

## English Language teaching curriculum reform strategies: A critical review

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### Abstract:

There is no doubt that English language has become a gateway for better communication and employment opportunities. Given the importance of English language, many countries often introduce curricula reforms of improve the status of English language teaching in their school system. However, during the implementation, these reforms often fail to achieve the goals of those who initiated and planned these curricula reforms. This failure is often attributed to the lack of understanding the key concepts related to the process of curricula reforms. In this paper, I shed light on these key issues in an attempt to facilitate the process ELT curricula reforms. This paper has implications and useful messages for educational policy makers, curriculum development processes, and teacher education programs in English language teaching in particular, and in education in general.

**Key words:** *curriculum reform, ELT, teachers' beliefs and classroom practices, educational policy makers.*

## Introduction:

It is widely acknowledged that the importance of English language is beyond discussion since English language is the most used language everywhere. English plays a central role in many sectors such as technology, internet, medicine, education, travel etc. Many countries have introduced English as a core subject into their educational systems (Rexon, 2013). For example, English language teaching in Kuwait aims to help Kuwaiti students “use the English language to access scientific journals, acquire information on technology, and communicate with people from English-speaking countries for education purposes” (Alnwaiem et al. 2021, p. 90). In China, learning English qualifies citizens to advance economically and participate effectively in the modern world (Cheng, 2011, p. 134). Yano (2001) stresses the importance of using English for Japanese people to interact with the broader world. He goes further to suggest that If Japanese people want good prospects, learning English must be compulsory. In Libya, the English language curriculum is designed “to consolidate and further develop understanding of the grammar system, to increase the students’ range of active vocabulary and to extent their ability in the four language skills of reading, listening, speaking, and writing (Orafi, 2008, p.13)

To meet the worldwide demand for communication in English, many countries often introduce curriculum reforms to improve the status of English language teaching in their school systems to help students become more proficient in using English language skills for different purposes. For example, in Hong Kong (Carless, 2004), in Libya (Orafi and Borg; 2009), In Thiland (De Segovia and Hardison 2009), in Iran (Bolghari and Hajimaghsoodi, 2017), in Pakistan (Shah, 2022).

However, during the implementation process, these reforms often fail to achieve the goals of those who planned and introduced these reforms. Kim (2008), examined teachers' beliefs and classroom practices in relation to implementing a learner-centered curriculum reform in South Korea. Kim concluded that teachers' beliefs and classroom practices were incongruent with the curriculum recommendation mandates. Teachers' beliefs and their experiences as learners had a much stronger influence on how they carried out their teaching. Teachers emphasized the need for the teacher-centered classroom and the mastery of language structure as effective ways in English language teaching.

Orafi and Borg (2009), studied teachers' classroom practices while implementing ELT communicative reform in Libya. Classroom observations showed little evidence of core curricula principles such as using pair work, promoting the use of English among the students, and enhancing the skills of reading, listening, and writing. Classrooms were generally teacher-centered with substantial time spent in reading aloud, translating into Arabic, and correcting grammatical and pronunciation mistakes.

Okoth (2016) investigated the challenges facing teachers when implementing the revised integrated English language curriculum in Kenya. Using a mixed-method research design including questionnaires, interviews and reflective conversations, findings revealed that while the revisited integrated curriculum recommends the use of oral literature genres like oral narratives, oral poetry, songs, proverbs, tongue twisters and riddles to foster students' listening and speaking skills, teachers were unable to transfer these recommendations into their classroom practices.

More recently, Basok, (2020) used semi-structured interviews to explore teachers' perspectives regarding the current English language

teaching policies in Turkey, which advocate the use of communicative language teaching in English language classrooms in state schools. One shared theme that emerged from the teachers' interviews was the inevitable mismatch between the intended curriculum and teachers' reported classroom practices. While the curriculum reform emphasizes the use of CLT, teachers reported that the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) still plays a big role in their teaching.

