social cultural factors. Methods of teaching in themselves are de-contextualised.

Therefore, the teacher has a duty of contextualising them according to the prevailing factors. Larsen-Freeman (2000:v) put it this way:

a method is decontextualised. How a method is implemented in the classroom is going to be affected not only by who the teacher is, but also by who the students are, their and the teachers' expectations, of appropriate social roles, the institutional constraints and demand, and factors connected to the wider socio-cultural context in which instruction takes place.

This is the reason why, as discussed above, teachers need to be well informed about the method if they are to apply it successfully. It is true that methods are decontextualised and teachers, with the knowledge of what factors surround their class, will decide how to contextualise the method so that it serves the learning needs of the learners.

The other characteristic of the eclectic approach is that error is considered as a normal part of the learning process. This does not mean that error is accepted but that error is viewed as a process of learning. Hence, error correction should not be done instantly but at the end of the communicative activity. Error correction is important as it helps learners to change their earlier knowledge which could be wrong. In grammar teaching, Curriculum Development of Zambia (2013) advises teachers to pay attention to errors in the teaching of grammar. On the importance of error correction, Krashen (1982:117) explained that:

when error correction works, it does so by

helping the learner change his/her conscious mental representation of a rule. In other words, it affects learned competence by informing the learner that his/her current version of a conscious rule is wrong. Thus, second language acquisition theory implies that when the goal is learning, errors should indeed be corrected.

From the above, it can be reiterated that when the goal is learning, errors should be corrected. It can be argued that without error correction, there would be no learning and there would be no need to teach because learners would still have the wrong rules and apply them in their communication even when they would have gone through an education system. However, it must be mentioned that error correction should not be done by the teacher alone. Learners should also be involved in correcting error as this helps them as well to test their own hypothesis of the rule they could be having. So, learner involvement should be extended to error correction of their peers. Li (2012:170) suggested that “the responsibility of error correction can be assumed by the students rather than the teacher so that they will learn from mistakes”. This is so because learners also have the ability to identify mistakes made by their peers. Thus, involving them in error correction helps them develop critical thinking and a sense of being an important member of the classroom.

To exemplify the proposition in Krashen’s quote, when a learner has made a mistake during a communicative activity, the teacher may ask fellow learners to comment on the answer or contribution. Learners will state whether it is correct or not and they should be encouraged to give reasons for their opinions. At this point, the teacher assumes his/her role of a facilitator. Learning is effective and learners will enjoy the experience if they

do not just learn from the teacher but from fellow learners too. This proposition is part of the conceptualisation of the eclectic approach.

In terms of the view of language, language is viewed as a whole. According to Larsen-Freeman (1992), the components of language such as pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary do not have meaning if used in isolation. Hence, meaning is expressed when language is used as a whole. Language teaching therefore should follow the same way. Kumar (2013) reiterated the same point when he advised that language should be viewed as a whole without separating into isolated units of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. As part of viewing language as a whole, language should not be separated from its culture.

Regarding teaching materials, the eclectic method employs a variety of teaching resources in order to respond to the various ways of learning inherent among pupils. It is important that teaching and learning materials are interesting and motivating for the learners. This means that the teacher should carefully select teaching materials according to the teaching point, learner needs and characteristics and the cultural context of the learning and teaching context. Weidemann (2001) asserted that effective language teachers invest a lot of time collecting interesting and attractive teaching and learning materials to liven up their teaching, and never spare a thought for the learners in the process of materials development and teaching. In the eclectic approach, the teacher will use any teaching material which will be deemed fit for use. They can use realia, chats, text books, magazines, newspapers, radio, film, music, maps, pictures and computers. Both visual and linguistic materials will be used. Iedema (2003) suggested that television, film and the computer are also useful resources in communication. In short, the eclectic method is multimodal.

In terms of the lesson procedure, Gao (2011) stated that a lesson should have the input stage where the teacher gives input and that it should have the practice stage where the lesson is learner centred and learners are encouraged to participate actively. He adds that the last stage is the production stage which is also learner centred and it involves learners doing an exercise or exercises based on the lesson. What Gao seems to suggest is that while an eclectic lesson should be learner centred through classroom practice and written exercises, the teacher also has a duty of giving some input in the learners.

