Investigating Teachers’ Classroom Practices: A Framework to Enhance the Quality of English Language Teaching in Libyan Secondary Schools

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Abstract: The implementation of English language curriculum within Libyan public schools still faces many obstacles. This paper offers a framework to facilitate the implementation process within Libyan public schools. This starts with an identification with the key methodological principles which underlie the curriculum. Then, the framework illustrates how we can investigate teachers’ current practices and the beliefs which influence teachers’ practices to examine to which these practices and beliefs reflect those of the intended curriculum. It is hoped that this framework will provide useful messages for curriculum planners, teacher education programs, and policy makers in Libya and elsewhere.

Introduction

In the year 2000, Libya introduced a new English curriculum into its preparatory and secondary educational system as part of its efforts to improve the status of English language teaching. This curriculum is embodied in a series of textbooks called “English for Libya” These textbooks were written by an ELT publishing company based in the UK with the cooperation of representatives of the National Education and Research Centre in Libya. The principles of this curriculum represented a significant shift for Libyan English language teachers in terms of teaching methodology, curriculum materials, and theories of language teaching and learning. This curriculum innovation required Libyan English
language teachers 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.

Although this curriculum was introduced for more than fifteen years, several concerns are still being raised about its implementation (Embark, 2015, Najeeb, 2013, Orafi, 2013, Orafi and Borg, 2009). In my informal discussion with different Libyan educational officials, they often blamed teachers for not being able to teach this curriculum. In one of these discussions for example, a senior Libyan educational official argued that the curriculum is excellent, and that it is the teachers who do not know how to teach this curriculum. On their part, teachers often raised concerns that they face obstacles during the implementation of this curriculum. In addition, the literature suggests 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).

In this paper, I propose a framework which could help us understand what happens during the implementation process, and therefore, enhance the quality of English language teaching in Libyan public schools. This framework provides an explanation of the curriculum methodological principles in an attempt to enhance teachers’ understanding of the methodological principles which underlie this curriculum. It also illustrates some strategies of how we can examine teachers’ classroom practices during the implementation process, and understand the teachers’ rationales which underlie their classroom practices. Figure 1 illustrates the dynamics of this framework. It is hoped that this paper will offer insights and useful messages for curriculum developers, policy makers, change agents and
teacher educators in Libya and elsewhere. I now proceed to provide an overview of how this curriculum was introduced into the Libyan educational system.

![Diagram of curriculum dynamics]

**Figure 1. The dynamics of the framework**

**The introduction of the English language curriculum**

As mentioned previously, the curriculum was introduced in the year 2000. The coursebooks which embody this curriculum are called *English for Libya*. These textbooks were written by a committee consisting of representatives of the National Education and Research Centre in Libya and Garnet publishing company based in the UK. The materials for this curriculum consist of a students’ textbook, a teachers’ book and a class cassette. I use the term curriculum here to refer to all these components, although it is primarily the students’ textbook which defines the curriculum. As an introduction to the advantages and effectiveness of this new curriculum, Libyan teachers of English were given briefing sessions which lasted about a week. These briefing sessions were conducted by Libyan English language inspectors who were themselves given briefing sessions by ELT educators sent by the publishing company.
It was assumed that these sessions would equip teachers to deliver the curriculum, but there has been no analysis of the extent to which they are doing so. Some of the Libyan policy makers may have felt that they were adopting an empirical-rational strategy (reference) by trying to explain the advantages of this curriculum for the teachers. However, what happened on the grounds implies that in practice the strategy to introduce this curriculum was in fact a power coercive strategy. Teachers were simply given briefing sessions about the curriculum, and in these sessions were told to follow the teachers’ book. Thus, in these sessions there was no consideration of teachers’ existing beliefs, and the contextual factors that might inhibit the implementation process. The decision to introduce the new curriculum was taken by the top levels at the Ministry of Education in Libya. Figure 2. Illustrates the process of how this curriculum was introduced into the Libyan Educational system.

