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Language Teachers' Evaluation of Curriculum Change: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This study aims at theorizing language teachers' evaluation of a top-down curriculum change by eliciting their perspectives through open-ended qualitative interviews. In line with grounded theory procedures, concepts and categories were theoretically sampled from the perspective of participants who were willing to share their views with the researcher. Iterative data collection and analysis revealed a set of categories which show the conflict of interest between practitioners and policy-makers. Practitioners focus on immediate classroom concerns and reject the syllabus change because of its lack of small-scale try-outs, inappropriate timing, vague methodology, inappropriate in-service program, learner homogeneity fallacy, unrealistic expectations and increased absenteeism among learners. On the other hand, focusing on issues beyond immediate classroom, policy makers advocate it since it is conducive to uniformity, convergent practice, efficiency and covert privatization. This conceptualization of teachers' perspectives on curriculum change has clear implications for policy makers and teachers in this context and other similar contexts.

Keywords

Unwarranted Change, Syllabus, Teachers' Perceptions, Grounded Theory

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Language Teachers' Evaluation of Curriculum Change: A Qualitative Study

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This study aims at theorizing language teachers' evaluation of a top-down curriculum change by eliciting their perspectives through open-ended qualitative interviews. In line with grounded theory procedures, concepts and categories were theoretically sampled from the perspective of participants who were willing to share their views with the researcher. Iterative data collection and analysis revealed a set of categories which show the conflict of interest between practitioners and policy-makers. Practitioners focus on immediate classroom concerns and reject the syllabus change because of its lack of small-scale try-outs, inappropriate timing, vague methodology, inappropriate in-service program, learner homogeneity fallacy, unrealistic expectations and increased absenteeism among learners. On the other hand, focusing on issues beyond immediate classroom, policy makers advocate it since it is conducive to uniformity, convergent practice, efficiency and covert privatization. This conceptualization of teachers' perspectives on curriculum change has clear implications for policy makers and teachers in this context and other similar contexts. Keywords: Unwarranted Change, Syllabus, Teachers' Perceptions, Grounded Theory

Among other things, failure in teaching and learning can be traced back to theoretically unjustified top-down changes which ignore practitioners' and other stakeholders' perspectives. Teachers' and learners' academic achievement and satisfaction are more likely to be met through systematic and principled curriculum development and research from the bottom-up. Recently, the Iranian education department has introduced a change in language education in public high schools of Iran, which is theoretically unwarranted on many grounds. First, the change follows a piecemeal approach, that is, instead of changing the whole curriculum, it changes the syllabus or the content component of the curriculum. Second, it takes curriculum as a fact to be taken for granted and implemented since there were no small-scale try-outs and as such it left no room for any modifications. Third, it was top-down and as such it left no room for language teachers' perspectives. What follows is a review of related theoretical perspectives and empirical findings. Having explained the research method, the study will then theorize language teachers' evaluation of the change imposed by central agencies on classroom practice. The study will finally present the implications drawn from teachers' perspectives which will be of great use in this context and other similar contexts in the cyclical process of curriculum research, development and evaluation. The findings are significant in that they help both policy makers and teachers make more informed decisions when it comes to curriculum change.

Review of Related Literature

Following Stern (1992) curriculum refers to a comprehensive plan of language teaching which organizes the objectives, content, teacher development, teaching strategies, learning strategies, timing, and evaluation into a unified whole. Syllabus refers to the content component of curriculum. Thus, if there is a change in language education objectives, there should be a

change in each and every other aspect of curriculum. That is, rather than following a piecemeal approach and change one aspect of curriculum, one should introduce a comprehensive plan including: (1) the theoretical and practical justification for the new objectives; (2) a multi-dimensional syllabus which develops language proficiency, learning strategies, and language awareness; (3) teacher education programs that make teachers cognizant with how the content should be presented and evaluated to ensure the achievement of objectives; (4) small-scale try-outs to make revisions and collect evidence related to logistics; and (5) a scheme for both summative and formative evaluation of the new curriculum (Scriven, 1976) to pave the way for further modifications through the feedback received from the stakeholders and to decide whether to continue, discontinue or modify the curriculum.

Curriculum has been conceptualized in different ways. For central agencies, it is a taken-for-granted plan which should be unquestionably implemented. Rejecting this view, Young (1998) conceptualizes “curriculum as practice,” where the collective contribution of stakeholders is essential to understand problems experienced in implementing the curriculum. Similarly, Stren (1992) conceptualizes curriculum as the cyclical process of development, implementation, evaluation and renewed research and development (Stern, 1992). The reason is that different issues including social, economic, political, institutional and personal factors affect the teaching and learning process (Fullan, 2003; Lamie, 2004; Wang & Cheng, 2008). Although the main purpose of educational change is improvement, (i.e., to “help schools accomplish their goals more effectively by replacing some structures, programs and/or practices with better ones,” Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991, p. 15), some educational changes lead to success but others might cause frustrations among teachers and learners because of some unpredictable problems (Wang & Cheng, 2008).