The above studies clearly highlights the need to understand why ELT curriculum reforms often fail to achieve their goals. Therefore, in this paper, I discuss the key concepts related to the curriculum reform processes including what does the concept of curricula reform mean?, and the various strategies that are often used to introduce these reforms. This paper has implications for educational policy makers, curriculum development, and teachers' education programs

### **What is a curriculum reform?**

While the term "curriculum" could have different meanings based on the context where this curriculum is being implemented, in essence, it is a plan for learning (Van den Akker, 2010). In other words, it is a set of guidelines for what students should learn and what should be taught through the education system (Gouedard et al. 2020). Stoll et al. (2006) uses a narrower definition, where curriculum refers to the materials or documents used for teaching and learning, such as textbooks or instructional materials. In contrast, Saavedra and Steele (2012) view curriculum in a broader sense, including issues that would have an explicit impact on how the curriculum is designed and realized, such as teaching methodology, class size, learning hours allocation, learning objectives, assessment and examination practices.

Curriculum reforms often involve changes in the objectives of learning including the skills, knowledge, values, and attitudes students should acquire (Fullan 2015). It is very important to understand that in some contexts curriculum reforms are often sensitive political and cultural issues since they sometimes decide what kind of knowledge and skills are the most valued for these contexts (Rahman et al. 2019, Freeman, 2020).

As mentioned above in recent years many countries have engaged in ELT curriculum reforms at various paces and methods in order to better prepare students for a fast-changing world. However, curriculum reforms are demanding in terms of implementation, since they require changes in many aspects that might challenge the existing beliefs and contextual realities deeply inherited in individual and organizational context (Fullan, 2015). For example, in English language teaching, curriculum reforms often require teachers to not only to change what they do regarding language teaching and learning, but also how they think about their work and the beliefs underpinning it (Fullan, 2001, Wedll and Grassick, 2018). Fullan, 2001, p.39), identifies three dimensions with respect to curriculum reforms at the classroom level. These dimensions are:

- The possible use of new or revised materials such as curriculum materials.
- The possible use of new teaching approaches (New teaching strategies or activities)
- The possible alteration of beliefs (Pedagogical assumptions and theories underlying new policies and programs)

Fullan emphasizes the importance of the three dimensions mentioned above and argues that “change in the three dimensions in materials, teaching approaches, and beliefs, in what people do and

think are essential if the intended outcome is to be achieved (Fullan, 2001, p. 46). He warns against the neglect of these dimensions, and argues that “innovations that do not include changes in these dimensions are probably not significant changes at all”. Factors such as existing beliefs and practices, lack of investment, contextual expectations, and many other could lead to obstacles and resistance during the implementation of these curriculum reforms. This is why how to introduce these curriculums reforms, and therefore effectively translate the intentions of these reforms into reality is a major concern of this paper.

The above discussion clearly has certain implications for English language teachers with respect to what they do how they think about English language teaching and learning. Thus, the above discussion implies that any ELT curriculum reform needs to be planned very carefully, and to take into consideration the various approaches, and strategies used to introduce these reforms, which in turn may influence its successful implementation. I discuss these strategies in the following sections below.

### **Power-coercive strategy:**

Within this approach, the authority of change rests with a small number of government officials who are at the top of the decision making process. “The decision makers derive the right to exercise authority based on hierarchical positions they occupy in a bureaucratically organized institution” (Markee, 1997, p. 63). This top down approach often ignores the individuals (teachers, school heads or local administrators) who are required to implement the curriculum changes (Wedell and Grassick, 2018). According to Poedjiastutie et al. (2018), curriculum reforms that are only based on

the views of policy-makers will unlikely match with other key participants who are responsible to carry out these reforms. Gouedard et al (2020, p.11), stress that all the parties involved in the curriculum reform process including teachers and other stakeholders must have a clear visons of why the curriculum reform is needed, and how the aims of the curriculum reform can be achieved. They go further to suggest:

In the absence of a clear justification of the reform, the curriculum policy might suffer from not gaining public and political support. Moreover, if there is no consensus on what kind of support is needed, the diverging and even conflicting opinions might hinder curriculum change. Finally, if there is not a clear roadmap or theory of change that can delineate how the proposed policies would contribute to the objectives the reform set out to achieve, it might lead to confusion among key actors, undermine credibility of the policy and waste of resources.

