ELT Curriculum Intentions and Teachers’ Classroom Practices: How to Bridge the Gap

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Abstract: This paper presents the findings of a study which examines teachers’ implementation of the English language curriculum in Libyan secondary schools, and compares their implementation to what is recommended by the intended curriculum. It also sheds light on how teachers’ beliefs and other contextual factors influence the way teachers interpreted and implemented this curriculum.

Data collection methods consisted of classroom observations in which audio recordings of the teachers’ actual classroom practices were obtained, and follow up interviews in which teachers commented on the factors which had an impact on their classroom practices. The analysis of the data pointed to a limited uptake of the curriculum by these teachers, and highlighted complex relationships among the intended curriculum, teachers’ practices, teachers’ beliefs, and other contextual factors. This paper provides implications for educational policy makers, change agents, curriculum planners and ELT teacher education programs. It also illustrates the value of studying what teachers do while implementing ELT curriculum innovations.

Key words: curriculum implementation, Teachers’ practices contextual factors

Introduction

Many countries often introduce ELT curriculum innovations into their educational system to improve the status of English language teaching and learning in these countries. However, in practice these innovations often fail to achieve the intentions of who planned and initiated these innovations. The fact that curriculum innovations may not be implemented as intended is a phenomenon which is widely noted within the wider educational literature (Chapman, 1997; Elmore, 1996; Fullan, 2001; Sarason, 1996, Smith & Southerland (2007).

In the field of ELT Gorsuch (2000), conducted a questionnaire survey of teachers’ perceptions (876 teachers who teach English at high schools in Japan) towards the impact of English educational policy on their classroom practices. Findings revealed that while the educational policy emphasizes the development of students’ communicative skills and calls for the equal treatment of the language skills, “Japanese teachers’ current orientation toward foreign language learning seems to be that strong teacher control is desirable and that students need to memorize, use written mode, and be very accurate”(p. 137). This apparent mismatch between curricular principles and teachers’ beliefs and practices is further reflected in a study in Taiwan where there was an attempt to improve the status of English language teaching. The Taiwanese government introduced new textbooks featuring activities for communicative language teaching into its junior and high schools. In this study, Wang (2002) interviewed six teacher educators to investigate their perceptions of this curricular innovation. These educators reported that: Most high school teaching is grammar oriented. Grammar-translation method prevails, which makes learning every day English impossible. Instruction resembles “parrot learning” wherein students
make sounds without knowing why. Another study which focuses on the implementation of curriculum innovation comes from O’Sullivan (2004), who used an eclectic approach (interviews, semi-structured and unstructured observations, lesson observation, assessment of learners’ work and an examination of documents), to examine 145 English language teachers’ implementation of learner-centred approaches within the Namibian context. Findings revealed that while “most teachers claimed to be implementing learner-centred approaches in their classrooms, lesson observations did not match teachers’ implementation claims” (p. 640).

One factor behind the mismatch between ELT curriculum intentions and teachers' classroom practices is that curriculum planners and educational policy makers often focus on the planning and initiation issues ignoring the dilemmas and obstacles that might evolve during the actual implementation (Markee, 1997), and that little attention has been given to how teachers implement changes in pedagogy (Carless, 2004). However, as Goh (1999) argues “innovators must take steps to ensure that after investing so much time and money in disseminating the innovation, the final and most crucial stage implementation is not left to chance” (p. 18). This implies that investigating what happens during the implementation phase should constitute an integral part of any educational innovation. Wang and Cheng (2005) point to the importance of investigating what happens during the implementation process. They suggest that “without knowing what is happening during the implementation phase, it is impossible to probe the underlying reasons why so many educational innovations fail” (p. 10). Given the crucial role of teachers in the implementation of ELT curriculum innovations, this paper reports the findings of a study which investigated five teachers’ implementation of ELT curriculum in the Libyan secondary schools. The study investigated the extent to which teachers' classroom practices reflected those endorsed by the curriculum, and also examined the factors and the rationales which had an impact on the teachers' classroom practices.