Curricular change involves certain stages such as “needs and situation analysis,” “developing goals and objectives,” “selecting an appropriate syllabus,” “course structure,” and “teaching methods and materials” (Richards, 2001). But the most critical component of curriculum research is the evaluation component, especially, the evaluation of contents or textbooks since: (1) they may be biased towards the perceived rather than the actual needs of the learners (Tomlinson, 2003); (2) their content may be culturally-biased (Banegas, 2011); wrong choices may lead to a waste of financial resources (Mukandan, 2007); and (3) financial success is the primary goal of textbook publishing (Tomlinson, 2003).

Textbooks not only specify and delimit what is worth teaching they also shape teaching and learning activities. Thus, rather than taking the truth-value of textbooks for granted, following Tomlinson (2003), they should be evaluated in three stages. First, prior to implementation, their pedagogical value should be well-established through pre-use evaluation. Second, their strengths and weaknesses should be diagnosed by classroom observation through in-use evaluation. Finally, decisions should be made as to whether to continue with the textbook or replace it with a more suitable one.

Before 1980s, the challenges and problems related to changes were underestimated. In recent decades, however, the issue has been addressed both in other fields (e.g., Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 2003) and in language teaching programs (e.g., Alderson, 2009; Wedell, 2009). Determining whether an educational change is top-down or bottom-up depends upon who is responsible for “creating” and “implementing” the change (Johnson, 2013). In top-down innovations, the policy-makers “create” the changes and the teachers and other practitioners should implement the designed curriculum in which “they have had no design role” (Tribble, 2012).

Ironically, teachers are called the “change agency” (Fullan, 1999) in curriculum changes though a great majority of them are usually excluded in making decisions (Wang & Cheng, 2008). Teachers are the actors without which the changes could not materialize, but they are involved only during the implementation stages (El-Okda, 2005). Some scholars (e.g.,

Karavas-Doukas, 1995; Markee, 1997) believe that the success of educational change depends on teachers; hence, they should also be involved in decision-making stage besides being central in the implementation stage of a curriculum reform (Watson Todd, 2006). Irrespective of these theoretical insights, “those who have power within the system, organization or institution being changed, i.e., the national policy makers and their local representatives, plan the change initiative with little, or usually no, consultation with those whom it will affect” (Wedell, 2009, p. 20).

What complicates education change is the conflict of interest between policy makers and practitioners. While the former focuses on organizational effectiveness, efficiency and equity, the latter focuses on students and classrooms (Mutch, 2012). When policy-makers introduce a top-down change, they do not care about stakeholders’ reaction to change. Nor do they care about “how the implementation process might be affected by the existing classroom conditions” (Wedell, 2009, p. 45). As a result, instead of accepting it, practitioners challenge it since they want to make decisions based on “their professional judgment, their years of experience, their commitment to students’ learning and their engagement with their communities” (Mutch, 2012). That is, are reluctant to follow a change imposed by people who are alien to the reality of language teaching in the classroom. In a nutshell, while teachers are interested in bottom-up innovations, administrators act in line with policy makers and insist on top-down changes (Christison & Murray, 2009).

In contrast to top-down changes, a bottom-up innovation refers to the process in which teachers are entrusted to develop a teaching curriculum collaboratively (El-Okda, 2005). All staff participate and propose ideas which end up in the curriculum (Christison & Murray, 2009). This process rarely occurs in planning for official language programs. What has often prevailed in most parts of the world in recent decades is nothing but top-down changes (El-Okda, 2005; Kantamara, Hallinger, & Jatiket, 2006; Mutch, 2012). Reiterating this fact, Tribble (2012) states that some of the projects claiming to be learner-centered and communicative language teaching are based on top-down change since in these projects teachers’ perceptions are quite completely overlooked. These projects may leave some room for consumer feedback but as Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) state, teachers’ views are not likely to reach upwards to those who are at the top-making decisions whose main characteristics are usually well-defined with power and authority (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997).

For a smooth transition from design to implementation, practitioners and policy-makers should work hand-in-hand. There is lots of empirical evidence against top-down change and in support of collaborative change:

- top-down change is efficient but might be rejected by teachers (Christison & Murray, 2009);
- teachers describe the negative effects of the change with offensive tones using terms such as wounded, violated, degraded, victimized and the like (Hargreaves, 2003);
- top-down changes do not work because they fail to “garner ownership, commitment, or even clarity about the nature of the reforms” (Fullan, 2007, p. 11);
- teachers’ contextual knowledge contributes to designing an effective curriculum (Sharkey, 2004);
- teachers’ intimate knowledge of their local context, their students, available resources, and the practical characteristics of their work are worth considering in implementing curricular changes (Kirk & Macdonald, 2001);
- low-level of teacher participation obscures the implementability of change (Elliott, Brooker, Macpherson, & McInman, 1999); and

- collaborative curriculum planning improves the implementability of curriculum change (Beattie & Thiessen, 1997).

Verifying these empirical findings McKernan (2008) states, “it is difficult to believe that classrooms and curriculum can ever be improved without the participation of teachers in that improvement” (p. 85). Similarly, Richards (2001) believes that teachers are the ones who can detect and compensate the problems and deficiencies in a curriculum. Moreover, Apple and Beane (2007) believe that teachers and students have their own “perceptions of problems and issues in their classrooms, schools, and professional lives” and thus “teachers have a right to have their voices heard in creating the curriculum” (p. 20). Although theories and empirical findings support the constructive role of practitioners in curriculum development, there is a paucity of research reflecting practitioners’ theories of practice concerning curriculum issues.