Okoth (2016, p.170) cautions that, “when the implementing agents (teachers) do not understand the curriculum requirements, they are likely to modify it to fit their understandings”. In a study, which investigates teachers’ classroom practices and beliefs in relation to curriculum reform in English language teaching within the Libyan context, Orafi and Borg (2009) found that teachers’ classroom practices reflected strongly held beliefs about English language teaching and learning were incongruent with the theoretical principles endorsed by this curriculum. Orafi and Borg (2009) concluded that one of the factors, which led to the limited uptake in the English language curriculum being implemented in the Libyan school system, is teachers’ lack of understanding of the theoretical

principles, which underpin this curriculum. Teachers had not received adequate support to enable them to develop new ways of thinking about teaching and learning and consequently their practices reflected their own learning experiences as well as the teacher-centered oriented curriculum that had previously been in place.

### **Empirical-rational strategy:**

This strategy is utilized on the assumption that people are logical beings and that a change will be adopted once proof has been produced to show that it will profit those whom it affects. This strategy implies that the main task of the reform initiators is to present as effectively as they can the soundness of the reform in terms of the benefits to be gained by adopting it. Advocates of this strategy propose that once the reform goals are approved, plans to achieve these goals are identified and essential resources allocated, successful implementation will be straightforward (Wise, 1977). Teachers are often given one-off briefing sessions using a lecture-based theory application approach (Malderez and Wedell 2007). Teachers are lectured about the justification for change, or about the content of the new curriculum (textbooks), but are not supported to adjust their accustomed classroom practices to meet the demands of the intended curriculum (Wedell and Grassick, 2018). However, it should be noted that briefing teachers with short sessions about the change would be insufficient in equipping teachers with the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes for successful implementation of the change. As Adey & Hewitt (2004, p.56) 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”.



Early research from general education, pointed to the deficiency of this strategy, which adopts a rational argument to introduce the curriculum reform process. For example, Markee (1997, p.65), argues that:

The biggest disadvantage of this approach is that it is mistakenly assumes rational argument to be sufficient to persuade potential users to accept change. In fact, sociocultural constraints, systemic and personal factors, the attributes of the innovations, and so on are frequently much more important than rational argument alone in determining an innovation's success or failure.

The criticism of the empirical rationale strategy is echoed by Zembylas & Barker (2007: p.239) who claim that curriculum reforms which are based on the rational strategies “overemphasize the rational and consequently do not take into account the complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty acknowledged to be part of change in schools”. In both strategies discussed so far, the power coercive strategy and the empirical rationale strategy, the teachers' role is to implement the curriculum reform, which is handed down to them. Although teachers are responsible for implementing change, “they often do not feel personal commitment to change” (Schwartz, 2002: p.126). In these models mentioned above, teachers often act as receivers of specific knowledge, which is imparted to them by an ‘expert’ without taking into consideration the context in which teachers work. In these top-down curriculum reforms, the role of the teacher is often neglected in the policy making process and sufficient consultation with the teachers and other stakeholders is often absent (Wedell and Grassick, 2018).

### **Normative and re-educative strategy:**

This strategy is different from the two preceding strategies in that it is the end users of an innovation who recognize the need for the change. In this sense, the strategy of change becomes a bottom up rather than a top down strategy. Underlying this strategy is the assumption that people act and behave according to the values and norms established in a given society, or culture and that accepting change sometimes necessitates changes to deep-rooted beliefs and behaviours (Richardson, and Placier, 2001).

The implementation of this strategy requires “a collaborative, problem solving approach, with all those affected by the change involved in some way and making their own decisions about the degree and manner of change they wish to accept” (Kennedy, 1987:164). Unlike the power-coercive and the empirical rational strategies in which “teachers merely implement the decisions that are handed down to them” (Markee, 1997, p.63), teachers within the normative and re-educative strategy play a crucial role because, they act as both initiators of and collaborators on change (Markee, 1997, Schwartz, 2002).