In the input stage, the approach is teacher centred. This is where the teacher should introduce the topic and help learners know the focus of the lesson. This is reasonable because when it is said that the method is learner centred, it does not mean that the teacher will not do anything. The teacher has a duty of introducing the lesson by way of mentioning the topic and providing direction. This can be done in many ways. The teacher can use question and answer or he/she can simply explain to learners before engaging them into communicative activities. The teacher will make choices whether to use question and answer or not depending on the topic and background information learners have on the topic. However, since some learners may prefer formal instruction and other may prefer question and answer, the teacher may do well to use both if the class has learners of different preferences. The practice or development stage will be learner centred. This means that the teacher should come up with communicative activities to make learners practice the rule or structure being learnt in meaningful contexts. Learner participation should be encouraged and they can participate through classroom activities such as group work, pair work, role play, simulation or class work. Li (2012) stated that learners should practice through role play, problem solving activities, debate and group discussion. At this stage, the teacher's

role is to facilitate learning by guiding and helping learners as they actively participate in the lesson. The last stage which is the output stage is also learner centred. This is where learners are given an exercise or exercises which they should do especially individually in order for the teacher to assess whether the learners mastered the teaching point or not. This stage is very important as it is also the evaluation stage. Similarly, the role of the teacher is to give an activity or exercise based on the lesson and learners should do the work and not the teacher.

### **Conceptual Limitations of the Eclectic Method**

An attempt has been in the preceding section to define and explain the meaning of the Eclectic Method. Major authors on the conceptualisation of the method have been cited but still, certain questions about the method have not been answered. The first question is: how many methods should be combined in order for one to call the combination as eclectic? Is it two methods, three, four or what? Mwanza (2016, 2017) interviewed teachers on how they understood the eclectic method, while some showed knowledge of the method, others did not. However, those who demonstrated knowledge of the method still could not mention or clarify how many methods formed the eclectic method. This is not surprising because even existing literature does not give an answer to this question. The second question relates to how one develops into an eclectic teacher. In the preceding section, I argued for the importance of teacher training. It has been shown that the eclectic method requires adequate training and preparation in the method. The question however is: are teachers expected or should teachers be eclectic upon graduation from college or university of is it something that develops over time? To answer this question, I will argue for the way teachers develop or should develop into eclecticism while not ignoring the exceptional cases. Thus, the

next two sections provide answers to the two questions in what I consider as an extension of how the eclectic method should be viewed and understood. Answers to these two questions may add clarity to the conceptualisation and understanding of the method.

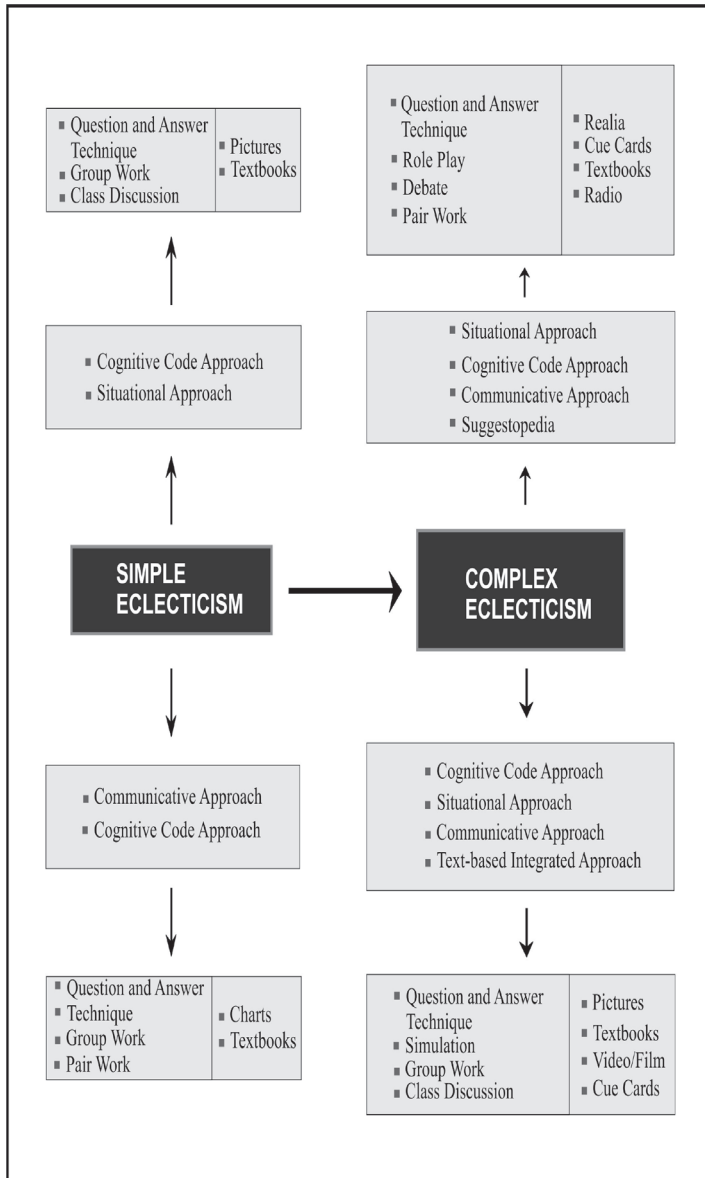
### **Eclecticism as either Simple or Complex Eclecticism**