Purpose of the Study

To fill in this gap, (i.e., lack of theories of practice on curriculum issues and options), this data-driven study aims at theorizing practitioners’ experience of syllabus change. More specifically, it aims at eliciting practitioners’ perspectives by asking the general research question, “How do you perceive the recent top-down change introduced by the education department?”

Research Context

Formerly, language education in public high schools of Iran aimed at developing students’ reading proficiency. Policy makers focused on reading at the cost of other language skills since they believed that the allocated time in the national curriculum is not sufficient to cover all language skills. Taking the time constraint into account, they adopted the reading-only policy to enable high school graduates to read scientific texts when they start higher education programs.

Recently, however, through a top-down initiative, there has been a shift away from the reading-only policy towards the four-skill policy in foreign language education. Initially, however, the focus is on listening and speaking. This top-down change has created lots of resentments among teachers, students and parents. Among other things, their resentment is due to the fact that the time allocated to language education is not sufficient to follow the reading-only policy, let alone following the four-skill policy. After seven years of exclusive focus on reading, a great majority of learners were not able to read scientific texts in English. Now without any increase in the allocated time, public language education aims to developing the four language skills.

Research Method

Participants

Instead of using the statistical sampling procedure, which is common in hypothetico-deductive studies, this study made use of purposive, snowball and theoretical sampling procedures, respectively. Initially, based on word-of-mouth communication, we selected a very popular language teacher willing to share his experience of curriculum change with the researcher. Having interviewed him, we asked the participant to introduce other qualified and interested participants. In other words, following snowball sampling, one participant recruited other interested participants. Finally, in line with grounded theory, we theoretically sampled

their perspectives to uncover the strategies and techniques experienced teachers use in developing EFL learners' writing skill in IELTS preparatory course. Having interviewed fourteen participants, evaluation of curriculum change reached a point of theoretical saturation.

Data Collection and Analysis

Following Glaser and Strauss (1967) I used grounded theory to overcome the restrictiveness of the hypothetico-deductive approach. More specifically, I explored experienced teachers' perceptions of top-down change, organized and reduced the data until a data-driven evaluation of top-down change emerged. However, I diverged from the original approach by adopting a constructivist theory (Charmaz, 2000), that is, theory construction was not an individual effort of rigorously coding the data; rather the theory was mutually constructed by the researcher and the participants. Though not entering the field with a "blank mind" (Suddaby, 2006), we did not delve into reviewing the literature on top-down change to let the data fulfill a primary function in theory development.

To gather rich data, I collected data from multiple sources including in-depth interviews and document analysis. Then following Corbin and Strauss (2008) a coding approach was adopted to develop concepts (i.e., the building blocks of the emerging theory) from the data. The constant comparative techniques were used to guard against researcher bias (Charmaz, 2006). The iterative process of data collection and analysis continued till theoretical saturation was achieved. Procedurally, the researchers:

- Posed a very general question so as not to direct practitioners' perspectives;
- Gathered some initial data and analyzed them to develop subsequent questions which delimited the scope of the study;
- Actively interacted with the participants to co-construct what the unwarranted syllabus change meant to them;
- Voiced their perspectives concerning the participants' views while allowing them to reflect on our views and paved the way for mutual change of perspectives rather than acting as objective observers during data collection and analysis;
- Iteratively collected and analyzed the participants' perspectives till an evaluation of top-down curriculum change were saturated;
- Showed the final conceptualization to the participants for confirmation or any possible modifications

Results

No Pilot Study

Key to the successful implementation of any top-down change is the pilot phase together with its monitoring and evaluation. Since there was not any pilot phase, the participants believed that this shift away from the written skills towards oral skills is a hastily-introduced change, which is doomed to failure since it ignores many logistics. This point is reiterated by Alavi, one of the syllabus designers himself, in an interview with Tasnim News Agency:

There is a wide gulf between the intended curriculum and that portion which is acquired (i.e., the acquired or learned curriculum) because the success of the

intended or developed curriculum depends on lots of factors including educational technology, teacher efficacy, and the like.

Alavi's comments are rooted in the fact that there was no pilot study testing the efficacy of the new syllabus at a small scale. A systematic approach to change involves a small-scale pilot phase which, among other things, aims at evaluating: (1) the sufficiency of audio-visual aids; (2) the efficacy of teachers who actually implement change; (3) and the strengths and weaknesses of the newly designed syllabus. Most participants relate their problems in teaching the new syllabus to the fact that there was no small-scale implementation. Reza explains:

If they evaluated the new syllabus through a pilot study in one small region, they could predict and solve many of the problems we face today. I believe thousands of language teachers together with their students suffer because of a hasty decision and a fallacy implying that the problem of language education can be solved via a so-called innovative syllabus.

Instead of teaching the new syllabus and believing in its efficacy, nearly every teacher is involved in fault finding; something which should have been undertaken during the pilot phase. Supporting this point, Keyvan explains:

I do not trust the effectiveness of the new textbook and even my own efficacy in teaching this new syllabus. The reason is that the book is loaded with wrong methodological assumptions. Moreover, I myself have been teaching grammar and reading for twenty years. Now that there is a shift towards listening and speaking I feel lost. I really don't know what to do. All these problems could be avoided if they tested the new syllabus in one or two small cities before its nationwide implementation.