**Data collection and analysis**

Data collection methods consisted of open classroom observations (Robson, 2002), and follow up semi-structured interview (Cohen, 2007). I conducted classroom observations over a two-week period with each teacher. During the classroom observations, I obtained detailed accounts of the teachers’ practices. To maximize the accuracy of the data collected, and hence the descriptive validity (Maxwell, 1996), the lessons observed were audio-recorded, using a digital mp3 voice recorder. During classroom observations, I also took field notes to complement the recorded data. The field notes included a description of the setting, what the teacher was writing on the board, and my own feelings and ideas about what was observed. The observational data provided a detailed account of the work which characterized the teachers’ practices during the lessons I observed with them and showed the extent to which these practices reflected the curriculum intentions. The analysis of the observational data generated a number of questions, issues, and themes which further were discussed during the follow up semi-structured interviews. In order to gain access to the beliefs and factors which underlie teachers’ practices, I presented the teachers with key episodes from their lessons. During the follow up interviews, teachers commented on what they were doing, explained the rationale for their actions, and identified the different factors which underlie their classroom practices. The interviews when used after
classroom observations helped me in understanding the perspectives of the teachers being observed instead of relying on my own inferences.

**Teachers' classroom practices**

The analysis of the observational data showed that in most cases teachers' classroom practices did not reflect the principles of the intended curriculum. Thus, although one of the curriculum aims is “for the students to communicate effectively and fluently with each other and to make talking in English a regular activity” (Macfarlane, 2000, p. 3) classrooms were generally teacher centered and Arabic was the dominant language during classroom interaction.

Teachers also spent considerable time correcting students’ grammatical and pronunciation mistakes. During the reading lessons, teachers spent substantial time reading word by word and sentence by sentence, explaining vocabulary, translating into Arabic, and reading aloud. Little attention was given to activities included in the curriculum such as working out the meaning of the words from the context, scanning the reading text for specific information, matching activities, and the after reading activities. Grammar items were taught in discrete activities without developing students’ abilities to use the grammar for communicative purposes.

A similar pattern was evident in the teaching of speaking and listening. Activities which aimed to give the students the chance to speak the target language were either omitted completely or talked through by the teachers, with little student involvement. Pair work activities (a core component of the curriculum) were either skipped or carried out at the class level between the teacher and the students. The listening activities which were designed to enhance the students’ skills of prediction, listening for gist and to develop the students’ confidence and competence in comprehension were omitted altogether by all five teachers.

The implementation of the writing activities in the curriculum, too, deviated significantly from the approach suggested by the curriculum. With the exception of one teacher, the writing activities were not done in the classroom to give the students the chance to work together and help each other during the writing process. While the curriculum considers the process of writing as important as the product of writing, and “students therefore are encouraged to work together, to help each other with note taking and editing, and to produce work with a communicative purpose” (ibid:2), teachers either left out the writing activities or (in one case) asked the students to do these activities as homework.

**Teachers' rationales**

As noted above, classroom observations in this study revealed that, overall, teachers’ practices deviated significantly from those recommended by the curriculum. However, a description of classroom observations alone does not allow us to understand why teachers implement curricula in particular ways. As Breen (2001) put it “we cannot infer the intentions of teacher action or the reasons why teachers work in the ways they do in particular lessons with particular students only from observed practices” (p. 498). Richards (1996) calls for “the need to listen to the teachers’ voices in understanding classroom practice in order to be in able to understand teaching in its own terms and in ways in which it is understood by teachers” (p. 281). Frechtling (2000) adds
that “it is essential not only to observe instruction, but also to talk to teachers about their instructional decisions” (p. 281). More recently Borg (2006, p. 247) has argued that:

Observation on its own…provides an inadequate basis for the study of what teachers think, know, and believe. Researchers may draw inferences about cognition from what is observed, but verification for these must be sought through further sources of data.

Reflecting these concerns, this study did not only focus on what teachers do, but also on the factors behind their actions. In order to gain access to the beliefs and factors which underlie teachers’ practices, I presented the teachers with key episodes from their lessons. As mentioned above, during the follow up interviews, teachers commented on what they were doing, explained the rationale for their actions, and identified the different factors which influenced their classroom practices. I now proceed to discuss these influences and in doing so shed light on why teachers’ practices and curricular intentions were not aligned.

