

Mainstream ELT curriculum implementation in Iran: A micro analysis perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate some core issues of ELT curriculum implementation in Iran undertaken by policymakers in practice, i.e. teachers. The core issues include: the efficiency of communication channels between ELT planners and implementers, the extent to which ELT textbooks are believed to meet students' cognitive and affective needs, the criteria English teachers are evaluated with and by whom, the extent teachers follow officially-approved teaching and testing practices, how ongoing professional support is provided to the teachers, and if context-based feedback of implementers is processed by planners. To collect data, structured interviews

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were conducted with 22 head teachers and open-ended questionnaires were administered to 672 teachers in 13 provinces. Results indicate that problems pertaining to evaluation policy, methods and techniques policy, in service training policy, and communication policy at practice level widen the gap between ELT planners' rhetoric and implementers' practice. It is argued that as long as curriculum implementers are not involved in setting ELT policies, the distance between these two groups will keep on growing.

Keywords: curriculum implementation, ELT planning, ELT practice, planning practice gap

1. Introduction

Curriculum planning is a multi-layer multi-component enterprise in which several interlocking components are at play. One such component that has attracted the attention of researchers is the way a given educational initiative or curriculum is implemented. The implementation of different curricula is generally undertaken by teachers who translate a set of educational plans and policies into concrete educational actions and behaviors. The role of language teachers is considered to be so important that in language policy and planning (hereafter LPP) studies they are described with terms such as 'policy makers in practice' (Kırkgöz, 2009) and 'curriculum implementers' or 'policy implementers' (Wang, 2010). Kırkgöz (2009: 675) maintains that "teachers are key players in implementing macro policy decisions in practice at the micro level".

Due to the fact that teachers are at the forefront of implementing curriculum initiatives, plans, and policies, the significance of studying their understandings, perceptions, and views of such plans or policies is well-recognized. Scholars such as Wang (2010) argue that the successful implementation of a given curriculum depends on the involvement of three major players. To her, teachers play the main role in successfully implementing a curriculum. In a similar

vein, Hope and Pigford (2001, p. 128, cited in Wang, 2010) argue that “those who shoulder responsibility for policy implementation... must also be involved in policy development”. As a result, if teachers as curriculum deliverers are not involved in setting and developing macro educational policies or if their perceptions and understandings of curriculum initiatives are not systematically sought and examined, the implementation of such policies at the practice level “may ... be confounded by the resistance of the primary stakeholders, i.e. the teachers” (Williams, Williams, Guray, Bertram, Brenton, & McCormack, 1994). Similarly, Bamgbose (2003, p. 428) argues that “no matter how desirable language policies may be, unless they are backed by the will to implement them, they cannot be of any effect.”

2. Literature Review

Studies investigating what teachers’ interpretations of macro educational policies are or how such policies are practiced are few. Nunan (2003) studied the educational policies and practices of seven Asia Pacific countries and concluded that there was a “disjunction between curriculum rhetoric and pedagogical realities” (p. 589). His study clearly demonstrates that in setting macro educational policies and developing national ELT curricula for those countries, contextual realities have been disregarded, resulting in uninformed educational policy decisions which Nunan argues need revision.

Kırkgöz (2009) studied Turkish teachers’ teaching behaviors in English classes and compared them with those proposed by ELT policymakers as reflected in official documents. She concluded that there existed “a gap between the idealized official policy recommended ... and the actual classroom practices of the teachers” (p. 679). She notes that the actual classroom practices of Turkish

teachers do not go with official stated policies which ask for more communicative orientation in language teaching to younger students.

Wang (2010) discusses the misinterpretation of EFL policies by middle level administrators which results in a gap between official policies and actual practices in China. Factors contributing to the gap between what is intended by educational policymakers and what is enacted by teachers have been discussed from different perspectives in literature (Beretta, 1990; Karavas-Doukas, 1995; Wang, 2010).