Inappropriate Timing

One recent change imposed on public language education in Iran was the shift of focus away from reading and grammar towards listening and speaking. This change has created lots of resentment among practitioners since they believe this change is dead and deaf to classroom realities, especially to time constraints. Participants believe that language teaching is very stressful since they try to do the impossible since the time allocated to teach the new syllabus is not sufficient. Complaining that a two-hour period is not sufficient for this syllabus, Zahra state:

My main concern is that I will never be able to cover the textbook before the finals. You know, I'm always pressed for time. Although I know I should diagnose learning problems and solve these problems through remedial teaching and despite the fact that I feel they have problems, I skip diagnostic tests, remedial teaching and start next unit.

Complaining that the syllabus cannot be covered within the time allocated, another participant adds that he and his colleagues have one common concern, "How to finish the textbook before the final exams?" Since in designing the syllabus time constraint has not been taken into account, teaching and learning have been severely overshadowed. Rejecting the newly introduced top-down change, Hamid explains:

Since I'm pressed for time, my conception of teaching is nothing but presenting the materials. Although I know that, even in its traditional sense, teaching involves presentation, practice and production, I deliberately ignore the last two phases of instruction and focus exclusively on presentation since I know that covering the book is more important than teaching it.

Participants believe that time budgeting is far from realistic. They reject the time syllabus designers allocated for teaching different sections. One of the participants explains:

The most severe problem in teaching the syllabus is time factor. The time allocated to teach this syllabus is not sufficient at all. The syllabus designers have specified the time needed to teach each section. In practice, teachers cannot make it since rather than being based on actual teaching of each section, the allocated time is based on the subjective judgment of the designer.

Vague Methodology

Another problem with top-down change is that unlike practitioners, policy makers are not good in answering how questions. That is, language teaching involves two main problems: How to teach and what to teach. For instance the language syllabus imposed by central agencies specifies the content, (i.e., what to teach), without specifying the techniques and procedures (i.e., how to teach it). Participants believe that syllabus designers deliberately ignore methodological aspects since it is beyond their expertise. Verifying this point, Abdollah says:

You know, when I started teaching the new textbook which is claimed to be communicative I didn't know what to do. Since this was a problem for almost all teachers, the education department held a meeting attended to by both the syllabus designers and practitioners. In that meeting, the practitioners posed many problems of practice, but they, I mean, the syllabus designers, did not have any clear answers. I really expected what happened in the meeting. How could you expect a person who has never taught in public high schools to answer questions posed by hardened practitioners?

As Abdoll's comments show, syllabus designers cannot solve methodological issues. The reason may be that rather than following a unified methodological framework, the textbook follows incompatible methodologies. Reiterating this issue, Ramin explains:

The textbook follows paradoxical methodologies. Teachers are advised to avoid teaching letters but very early in the course students are forced to spell out their own names, their parent's names and their classmates' names. How do you expect a child who is not familiar with the letters at all to spell his or her name? I believe this is not a textbook, rather it is a bunch of hocus pocus.

Just like teaching, there remain many unresolved problems in testing. Testing is left to the teachers' subjective judgment. Teaching follows testing. Thus there should be a paradigm shift in testing followed by a pertinent change in teaching. This is most pertinent to language education in Iran since passing tests is more important than learning English or communicating in English. That is, practitioners live in a context where pass rate and test performance is more important than leaning and communicative performance. Teachers may be cognizant with the communicate syllabus through workshops and meeting, but when it comes to testing, most

teachers are kept in the dark. As a result, rather than developing communicative tests which are in line with communicative activities specified in the textbook, teachers follow the old traditions. Being ignorant of testing, the syllabus has created lots of disputes among practitioners as to how achievement should be tested. Reiterating the dispute over testing, Kamal states:

We have been given a new syllabus. We do notice the difference between the old and the new syllabus. But we don't know how to teach it and how to test it. The syllabus is communicative but as far as I know the tests are the same as before since the syllabus and the teachers' book do not clarify how students' communicative abilities should be tested. You know, I believe when there is a change in the syllabus, there should also be a change in teaching and testing. This won't happen unless practitioners are instructed through teacher development prior to implementing the syllabus.

Inappropriate In-Service Programs

Taking the participants' perspectives into account, in-service programs are effective if two conditions are met: (1) they should be run by seasoned practitioners rather than university professors and researchers; and (2) they should precede the implementation phase of the syllabus rather than follow it. Participants believe that both of these conditions have been violated. Referring to the first criterion, Hadi comments:

My colleague and I attended some in-service programs which were held to clarify the objectives, processes and procedures. But the problem was that the instructor himself was not truly aware of the methods and approaches. Instructors should have a certificate of advanced skills in teaching but in our case they are chosen on the basis of many nonprofessional criteria. Practitioners attend these programs for the instructor's experience and skills in communicating the syllabus rather than their university degree, knowledge and publications, though I believe even these technically irrelevant criteria are not met.