**Figure 2. The process of introducing the curriculum**
The curriculum methodological principles

As explained earlier when the new curriculum was introduced, English language teachers were given briefing sessions about it on the assumptions that these teachers would see its benefits and would therefore be able to implement it. However, briefing teachers with one off training sessions is not enough to prepare teachers for the demands of the proposed change (Lamb, 1996), and, as Carless (1998:355) observes “if teachers are to implement an innovation, it is essential that they have a thorough understanding of the principles and practices of the proposed change”. Therefore, it is very essential to examine the methodological principles which underlie the English language curriculum being implemented in Libyan public schools. According to the teachers’ book, the textbooks are “designed to consolidate and further develop understanding of the grammatical system, to increase the students’ range of active vocabulary and to extend their ability in the four language skills of reading, listening, speaking, and writing” (Macfarlane, 2000:1). The teachers’ book also highlights several principles in relation to the process of English language teaching. These are summarized in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Curriculum principles</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>▪ Aims to help students develop the sub-skills of prediction, inference, reading for gist, for specific information, and to work out the meaning from the context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>▪ Aims to activate the grammatical points which students have already learned through the productive skills of speaking and writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>▪ Aims to develop the sub-skills of prediction, inference, listening for gist, listening for specific information, and to enhance students’ competence and confidence in listening comprehension.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>▪ Aims to promote fluent communication and to make talking in English a regular activity among the students.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>▪ Discourages error correction during the speaking stage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>▪ Aims to develop the language and grammar students have already</td>
</tr>
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</table>
learned through producing longer pieces of writing.
- Considers the process of writing as important as the end product, and encourages students to work together, to help each other with note taking and editing, and to produce work with a communicative purpose.

| **Pair work** | - Encourages the use of pair work, and considers it as a good opportunity for students to speak the target language |
| **Error correction** | - Making mistakes is part of the language learning process. |

I believe that the above principles coincide with Mitchell’s (1994:38) characterization of the communicative language teaching. Her characterization includes the following:

- Classroom activities should maximize opportunities for learners to use the target language for meaningful purposes.

- Learners trying their best to use the target language ...........are bound to make errors; this is a normal part of the language learning, and constant correction is unnecessary, and even counterproductive.

- Language analysis and grammar explanation may help some learners, but extensive experience of target language use helps everyone.

The principles outlined in the teachers’ book also seem to correspond with Richards’ and Rogers’ (2001:172) view of the principles of the CLT. They put these principles as follows:

- Learners learn a language through using it to communicate.

- Authentic and meaningful communication should be the goal of classroom activities.

- Fluency is an important dimension of communication.

- Communication involves the integration of different language skills.
Learning is a process of creative construction and involves trial and error.

In addition, the teachers’ book describes the teacher as a monitor who manages the classroom, and provides encouragement, guidance, explanation, and feedback to allow the students to effectively achieve the required tasks. These roles appear to be similar to Breen & Candlin’s (1980:99) view of the teacher’s role in CLT. According to them, “the role of the teacher in the classroom is to facilitate the communicative process between all participants in the classroom and between these participants and various activities and texts”.

Although neither the course book nor the teachers’ book explicitly define the learner’s role in the language learning process, it is clear from the nature of the activities that the students are expected to participate actively in the learning process, relate some of the classroom activities to their own experiences and personal lives, and undertake a variety of tasks which involve problem-solving, classroom discussions, expressing opinions, and discussing answers together.

In addition to looking at the materials which comprise the curriculum, I also contacted the publishing company for any documents which explain the thinking behind this curriculum. The publishing company (Garnet) provided me with a document outlining the objectives that guided the committee which wrote the materials. The objectives mentioned in this document are:

- For the students to leave school with a much better access to the world through the lingua franca that English has become.
To create an interest in English as a communication tool, and to help students develop the skills to start using this tool effectively.

- To help students use the basic spoken and written forms of the English language.

- To help students learn a series of complex skills: these include reading and listening skills that help get at meaning efficiently, for example, skimming and scanning and interpreting the message of the text; they also include the speaking and writing skills that help the students organize and communicate meaning effectively.

**Examining teachers’ classroom practices and rationales**

Having identified the key methodological principles which underlie the English language curriculum being implemented within Libyan secondary schools, I believe the next step should be examining the extent to which teachers’ current classroom practices reflect those recommended by the curriculum. I would argue that open classroom observations (Robson, 2002, Cohen et al. 2007), can provide a clear picture of what actually happens inside the classroom. Teachers can be observed teaching different aspects of the curriculum (reading, grammar, speaking, and writing) over a period of time of one week or two weeks to get a detailed account of teachers’ classroom practices. To maximize the accuracy of the data collected, and hence the descriptive validity (Maxwell, 1996), the lessons observed can be audio-recorded, using a digital mp3 voice recorder since using video recording might not be accessible within the Libyan educational setting. During classroom observations, field notes (Bogdan, and Biklen, 1998) can be taken to complement the recorded data.