**Lack of understanding the curriculum intentions**

Teachers' in this study raised concerns regarding their understanding of the principles of the curriculum. one teacher for example suggested that "I think as teachers we still do not understand the ideas of this curriculum. We are still not given any explanations as to how to effectively teach this curriculum". similarly another teacher commented " I cannot implement all what is in the teachers’ book. Sometimes I do not understand what is in the teachers’ book". These concerns were also echoed by another teacher who argued that "If teachers do not understand the curriculum they are asked to teach, then how can these teachers teach it? These teachers' reflections suggest that teachers should not be should not be left alone to find ways of implementing the innovation. In this respect, Leithwood (2002, p. 12) stress the importance of providing teachers with clear description of how to put an innovation into practice. They suggest:

The curriculum to be implemented should be described in exceptionally clear and concrete language. This is not meant to diminish the necessity and value of dealing with relevant conceptual and philosophical matters in curriculum frameworks and related materials. It does mean however, that the actual practices emerging from such consideration need to be outlined very clearly, and with plenty of illustration if they are to be uniformly understood.

Thus, teachers need to understand why they are being asked to behave and act in certain ways. This can be done by explicitly explaining the rationales and principles which underlie the practices which teachers are asked to implement.

**Lack of teacher training and development**

Teachers' lack of understating the intensions of the curriculum appeared to be as a result of the lack of teacher training and development. This was noted by all the five teachers in this study. As one teacher explains "We did not have any training when we started teaching the new curriculum". Another teacher argued " We (teachers) need training sessions to understand how to teach this curriculum."
Since many educational innovations require teachers to change their classroom practices and adopt new ways of teaching, teachers’ training and development are also regarded as an essential factor in the implementation process. As Malderez & Wedell (2007) emphasize “the effective teaching of teachers is the key factor influencing the extent to which the effective implementation of new education policies and curriculum reforms takes place as intended” (p. 12). Carless (1999) highlights the consequences of neglecting the retraining of teachers:

If teachers are not equipped to deal with the implications of a new approach, they are likely to revert to the security of their previous behavior and the desired change may not take place. Without sufficient retraining, even teachers initially enthusiastic about an innovation can become frustrated by the problems in innovation and eventually turn against it (p. 32).

However, it should be noted that briefing teachers with short sessions about the innovation will be insufficient in equipping teachers with the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes for successful implementation of the innovation. As Adey & Hewitt (2004) put it “real change in practice will not arise from short programs of instruction, especially when those programs take place in a centre removed from the teacher’s own classroom” (p. 156).

**Classroom expectations**

The educational process in any context is not only an exchange of information between teachers and students, but it is also a set of conventions which decides what happens between these parties (teachers and students). These conventions are determined by the social, and cultural norms within this particular context (Coleman, 1996; Holliday, 1994; Tudor, 2001; Tudor, 2003). Teachers in this study reported some mismatches between the intended curriculum and the classroom expectations within the Libyan educational system. For example, one teacher expressed views about students’ expectations which might be incompatible with what the curriculum requires the students to do. This teacher argued that "The students only act as listeners. The students come to the school only to listen to what the teachers say. They do not think that they should actively participate in the classroom activities in order to learn English". Another teacher went further to describe what the teacher is expected to do within the Libyan educational setting. "We are used to the idea that the focus should be on the teacher… Here in Libya the focus is always on the teacher. The teacher does everything in the classroom”.

The socio-cultural context where an innovation is to be implemented therefore will play a major role in the adoption or resistance of the innovation. For example, commenting on the process of curriculum implementation, Morris (1998) argues that “the implemented curriculum can be far removed from the intended curriculum, particularly if …insufficient consideration is given to the context in which the reform is to take place” (p. 128).

If an innovation is implemented without consideration of the socio-cultural structure of the society, conflict and resistance might arise. If an innovation entails new behaviours and roles which contradict the behaviours and roles inherent in the society and culture, receivers of this innovation might not easily accept these new roles and behaviours. Therefore, for successful implementation, it is important for the culture of the proposed innovation to be consistent with the social-cultural norms of the context where the innovation is to be introduced. text in which the reform is to take place”. what we are used to since we were students"
The examination system

As mentioned previously, teachers in this study often skipped teaching activities included in the curriculum such as the listening, and the speaking activities. This omission of these activities appears as the result of the mismatch between the focus of the exams and the intended curriculum. As one teacher puts it "We try not to waste our time on teaching things that will not be included in the exam. We are only teaching for the exams. For example, we do not teach the listening section because the exams do not have listening section". Exams not only affect how the teachers implement the curriculum, but also shape how parents and school administrators evaluate teachers. One teacher, for example, explains "You know that the parents of the students and the school administration evaluate the teacher by how many students pass the exams. The parents want their children to pass the exams. They do not care if their children learn English or not. What should I do in this situation? Should I teach the things which will be in the exam or should I waste my time in the things which will not be included the exams?"