The second problem is that in some cases in-service programs follow the implementation phase of the syllabus. One of the participants complains:

My school is far from the center. I started teaching the new syllabus without having any clear conception of how to teach the syllabus and how to test it. I did not even know what the objectives were. Later on, my colleague and I were invited to a teacher development meeting which aimed at clarifying teaching and testing issues related to the new syllabus. My participating in the meeting was a waste of time since I still have lots of problems in implementing this supposedly innovative syllabus.

What is really strange about the in-service programs is that although most of the participants take them as a waste of time, almost all the participants take part in these programs. Explaining the participants' incentive, Abdollah explains:

Many teachers attend in-service programs which they believe do not improve their teaching. You may be curious to know why they participate then: they take

part to receive the in-service certificate of attendance. They do need it because increments are given on the basis of hours of attendance as a determining criterion.

Unrealistic Workload for the Teachers

The unrealistic workload imposed on teachers clearly shows that the new syllabus has been designed by people who have no experience of teaching. If syllabus designers heeded practitioners' perspectives and took them into account in designing the syllabus, they would reduce the tasks, exercises and activities dramatically. Addressing the workload, Hamid states:

The new syllabus is loaded with different types of activities. Taking the allocated time into account, the workload leaves no room for feedback and practice. You know, the workload made me follow a teacher-centered, teacher-fronted approach. My main concern is to finish the book on time rather than help the learners understand the content and use them in communication.

Moreover, since teacher's book does not specify how teachers should teach and test the new textbook, teachers should spend a lot of time at home to come up with personal solutions to classroom problems. Complaining about the workload Sara explains:

I really hate teaching this new syllabus since I cannot cope with the workload. When I go home, I cannot switch off. Instead of following a leisure pursuit or spending time with my son, I keep planning how I should teach or what I should do the next day. I do believe that those who planned these activities are not familiar with the constraints a teacher faces while teaching.

Lack of Audio-Visual Aids

Language education used to focus on reading, vocabulary and grammar but there was a sudden shift towards listening and speaking. Formerly, language education did not need any audio-visual aids; hence, very few schools felt the need to buy these teaching aids. With the shift towards communication, language teachers demand audio-visual aids, though they know that schools cannot afford to buy them. Clarifying this problem, Hadi explains:

Those who introduced this sudden shift towards listening and speaking wrongly supposed that schools are well-equipped with audio-visual aids. While this may be true for some schools, many schools cannot provide language teachers with a simple audio-tape to play the audio-taped materials. What is the use of audio-taped materials when teachers and students cannot use them in the classroom?

Lack of educational technology is reiterated by another participant who teaches in a deprived school. Rejecting the sudden shift towards communication, Zahra explains:

While in some schools you can find the latest technology including interactive whiteboards, in my school we don't have even CD-players. There is only one old computer in the principals' office. The textbook contains many listening activities but I ignore them since I cannot play them for my students.

Learner Homogeneity Fallacy

When learners start their formal language education in Iran, they are divided into two groups: A privileged group whose listening and speaking proficiency far exceeds the level specified in the textbook since they have taken many language courses; a deprived group of true beginners who have no background at all since they could not afford private language course. Focusing on group heterogeneity, Fatemeh explains:

There is no placement test. Some of my students are very strong and some others are very weak. Since a great majority of them are weak, I should teach in line with their level of proficiency. I myself know that the course has nothing for students who have already taken some language courses. Since they have nothing to do, they get bored, go to the principal and complain and this negatively affects the principal's evaluation of my performance.

It is very difficult for teachers to teach quite heterogamous classes. Participants believe that this problem can be solved either through placement tests or through exempting students whose language proficiency is above the level specified in the textbook. Focusing on one of the extreme cases, another participant explains:

In one of my classes, there is a student who could speak English fluently when she was five. Her proficiency in listening and speaking is native like. Due to the formalities of the schooling system, I cannot exempt her from the course. She has to attend all the classes since attendance is required. In the very same class, I have some students who have no background in English and they need remedial teaching since they cannot follow the instruction at all.

The textbook presupposes some previous knowledge of English. Thus, it awards a limited number of privileged students who have taken many language courses and penalizes the deprived group who is exposed to English for the first time. Taking this deficiency into account, Hassan explains:

This textbook has been written for students who have some background in English. It totally ignores students in rural areas and deprived urban areas who have no background at all. In rural areas there are no language schools and even in deprived urban areas parents cannot afford expensive language courses. The book starts with very long and serious dialogues. This book has turned the class into a hell not only for students but for the teacher.

Imposition of a Linear Syllabus

In a linear approach towards syllabus design teaching points are covered only once. On the other hand, in a cyclical or spiral approach, teaching points reappear systematically based on their use or complexity. Compared with a linear approach to syllabus design, in a cyclical approach, the same teaching point is repeated every now and again to make sure that learners go beyond learning to using it in actual communicative situations. Although cyclical syllabi are found to be more effective than linear syllabi, the new syllabus is linear in design. Relying on his years of experience, Reza criticizes the new syllabus by saying:

Most of the words and functions appear only once in the syllabus. I believe that once learned, materials should reappear systematically for memory consolidation and learning enhancement. In this syllabus, the learner does not find a chance to use what s/he has learned. I believe the new syllabus takes a toll on students' memory. In addition to introducing new functions or some new words, the syllabus should help the learner apply what he has learned in previous lessons by systematically reintroducing the items taught in previous lessons.