The observational data provide a detailed account of the work which characterize the teachers’ practices during the observed lessons and show the extent to which these
practices reflect the curriculum methodological principles. The observational data should be fully transcribed to get a detailed account of the teachers’ practices. Each observed teacher should be given a copy of their transcribed lessons and be given the opportunity to comment on these lessons. In analyzing the observational data, the focus should be on describing what teachers did at each stage of the unit observed. Then, key episodes from each teacher’s practices which were characteristic of their approach of teaching can be identified and compared to those practices recommended in the textbook.

The analysis of the observational then can generate a number of questions, issues, and themes which further can be discussed with the observed teachers during follow up semi-structured interviews. In order to gain access to the beliefs and factors which underlie teachers’ practices, teachers can be presented with key episodes from their lessons. During the follow up interviews, teachers comment on what they were doing, explain the rationale for their actions, and identify the different factors which underlie their classroom practices. The interviews when used after classroom observations help us in understanding the perspectives of the teachers being observed instead of relying on our own inferences. During the interviews, we need to listen very carefully to what teachers have to say. We might also use probes to enhance the richness of the data. A probe is defined by Robson (2002:276) as a “device to get the interviewee to expand on a response when you intuit that the she or he has more to give”. Probing strategies involve asking teachers to add more details on issues which need more elaboration. Statements or expressions teachers had already said could be used as probing strategies. The following example illustrates how probing is used during the interviews. The probing question is underlined.
There are difficulties in teaching this curriculum. For me there are some difficulties in teaching this curriculum. I do not find any one who can give instructions of how to deal with these difficulties. I try to use my knowledge and my efforts in order to deal with these difficulties.

**What kinds of difficulties are you talking about?**

For example, when I teach the speaking activities, I find the student has nothing. He does not react to the speaking activities. He cannot do the speaking activities. What is the solution for this dilemma? As a teacher what shall I do in this case? What shall I do?

**Providing support for teachers**

Having identified the key patterns of teachers’ classroom practices and uncovered the beliefs and rationales which underlie these practices, the next step should be providing support and help for teachers’ in order to facilitate the implementation process. I would argue that educational officials in Libya need to realize that in order for the intentions of this curriculum to be implemented effectively, teachers need the skills and knowledge which enable them to cope with the demands of this curriculum. As Malderez & Wedell (2007:xiii) 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”.

However, it should be noted that briefing teachers with short sessions about the curriculum will be insufficient in equipping teachers with the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes for successful implementation of the innovation As Adey & Hewitt (2004:156) 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”.

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In addition, teacher training and development programs which depend on knowledge transmission models may not be effective in bringing about the desired change (Adey & Hewitt, 2004; Kennedy, 2005). In these models 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. Acknowledging the importance of the context, Bax (2003:283) states that “any training course should make it a priority to teach not only methodology but also a heightened awareness of contextual factors, and ability to deal with them”.

Furthermore, Libyan officials need to understand that it is not enough to ask teachers to follow the guidelines of the teachers’ book. Thus, English language teachers in Libya need the support to make the necessary adjustments required by the curriculum. Therefore educational officials in Libya need to examine what the requirements embodied within the curriculum imply for teachers’ classroom practices. We cannot simply ask teachers to implement a curriculum without looking at what this curriculum requires teachers to do. English language teachers within the Libyan context may not be aware of the influence of their existing beliefs. 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 see to the extent to which these beliefs and practices hinder or facilitate the implementation process. As Kumaravadivelu (2001:552) argues “when teacher educators use the teachers’ values, beliefs, and knowledge as integral part of the learning process, then the entire process of teacher education becomes reflective rewarding”.

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Conclusion

There is no doubt that the implementation process of the English language curriculum within Libyan public schools still faces many obstacles. In order to uncover these obstacles, I proposed a framework to facilitate the process of the implementation of this curriculum, and in turn enhance the quality of English language teaching in Libya. This framework starts with identifying the key methodological principles which underpin this curriculum, and examining what these principles imply for teachers’ classroom practices. The next step in this framework is going into the classrooms to examine the extent to which teachers’ current classroom practices reflect those recommended by the curriculum. The third step in this framework is to uncover the beliefs and rationales which underpinned teachers’ classroom practices in order to understand why teachers taught the way they did. This diagnosis of what actually happens during the implementation process will in turn provide an effective support and training for teachers.

However, it should be clear, that Libyan teachers are not used to being observed or asked about what they are doing in their classes, or to give the rationale of what they are doing. Even if they are visited by the inspectors, the inspectors usually write reports about their teaching, and the inspectors would rarely discuss what they had seen in the class. Therefore, we need to frequently remind the teachers that what they are doing and their reasons for what they are doing are crucial to our understanding of what actually happens during the implementation of the English language curriculum within Libyan public schools.
References