Systematic studies of ELT curriculum planning and practice in Iran are scanty. Atai (2002a) studied English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) curriculum development and concluded that “ESAP curriculum development in Iran has not been conducted systematically and coherently ... the participants involved in the development and implementation of ESAP programs have typically done their tasks independently of each other” (p. 1). In another study, Atai (2002b) argues that the lack of rhetoric between the upper and lower layers of the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) curriculum results in confusions in EAP courses in Iran.

3. Purpose of the Study

The present study is an attempt to investigate the understandings, perceptions, and feedback of ELT curriculum implementers in Iran and, as a result, explores the interrelationship between ELT planning and its practice. The study, therefore, moves from macro ELT policymaking to micro level of practice and thus keeps abreast of the latest LPP arguments that call for more systematic analysis of micro level contexts in which local policymakers, teachers in this study, translate macro educational decisions into concrete actions and behaviors (Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008). Teachers are not

passive conduits or neutral deliverers of such educational decisions only. They ‘interpret’ the proposed curriculum first. Thus, their interpretations are valuable sources of feedback for ELT planners in Iran’s Ministry of Education.

4. Method

4.1 Participants

Two main groups took part in this study: head teachers and practicing teachers. The participants are believed to comprise the core of micro practice level since they are responsible for implementing macro ELT decisions made by officials, planners, and material developers in the Ministry of Education. Below is a detailed account of each group.

4.1.1 Head Teachers

Twenty-two head teachers took part in this study. There are offices of the Ministry of Education in each province throughout Iran. Each office appoints one or two English teachers as the heads of what is generally known as English Teaching Groups (ETG). In addition, there are similar groups in smaller towns of each province which are supposed to make up a network for efficient communications and increased agreements in their activities.

Gerhardt (1986, cited in Flick, 2006, p. 124) believes that complete collection of cases as an alternative method in qualitative studies is aimed at “the keeping and the integration of all cases available in the sample” to “learn more about events”. To learn more about the planning practice bridge and to collect as much information as possible on ELT ecology of Iran, it was decided to turn to heads of ETG in all provinces throughout the nation. The advantage of these target cases is the fact that they are officially responsible for leading and supervising the heads of ETG in all towns of their provinces. They also have the responsibility to

cascade the latest of the ELT field to them. As a result, they play the important role of networking the smaller towns in their provinces. They also make a larger national network of heads of ETG who hold annual meetings in Ardabil, where National English Language Secretariat (NELS) provides the opportunity for a national forum. Thus, heads of ETG in provinces are indisputably of considerable importance to be included in the sample.

4.1.2 Practicing Teachers

Six-hundred and seventy-two English teachers in thirteen provinces of Ardabil, Tehran, Khuzestan, Kohkiluyeh va Boyer-Ahmad, East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, South Khorasan, Kermanshah, Yazd, Hamadan, Zanjan, Golestan, and Qazvin took part in the study.

Attempts were made to do *typical case sampling* (Flick, 2006) through including English teachers from different provinces located in different parts of Iran. In this study, two hypothetical lines were assumed to divide the country to four main parts of north-west, north-east, south-west and south-east. Then provinces from each main part were selected and contacts were made with the heads of ETGs to see which would cooperate and help further with distributing teacher questionnaires.

4.2 Sources of Data

To collect data, structured interviews were conducted with the head teachers and open-ended questionnaires were given to practicing teachers. To develop the interview protocol (Appendix A) and questionnaire items (Appendix B), LPP literature as well as curriculum planning/practice studies were used. Interview questions and the questionnaire were intended to elicit data about the communication channels of practice level (i.e., head teachers and

practicing teachers) with planners in the Ministry of Education, the extent to which the current textbooks were well-tuned to Iranian students' cognitive and affective needs, the extent practicing teachers' teaching and testing practices followed what has been planned by the ministry officials, the criteria English teachers were evaluated with at practice and by whom they were evaluated, and how they were provided with educational and professional support.