Another participant indirectly rejects the linear approach. He believes that the new syllabus normalize the vicious circle "repeat, memorize, and forget." This problem is rooted in the fact that syllabus designers wrongly suppose that new language functions and words can be presented and learned in one lesson. Rejecting this assumption, Farid explains:

Just like the alphabet, functions and words are presented sequentially one after another. The textbook is based on the assumption that once students learned "A," they should learn "B." But based on my experience, I believe once students learned "A," the teacher and the textbook should design activities and tasks that encourage students to use "A," I mean what he has learned in the previous lesson.

Unrealistic Contexts

The textbook is very weak in specifying the contexts in which the dialogues take place. The participants reject the contexts because they are both artificial and unrealistic. Commenting on the context in which the dialogue is going on, Pedram explains:

The contexts in which dialogues are used show that language is not used to communicate ideas. For instance in page 32, Book Seven, Fardi and his mother are both in the kitchen. Despite the fact that Farid knows his mother is in the kitchen, he asks, "Where are you Mum? If they were in two different situations, the question was meaningful.

We learn English to communicate with people in other countries. The textbook does not reflect this function. In the new textbook, it is Iranians that communicate with each other in English. Participants believe that there is no point in teaching English if we are not supposed to use English to communicate with people from other nations. With a sarcastic tone, Ali explains:

In this textbook, all Iranians speak English. The dialogues reflect Iranian addresses, names, norms, and values. For instance, a girl enters a library in Iran, asks for a library card, and the librarian answers her questions in English. In another dialogue, a boy enters home and asks in English, "Where is dad? Her mother answers in English and ask him to go and wash his hands and eat his lunch. Still in another dialogue, a student enters the staff room, and the secretary wants him to spell his name out. We do not learn English to communicate with ourselves; we learn English to communicate with people in other countries. The textbook does not reflect this function.

In a context where both the listener and the speaker speak Persian, naturally we expect Persian rather than English. Not only do the participants reject the unrealistic contexts of language use in the textbook, they also come up with suggestions for improvement. To ameliorate the problem, Bahman suggests:

The dialogues will be more realistic if an Iranian communicates with people from other countries. In this context, they have to use English because they do not have a common language background. For instance, imagine an Iranian student goes to Germany with his father and the student uses his knowledge of English to ask for directions; or suppose an Iranian student visits some tourists from Japan. In this context, the student introduces his family and then asks about their impression of Shiraz or any other historical places.

In a nutshell, participants believed that the new syllabus is devoid of any authentic use of the target language. This becomes quite evident if one compares teaching dialogues, i.e., the dialogues presented in the textbook, with target use dialogues or what people actually say in real language use. While in teaching dialogues English is a medium of communication between Persian speakers, which is really funny, in target use dialogues they are expected to use English as a lingua franca to communicate with people from other nations including people from English speaking countries.

Irrational Expectations

Oral approach requires that learners master materials orally before they see them in written form. Based on a misconception of oral approach, the textbook skips teaching sounds and letters. Nonetheless, exercises and activities require students to recognize and read words. Commenting on this problem, Kazem explains:

The newly imposed syllabus leaves no room for teaching letters. Paradoxically, however, it expects the students to read some words without any awareness of the graphemes, phonemes and their interconnections. For instance in page two, you see a list of fifteen pictures and the words related to them. This is followed by an exercise that instructs students to circle the words they recognize. After two or three pages, suddenly there appears a forty-six-word dialogue and students are expected to read them and communicate the contents of the dialogue through pair work.

As mentioned by the participants, the textbook starts with very long dialogues. Ignoring the fact that, except for the privileged minority, a great majority of students see this dialogue as their very first encounter with a foreign language, the syllabus designer expects them to decode the dialogue phonologically and semantically. Taking irrational expectations into account, Reza states:

In one of the in-service programs, we were instructed to clarify the meaning of the dialogues without any resort to the learners' mother tongue. If students had some background, this was something logical. However, knowing that a great majority of learners are true beginners, it is quite irrational to expect them to understand the meaning of the dialogue in English.

When the syllabus specifies the overall objectives, irrational expectations become more evident. Taking the limited amount of time allocated to language education in the overall school curriculum, the old syllabus set reading as a realistic objective. Ignoring the time constraint, the new syllabus aims at developing the four language skills. Explaining irrational expectations, Ahmad comments:

As the syllabus designer claims, the new syllabus aims at developing the four language skills. Although this can be an ideal goal, it does not match the realities of our education system. Previously the syllabus aimed at teaching reading. Although the time allocated to language education is the same, the new syllabus sets the unrealistic goal of developing the four language skills. The syllabus designers know for sure that a great majority of our language teachers themselves are not able to communicate in English. I believe the syllabus designer should first write a syllabus that develops teachers' conversational abilities and only then develop another syllabus for learners.

Increased Absenteeism in Language Classes

In rural areas where there are no language classes, students find the new syllabus very demanding and challenging. Since they do not have any background knowledge, they cannot cope with the workload. So, they skip language classes for one reason or another. Ahmad explains the sad scenario as follows:

The textbook may be suitable for students who have taken a language course in private language schools but it is not suitable for a deprived majority, especially students in rural areas. Even in urban areas, the number of students who do not attend English classes is on the rise. These students cannot follow the lessons since they find the textbook too difficult to learn; hence, they prefer to skip English classes under different pretexts, most evident of which is sick leave.