The first question to be addressed is the question of how many methods constitute the Eclectic Method. As hinted above, no known literature gives this detail or clarification on how many methods one should combine in order to come up with the Eclectic method. Mwanza (2006) conducted a study where one of the questions on teachers' understood of the Eclectic method. While some teachers explained the meaning, non of them stated or explained how many methods constituted Eclecticism. This question and its answer are very important because the phrase 'combination of several methods' is not clear. What is several? How several should be several in order to come up with the Eclectic method?

To answer the question, I use the concepts of simple and complex to explain how the eclectic method should be viewed and understood in terms of how many would formulate the Eclectic method. In this case, I suggest a conceptual extension in which eclecticism can either be simple or complex. Simple eclecticism involves the integration of two methods in one lesson while complex eclecticism refers to the integration of three or more methods in one lesson. It must be mentioned that although the definition does not mention the number of activities, the idea here is that activities are informed by methods (cf. Larsen-Freeman 2000). Thus, the number of methods one combines influences the number of activities and materials one will use. Below is a diagrammatical representation of the two types of eclecticism I am suggesting:



**Figure 1: The Eclectic Dichotomy**



Note that the above types of eclecticism and their constituents are just examples of what would constitute either simple or complex eclecticism. Furthermore, while the two methodological combinations are examples of simple eclecticism, the two methods in each case are not strictly the only ones which can be combined. The two can be any other two methods which a teacher may combine to teach a particular topic. Similarly, the methods which I blended into complex eclecticism are not prescriptive of what should constitute complex eclecticism. It can be any other complex combination involving any other methodologies. Thus, at the basic level, a combination of two methods is called simple eclecticism and any combination of three or more results in complex eclecticism. From this argument therefore, eclecticism ensues the moment one goes beyond the use of one method. At its most basic level, the eclectic method involves the use of two methods in the same lesson while at the complex level; the eclectic method is a combination of three or more methods. To reiterate the answer to the major question, the eclectic method begins the moment one combines two methods and gets more complex with the increase in the number of methods being combined.