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was conducted in 2010 and 2011. The head teachers in provinces were interviewed electronically or on the phone. Phone interviews lasted about 25 minutes each on average. To encourage participants' easy interaction with the interviewer, all interviews were conducted in Farsi. Notes were taken during the phone interviews followed by their immediate transcriptions. As for the practicing teachers in thirteen provinces, questionnaires were sent to the head teachers or colleagues first and they distributed them among English teachers in their corresponding provinces.

Head teachers' responses were examined to extract and categorize the most pertinent 'ideas'. Then, the categorized and clustered responses were ordered by giving them percentages. In a similar way, the recurring categories in teachers' answers to questionnaire items were given percentages after extracting clear categories from their answers to each question.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Communication Policy

First of all, the efficiency of communication channels between practice and higher planning levels is open to question. Most head teachers (73.33%) in our sample believed that such a channel was a one way top-down route and that their context-based feedback,

reports, and comments were required by NELS and Research and Technology center in their education office for the sake of formalities only. Head teachers' direct correspondence with Curriculum Planning Center (CPC) led to nowhere in most cases (93.33%). The same criticism was raised by those practicing teachers communicating with planning level officials. For example, one of the head teachers argues that:

I have sent my views and feedback over and over to the Curriculum Planning Center. Most of my letters have not been answered and the letters they sometimes send in response are too general... they are not responses at all... but general statements. They only encourage and support us in those letters (Head Teacher # 6).

The significance of efficient communication and feedback channels has been emphasized in the literature. Albeit verbally recognized, such channels do not operate efficiently since they are of top-down and one way nature. Practice level head teachers *are communicated* by higher level officials in the Ministry and their context-informed feedback is required for the sake of formality only. The reason for such a one-way communication channel-though a paradoxical term- might be the highly centralized nature of the Ministry of Education (Riazi, 2005). Such a one way communication policy at this level is the cause of several other problems discussed below.

5.2 Compatibility of ELT Textbooks with Students' Cognitive and Affective Needs

Most head teachers (71.42%) maintained that planners' final products (ELT textbooks) were basically not well-tuned to Iranian students in terms of cognitive and affective considerations. One of the head teachers noted that “No, the book contents are not

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compatible with my students' needs in these domains because the contents do not reflect the realities of Iranian society" (Head Teacher # 11). Another head teacher held that "No, the book contents are not compatible with the needs you are talking about... but we are told that through cultural localization the problem will be solved" (Head Teacher # 19).

Such an argument is supported by earlier studies in which it is held that textbooks deal primarily with lower-order cognitive skills in all grades; only in the newly-developed pre-university textbooks were there some higher-order cognitive skills (e.g., analysis, evaluation, and creativity) (Babaii, 1997; Riazi & Mosallanejad 2010). The dominance of lower-level cognitive skills in the contents of English textbooks is explanatory of the finding of this study. The book contents, according to the participants, were not well-suited with Iranian students in terms of affective considerations either. The incongruence between book contents and students' interests, needs, their everyday life, and experiences were reported as the explanation to such a finding. Similar findings are reported by Kamyabfard (2002).

Head teachers' argument is backed by both national documents and several studies. In a national report of Iran's Ministry of Education (1993), the authors discuss the deficiencies of secondary education in Iran and raise critiques against Iran's education system in general. According to the report, the education system is centralized and does not have enough flexibility to cater to students' needs and interests. Similar criticisms are made by Iran's Organization of Plan and Budget (1999). As far as ELT specific needs are concerned, the Supplementary Documents of Comprehensive Science Roadmap refer to the mismatch between ELT materials and the needs of different students in different regions that has led to what is described as 'far distance' between book contents and needs of Iranian society.