This is significant because teachers are among those most responsible for carrying out the policies adopted, so their voices and their sense of ownership of policy is crucial to its effective implementation (Giroux, 2017; Bangs & Frost, 2012). This re-educative strategy emphasizes the need for collaboration and cooperative actions between teachers and other educational stakeholders. Insisting on the key role of the teachers in the educational process, educational researchers call for the teachers’ voice and their active participation in any form of educational reform. For example, Bangs and Frost (2012) emphasized the need to

consider approaches to teacher and school development that puts the teacher at the core of the process if we want them to influence both policy and practice. Al-Bulushi (2022, p.179) restates the role of the teacher:

The teacher has a wider responsibility than the single classroom and this includes contributing to his/her school, the system in general, other students not only the ones he/she is teaching, the wider community and collective responsibilities of teachers themselves as a group and the broader profession.

The initial curriculum reform idea should be explained to those who will use the curriculum including teachers, as well as those who will be responsible for overseeing it to promote their sense of ownership and to make sure that they are well acquainted with the reform situation. Discussions could be held, in which teachers (and if possible students), heads of departments, supervisors, trainers are given opportunities to give feedback to the curriculum designers on how the curriculum materials and its underlying principles, and methodologies do or do not fit in with the existing beliefs and assumptions of those who will use and oversee the curriculum.

### **Conclusions and implications:**

There is no doubt that in this fast growing world, learning English language has become a key for the success in many fields, and a gate for international communications and cooperation. Given the importance of English language, many countries frequently introduce curriculum reforms to help their students meet the demands of mastering the competencies and skills of English language. However, these curriculum reforms often fail to achieve the goals of who planned and initiated these reforms. One factor of this failure is

the lack of understanding of the effective approaches, which must be included in any curriculum reform endeavour.

It is very significant to understand that any curriculum reform process is a complex process, and that there are many factors including teachers' existing beliefs, established classroom practices, and the educational context may influence the success or failure of the curriculum reform process. If these factors were not taken into account during the planning and initiation process, conflict and resistance might happen during the implementation of the curriculum reform.

Stakeholders and educational policy makers need to realize the need for long-term commitment and follow-through during the implementation process. Teachers' should not be left alone to struggle with the demands and requirements of the change process. In this

Educational policymakers also need to grasp all the changes in behaviors and thinking that are needed from all parties involved in the implementation of the curriculum reform process. Wedell (2022, p.273) highlights the key issues that educational policy makers need to take into account before planning to introduce a new curriculum reform.

- Develop their own understanding of the pedagogic principles and classroom practices underpinning the curriculum;
- Identify the educational roles (e.g. teachers, school leaders, teacher educators) whose work will affect and be affected by implementation of the new curriculum;
- Provide each with role-relevant information about the key principles and practices underpinning the innovation;

- Discover how representatives of each role in different parts of the country understand the personal and professional challenges that the innovation poses for how they currently work.

Educational policy makers often take more time in the planning and initiation stages of the curriculum reform, and pay little attention as to how teachers implement changes in pedagogy (Caeless, 2004). Therefore, it essential to recognize that curriculum change is a process and takes time for the intended curriculum to be enacted successfully in schools and classrooms. This in turn implies the need for regular examinations for what happens inside the classrooms to provide support for those who struggle with how to put the intended curriculum into classroom practices. As Fullan (2007, p.8) puts it:

Neglect of the phenomenology of change- that is how people actually experience change as distinct from how it might have been intended- is at the heart of the spectacular lack of success of most social reforms.

**Finally**, it is vital to understand that curriculum reform does not only mean introducing a set of textbooks, or prescribed set of educational goals and objectives, but also implies the identification of other elements influencing what happens inside the classrooms. This includes the beliefs and behaviors of school principals, teacher educators, parents, inspectors, students, and the cultural and contextual constrains of the educational system. The identification of these elements would help explain the extent to which the intentions of the curriculum reform can be put into practice.

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