Another participant compares students' achievement in English with their achievement in other school subjects and complains that quite talented students (i.e., students with straight A's) fall short of teachers' and parents' expectations in English. Despite their effort, they consider themselves as low-achievers. Another participant relates absenteeism in English to low achievement:

This syllabus is very stressful for a great majority of learners who come from rural areas and deprived regions of big cities. Since they feel they can't learn, they skip school when they have English. To solve the problem of absenteeism and reduce students' level of stress, students in villages and deprived regions should start English in grade six rather than grade seven. They should study a starter textbook which aims at raising learners' phonological awareness and functional vocabulary including numbers, colors, shapes, and the like in grade six.

Rationales

Despite the inherent negative consequences of top-down curriculum change for almost all the stakeholders, many countries including Iran prefer this approach rather than the bottom-up approach to educational change and reform for three reasons. First, one-change fits all is

less expensive and more economical. Second, it leads to a convergent approach in teaching and uniformity of practice throughout the country. And finally, it solves the educational ills by putting part of the load on the private sector. What follows aims at elaborating the rationale behind theoretically and practically unjustified change.

Uniformity

In line with general education, language education follows the transmission model in which the teacher is a conduit (i.e., a mechanical channel which transmits nothing but the information in the textbook). This model ensures uniform practice. That is, irrespective of teachers' and learners' background knowledge, individual differences and contextual constraints, in different parts of the country students study the same textbook and teachers follow the same approach with the same priority. Despite its debilitating effects, some of the participants accept the top-down one change for all by arguing:

Suppose you move to another city. When all the students follow the same system and the same textbook, you won't have to worry about your child's education. I mean it is much easier for the student to fit in in case of transfer. This is also true to the teachers. When the textbook and the teaching procedures are uniform, teachers won't fret over moving to another city.

Following Fordism, uniformity and educational standards will be jeopardized if teachers are allowed to exercise their professional judgment in what to teach, how to teach, and what to test. To ensure uniformity, the system gains itself control over input, process output through the prescribed curriculum, the teacher evaluation scheme and the national testing scheme respectively (Ostovar-Namaghi, 2006). When teachers lose control over these issues, the education department guarantees the achievement of predetermined objectives. Participants believe that uniformity ensures teacher accountability. Reza explains:

Although I do believe that materials development, teaching and testing should be within teachers' reach, my main concern is that some teachers may evade responsibility. They may deprive students from their professional knowledge and skills by simply taking it easy. On the other hand, some teachers may be very strict and bombard students with tasks and activities. Uniformity ensures that all students and teachers work within the same domain and have the same duties, objectives and concerns.

Economy

Top-down change is based on the premise "one-size fits all." Such an approach can be justified only on economic grounds. If reform is from the bottom-up, the result will be diversity and education will be responsive. Responsive education entails recognizing individual differences, varied learner needs, varied learner and teacher backgrounds. In this case, rather than being uniform across nation, the syllabus should be tailor-made so as to be responsive to contextual diversity. Thus, there is a conflict of interest between teachers and top-down policy makers. For the teacher a good syllabus is the one which reflects the needs, goals, and proficiency level of a specific group of learners. While for the policy makers a good syllabus is the one which is written for the total population of students studying in the same grade. While a responsive change is more effective pedagogically, one-size fits all is more efficient economically. Recognizing the policy-makers' agenda, Hassan explains:

As you know it yourself, in one class there are two groups of learners: those who have already taken some language courses; and those who have no background in English. While the textbook is boring for the former group, it is very hard and challenging for the other. In such a situation, we need two language syllabuses for grade seven. But the central agencies do not accept to provide us with two syllabuses for one grade because it is very costly for the government.

Another participant believes that teaching in a highly heterogamous class is doing the impossible. This problem can easily be solved by administering a placement test which aims at helping learners find a proper channel for language education. Although they recognize the pedagogical value of placement tests and homogeneity, schools never accept it. Explaining the reason Hamid states:

Our school cannot afford even one syllabus for all. Schools are looking for ways to cut corners and reduce costs. Administering a placement test entails accepting two separate classes for seventh graders, hiring two teachers and teaching two separate syllabuses.

Although convergent practice is justified on economic grounds, it has a negative effect on language teachers' professional identity since as Ostovar-Namaghi (2009) found such an approach defines teachers' roles as passive receiver of information and a mechanical channel through which information flows from the textbook to the learners.