Not only in national reports and documents, but also in several studies the question of NA (Needs Analysis) in Iran's ELT programs has been raised. Tusi (1998) believes that one of the main problems of mainstream ELT material developers in the Ministry of Education is that they simply do not identify learners' needs. In a similar vein, Maftoon, Yazdani Moghaddam, Golebostan, and Behafarin (2010: 2) argue that “curriculum developers ... have almost certainly neglected to pay attention to students' needs and future demands”. Ghorbani-Nezhad (1999) maintains that there is not an acceptable level of congruence between Iranian learners' increasing needs and ELT practice of the nation. Paknezhadi (2001) analyzed the content organization of English book 2 and concluded that very few teachers believed the book meets their students' needs. Similar criticisms have been made by several other researchers (e.g., Bajelan, 2004; Zangeneh, 1995; Kamyabfard, 2002; Zera'ati, 2000). Atai (2002a) criticizes Iran's EAP programs for neglecting NA and finds this problem as a major source of confusion in EAP practice.

5.3 Evaluation Policy

As far as systematic evaluation of teachers' professional competence is concerned, most of the respondents were dissatisfied and feel frustrated. According to most of the head teachers (82.60%), English teachers were generally evaluated the same way as other teachers (e.g., chemistry or geography teachers). Practicing teachers stated that their teaching quality was evaluated predominantly by *the number of students passing exams* which they believed was an unacceptable criterion. About eighty percent of the practicing teachers believed that their evaluation was not systematic. Most of these answerers (61.63%) argued that their evaluation was affected by their students' exam results only and no other criteria were

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important to the principals, or officials in the ministry. These teachers argued that they were evaluated by ELT naïve principals, their professional teaching skills were disregarded, and contextual idiosyncrasies were not important for evaluators. Teachers also held that their politico-ideological beliefs should not be used as evaluation criteria. A small number of teachers (only 2.04%) disagreed with this and believed relevant criteria were used for evaluation purposes.

One of the head teachers noted that:

Unfortunately, the aim of English learning is not defined and set at high school level... the books do not follow a specific purpose either. In other words, it is not established how much of a given skill should be learned or mastered by the students at a given level. As a result, teacher evaluation is not the question of whether he has enabled his students learn or master a given amount of a skill; teacher evaluation is done through a set of cliché questions which are common for all teachers (Head Teacher # 10).

The term personnel policy (in language-in-education policy) examines whether there are language proficiency standards for teachers (Baldauf, Li, & Zhao, 2010). This is an important issue since teachers' proficiency level is one of the key elements in implementing an educational initiative. In Iran, there is no systematic definition in form of a formal evaluation scheme dealing with teachers' language proficiency standards or their professional knowledge. The question of Iranian teachers' English proficiency has been hotly debated. While some researchers argue that Iranian teachers' language and professional knowledge level is acceptable (Farhady & Sajadi, 2004), studies by English Office of Organization of Research and Educational Planning, affiliated to the Ministry of Education, in 1995 and 1999 indicate that most of them are not at “an adequate or even an acceptable level of English

particularly in English speaking and pronunciation” (p. 5). Other studies (e.g., Tusi, 1992; Golebostan, 2003; Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010) support the latter conclusion.

5.4 Methods and Techniques Policy

More than half of the head teachers (57.14%) argued that teachers simply did not keep to officially prescribed plans dealing with teaching and testing in general, the result of which was undesirable discrepancy and inconsistency among teachers' teaching and testing practices. They believed that there were two main reasons for this: There was no supervision; and, the criterion of students' exam results for teacher evaluation discouraged teachers. The remaining 38.09% were satisfied with the adherence of teachers to expected teaching and testing norms. One of the head teachers stated that “Unfortunately, since there is no strict control over their [teachers'] practice... nobody cares about it” (Head Teacher # 3).

Interestingly, more than sixty percent of practicing teachers (63.67%) argued that there was no such a guideline for assessment purposes and more than seventy percent (73.06%) maintained the same for teaching guidelines known as teacher guidebooks in Iran.

The results were verified by official documents. According to some documents (e.g., Five-year Program for English Language Development and Investigation of ELT Quality in Iran developed by the Ministry of Education and High Council of Cultural Revolution respectively), neither a teacher's guidebook nor a workbook is available for junior school teachers and there is no workbook for high school level.