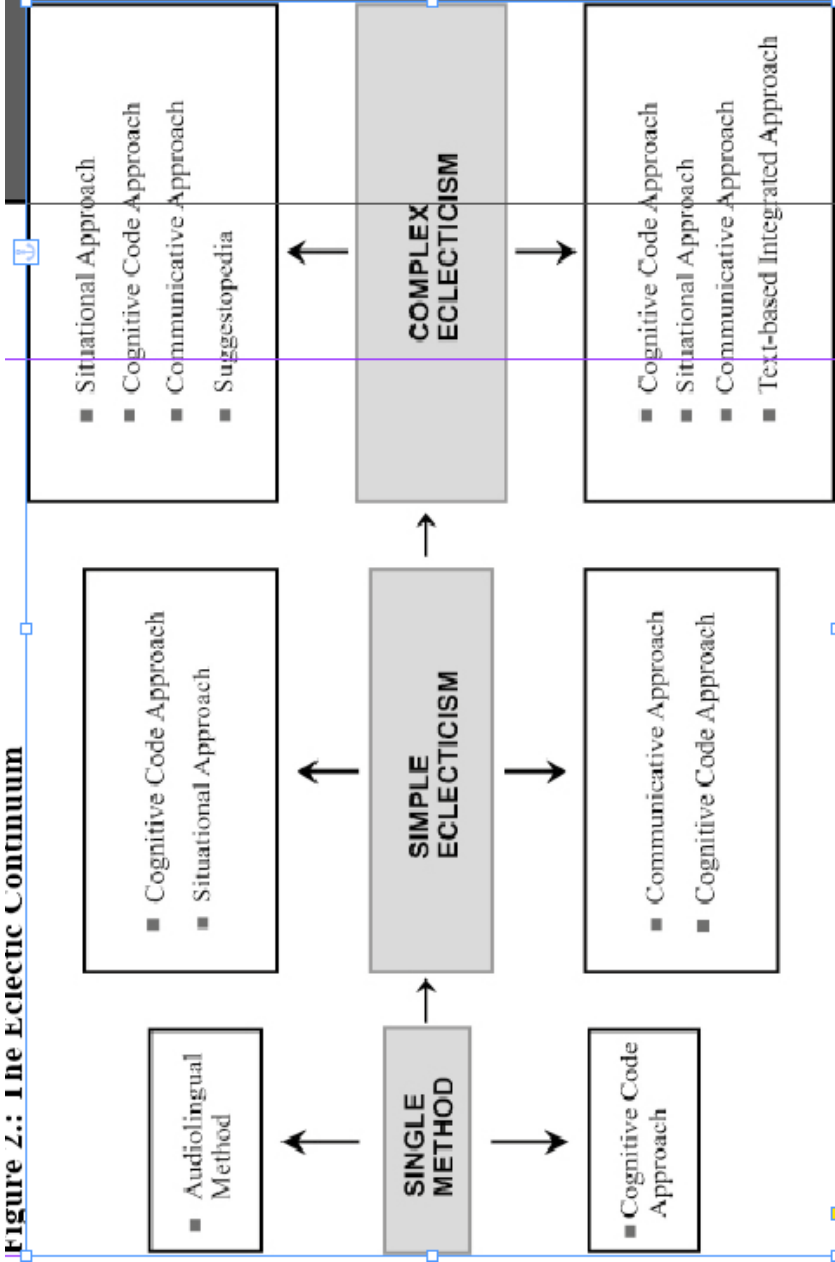
### **The Eclectic Continuum**

The eclectic continuum arises from Mwanza (2016) study where teacher trainers and teachers of English were asked whether or not teachers of English were adequately prepared in the Eclectic method and be able to use it upon graduation from college/university. Some lecturers stated that a teacher needed to start teaching using a single method adding that eclecticism developed with experience. They suggested that the more experienced a teacher became, the more eclectic, s/he would become. Some lecturers also stated that teachers needed to use a

single method first before they developed into eclecticism. These results were consistent with quantitative results in the same study where teachers were asked whether they become eclectic during training or in schools after training. The statistics showed that 43.3% of the respondents stated that they only knew how to apply the eclectic approach in schools after they were deployed (through experience). In other words, the majority of the teachers (43.3%) only learnt how to apply the eclectic approach when they started teaching in secondary schools. This seems to correspond with some of the respondents who said that eclecticism came with experience. 30% stated that they knew how to apply it while in college/university during training while 6.7% indicated that they did not really learn to apply it only after they started teaching. This means that they learnt part of it while on training and continued to do so after they were deployed in schools. Finally, 20% stated that they did not know whether they learnt the approach in college or after they were deployed. What I see here is that eclecticism is a continuum from single method to simple combinations to complex combinations as one gains more experience.

The eclectic continuum therefore is based on three major arguments. Firstly, teacher training institutions can train eclectic teachers by first training them as single method teachers and later developing them (even on their own through experience) into eclectic teachers. The second argument is that teacher training institutions can develop eclectic teachers directly without first making them single method teachers. The third and last argument is that eclecticism develops with experience. The last argument implies that the more experienced a teacher is, the more eclectic s/he becomes. I therefore use the concepts single method, simple eclecticism and complex eclecticism in my suggested eclectic continuum below:

**Figure 2.: The Eclectic Continuum**



The continuum is a model showing several possibilities of how one can become eclectic during and after teacher training and further shows how the eclectic approach can develop from single methods to simple eclecticism and finally to complex eclecticism with experience.

Note that the continuum I have suggested does not imply that a teacher can only move from a single method to simple eclecticism and finally to complex eclecticism sequentially. It is actually possible that a teacher can start with a single method and fail to reach even simple eclecticism either because s/he is not able to or because s/he simply prefers a single method to an eclectic approach. It is also possible that someone can start as a simple eclectic teacher and develop into a complex eclectic teacher with experience. Yet, it is also possible that someone can become a complex eclectic teacher straight from a teacher training institution. Therefore, the continuum is simply a suggestion that eclecticism is mostly progressive and one becomes more eclectic and more confident with the method as one gains classroom teaching experience. In any case, one may know what to combine after one has learnt how the individual methods work both in theory and practice.

The other clarification is that the methods which have been included in the continuum (combinations) are not prescriptive of what should constitute single method, simple or complex eclecticism. The number and choice of methods are just an example of the possible combinations. With the eclectic continuum, the point is that teacher development through the use of the eclectic approach is continuous and progressive.

## **Conclusion**

The paper has provided an appreciation of the Eclectic

method in terms of its definitions and meaning. It has been shown that some aspects of the method required explanation. In this paper, the explanation has been done through providing an extension to the current conceptualisation by bringing out simplex and complex eclecticism on one hand and the Eclectic dichotomy on the other hand. Since the eclectic method (post-method) is relatively new, it is hoped that more attempts from applied linguists will be made to clarify this and many other issues.

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