Covert Privatization

For twenty-seven years, the education system recognized reading as the only legitimate goal for language education. Reading-only policy was based on two practical considerations: (1) the limited amount of time allocated to language education; and (2) preparing students to read science, technology, and medicine in English upon entering the university. Due to the insufficiency of the allocated time and many other factors, the education system failed in its mission since a great majority of university students feel totally incompetent in reading scientific texts. Ironically, although the allocated time is the same, in a quantum leap, there was a sudden shift away from reading towards the four language skills, with an initial emphasis on listening and speaking. On the surface, this seems to be a short-sighted policy. Deep down, however, this is a calculated measure which aims at covering up public language education ills, and put the load on the private sector. A great majority of language learners take part in private language schools and develop their listening and speaking proficiency; hence, public language education rips what private language schools sowed. That is, when private and public language education both focus on listening and speaking, it is very hard to determine which sector developed learners' listening and speaking proficiency. Confirming this bitter fact, Kaveh explains:

Everybody knows that we cannot teach the four language skills through public education. However, with the shift towards listening and speaking, public education reaps what private language schools sow. With this move, the government indirectly involved private sector in language education. With our focus on listening and speaking, parents are forced to put their kids in private

language classes. Moreover, when both public education and private sector have the same goal, indirectly private language schools carry the load.

Participants believe that with this policy the government kills two birds with one stone, that is, it covers public language education inefficiency and involves the private sector without giving credit. They further believe that the shift towards the four-language-skill policy mainly aimed at reducing ever-increasing criticisms against language education. Elaborating this point, Bahram says:

Language education was a crystal clear failure. Students studied English for seven years, they could neither communicate in English nor read scientific texts. If the government kept the reading-only policy criticisms would mount because students' performance at the university clearly showed that the education system failed in its mission. With the shift towards listening and speaking, private schools would do what we can never do. How do you expect public education to develop four language skills when it failed in developing one skill?

Taking literacy skills to oblivion is the unpredicted and dire consequence of privatization. Formerly, there was a division of labor in language education: public education focused on literacy skills and private language schools focused on oral skills. With the public language education's shift towards language skills, one wonders who will take care of literacy skills. This cannot be done in private language schools since they do not have the professional workforce. A great majority of language teachers working in these schools have been hired on the basis of their oral proficiency; hence, they deliberately ignore literacy skills since they themselves do not have any literacy skills. Taking this tragic fact into account, in a nutshell, it can be said that this sudden change was moving from bad to worse in language education in Iran.

Discussion

The findings of this study are in line with the previous findings which clearly describe the negative consequences of top-down curricular changes. Although previous findings have descriptive power, they lack in explanatory power since they do not explain why policy makers deliberately weed out the contextual constraints of top-down curricular change as irrelevant. The findings of this study, however, go beyond description by relating the deliberate overlook of contextual constraints to the conflict of interest between practitioners and policy makers. While practitioners reject top-down change because of its lack of small-scale try-outs, inappropriate timing, vague methodology, inappropriate in-service program, learner homogeneity fallacy, unrealistic expectations and increased absenteeism among learners, policy makers focus on wider issues that go beyond immediate classroom and as such persist on its implementation since they seem to believe that the introduced top-down change is conducive to uniformity, covert privatization, convergent practice, and efficiency.

Policy makers are fully aware of the fact that they should build-in diversity by taking contextual constraints into account. However, they deliberately sacrifice diversity at the cost of uniformity since uniformity minimizes cost in the implementation phase of the curriculum while diversity entails maximum cost. That is, although they know that diversifying curriculum based on contextual constraints is more efficient in terms of instruction, they present the whole nation with one unified language curriculum to make it more cost-effective. This is due to the fact that policy makers consider language education as an expense. They can resolve this

dilemma by taking language education as an investment rather than an economic burden as they currently do. This fact is easy to understand but very difficult to execute since governments' main concern is budget deficit.

To find a way out, they strategically put the burden on the private sector without acknowledging it. Although public language education failed in its reading-only policy, policy makers introduced a sudden shift in language education towards the four-language-skill policy with a disproportionate emphasis on listening and speaking. While practitioners complain that developing listening and speaking is next to impossible since there is no change in the time allocated to language education, the government is sure that this change in policy works because more than eighty percent of learners take private language courses to develop their conversational skills. While it is the private sector that develops learners' language proficiency, it is the public sector that gets credit because developing listening and speaking is an inalienable part of the newly introduced public language education curriculum.

Moreover, policy makers know that curriculum change should build-in divergent practice on the part of practitioners to ensure responsive teaching. However, they deliberately build-in convergent practice to ensure accountability. While divergent practice is more likely to develop learners' language proficiency, convergent practice ensures that the externally-imposed syllabus is covered nation-wide. That is, while teachers are interested in developing learners' proficiency by following a divergent mode of teaching which is responsive to the learners needs and objectives, policy makers are interested in ensuring the coverage of the national curriculum by reinforcing a convergent mode of language education that takes teachers as a conduit which mechanically transfers the content of the syllabus to the language learners. This dilemma can be resolved if policy makers reconceptualize language education as developing learners' language proficiency rather than covering the syllabus in a uniform fashion. In the light of these insights, it is suggested that:

- Policy makers change their attitude since in the short-run top-down initiatives may reduce costs and ensure accountability but in the long-run it deprives the whole nation from the professional workforce.
- Researchers go beyond describing the shortcomings of top-down curricular change to explain why local governments are dead and deaf to their research findings and keep imposing their change initiatives on language teachers and learners.
- Curriculum developers introduce any possible future changes from the bottom-up, that is, interviewing language teachers, conceptualizing their perspectives, and accommodating their recommendations in the forthcoming change initiatives, and let it go through the trial phase before its large-scale implementations.

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