A number of researchers have pointed to the crucial role exams play in shaping what teachers do inside the classroom (Andrews, 2004; Cheng, 1997; Cheng & Watanabe, 2004; Choi, 2008). For example, Lamie (2004) indicates that:

If the tests are perceived by the teachers to have significant effects on their students’ lives, then they can see it as part of their duty to make sure that their pupils have the best possible chance they can to succeed (p. 127).

Given the crucial role of exams in determining what happens inside the classroom, one could argue for a change in the examination system to match the aims of the proposed change. Wedell (1992) claims that “the success or failure of any proposed changes in teaching content and methods depends on whether the examination system is altered to reflect the proposed changes” (p. 338). It is clear, then, that the mismatch between assessment and the curriculum is another factor that works against communicative teaching in Libya.

The role of the inspectors

Inspectors play an important role within the Libyan educational system. They are responsible for monitoring the educational process, and providing support and training for teachers. They often visit teachers in their classes to monitor teachers’ performance and to provide help and support for teachers. They also appraise teachers and submit reports on them. However, as two teachers in the study said, English language inspectors may not understand the principles of this curriculum, and therefore they may not be able to provide teachers with the necessary help and guidance.

In the absence of proper training, inspectors often rely on their beliefs and experience to interpret the new curriculum. These beliefs and experience may not be in line with the principles of the new curriculum. This in turn creates frustration and confusion during the implementation process. One the one hand, teachers need guidance and support in order to understand the principles of the new curriculum, on the other hand, inspectors themselves may not understand what teachers need to understand, and how to help them understand it. This implies that those responsible for providing support for teachers need to understand the principles of the proposed change in order to be able to help teachers. As Wedell (2008) argues:
If English teachers working to help learners achieve the outcomes of a particular EFL curriculum are to be come ‘qualified’, it is necessary for those planning to support them to be clear about what knowledge and skills the curriculum expects of them, and so how teacher educators can help them become qualified (p. 23).

Given the crucial role of inspectors within the Libyan educational system, I would argue that a key issue that has to be taken into account is qualifying inspectors in order for these inspectors to provide the support teachers need. However, within the Libyan educational system, inspectors are often regarded as the experts in the school subjects, and therefore asking them to enroll in qualifying programs might be seen by some of these inspectors as a threat to their status within the educational system.

Conclusion and implications

Clearly this research study points to a limited uptake of the ELT curriculum being implemented in the Libyan secondary school system. This limited uptake appears to be the result of a series of mismatches between the intended curriculum and what teachers can do (their knowledge, and pedagogical skills), and the system (classroom expectations, assessment, inspectors, and, teachers’ abilities). It also confirms the widely acknowledged view that teachers are not simply implementers of policies that are handed down to them, but they interpret, modify, alter, and implement these policies according to their beliefs and the context where these policies are being implemented. Thus, this research study shows how curriculum implementation can be constrained by many adverse forces and conditions both internal to the teacher and external.

Methodologically, this study shows the value of qualitative research with a longitudinal element as it involves both observations and interviews in studying how and why teachers implement ELT curriculum in particular ways. I believe this study thus provides significant insights into the process of curriculum innovation, and educational change in general. Therefore educational officials need to examine what the requirements embodied within the curriculum imply for teachers’ classroom practices. We cannot simply ask teachers to implement a curriculum innovation without looking at what this curriculum innovation requires teachers to do.

This implies the need for teaching training and education programs where teachers are given opportunities to reflect upon their own classroom practices, and where their existing beliefs are uncovered and confronted to examine the extent to which these beliefs hinder or facilitate the implementation of the intended ELT curriculum. Finally, Students need the support to make the necessary adjustments required by the curriculum. They need to understand that learning a language might be different from other school subjects. Students need to know why they are being asked to act in certain ways and how they can learn most effectively.

References