As far as practice-level assessment is concerned, inconsistencies occur since English teachers are provided with a set of general guidelines known as *Barombandi* (a set of rubrics developed by the officials of the Ministry of Education for correcting papers). Interview data together with earlier investigations confirm

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inconsistencies with undesirable consequences in assessment at different levels. The findings seem to suggest that since there is not a supervision mechanism watching Iranian English teachers teaching and testing behaviors, and because teachers' performance is judged and formally evaluated on the basis of students passing the course, inconsistencies between teachers and discrepancies with theoretical principles of assessment and evaluation or even *Barombandi* are inevitable.

Inter and intra-level inconsistencies in teachers' teaching and testing practices are partially attributable to not providing them with practicable guidelines on these areas. Even in few cases that teachers are provided with some guidelines, they are either interpreted and practiced differently (e.g. Jafarpour, 1986) or they do not meet teachers' needs (e.g. Yarmohammadi, 2003). For example, Jafarpour (1986) demonstrates that *Barambani* has failed to bring coherence to teachers' assessment in end-of-the-year exams. Jafarpour (1986, p. 92) argues that "how students' achievement is assessed still remains to be ambiguous ...although officials try hard to end up with as similar nationally administered tests as possible across the nation, there are stark contrasts between end of the year exams of different provinces". His examples demonstrate that *Barmbandi* is interpreted and practiced differently in different provinces. The adverse repercussions of lack of clearly defined assessment techniques and criteria have been reported in several other studies (Bajelan, 2004; Khani, 2003; Mazlum, 2007).

Not unrelated to this argument is the fact that there is not a supervision mechanism watching teachers' professional practices. Head teachers' concern about educationally undesirable consequences of teachers' inconsistent practices is explained by these two facts: there are no preplanned documents containing general and specific guidelines for teaching and testing different lessons, skills, components, etc. and there is no control over how

teachers teach and test. Since teachers' testing and assessment practices are not formally supervised, teachers even might choose to ignore the mandatory rules as well. For example, Farhady, Hedayati, and Hezaveh (2010, p. 12) argue that “although the Ministry of Education mandates utilization of diagnostic and formative assessments during school year at grades 9-11, teachers rarely use them in reality because they are not controlled by the ministry officials”.

5.5 In-service Training Policy

Teachers perceived another part of the planning activities differently. Planning level officials regarded in-service training programs to be the prime means of helping with professional growth of teachers. In a similar vein, head teachers viewed such programs as their first choice for such a purpose. Practicing teachers, however, argued that their own personal investment was more efficient. Intra level discrepancies were also evident in this regard. While head teachers reported weblogs and emails as the second means for providing educational and professional support, it came last for the teachers.

In literature, significance is attributed to providing teachers with continuous support and resources so that they are kept informed of a given educational policy, its goals, and the procedures needed for implementation (Hill, 2003). Since teachers are at the forefront of implementation, they need to be equipped with the necessary *educational and professional support*. Short in-service training programs- verified by data from head teachers- are planned for such purposes but teachers believe that their own personal investment is more efficient. More serious discrepancies are evident at intra level where what head teachers regard to be the second means of *educational and professional support* comes last for the teachers. In

other words, head teachers regard the use of electronic means (e.g., their weblogs and emails) as the second strategy for professional development of teachers while such means come last for the practicing teachers.

Equally challenging the head teachers' ideas and confirming the finding of this study is the results of several studies on the efficiency of in service short term programs. The efficiency of such programs for Iranian English teachers has been questioned from different perspectives in several studies (e.g. Behafarin, 2007; Danafar & Derakhshan, 2003). The results of some other studies (e.g. Doudman, 2006; Madadlu, 2002; Khani, 2003) are also directly or indirectly related to different problems of such programs in Iran. The results also indicate that the officials' plan for the head teachers to hold monthly meetings with teachers is being practiced differently. Instead of dealing with educational and professional issues, both head teachers and teachers prefer to *talk about* persistent problems for which they can do little or nothing at all (e.g., income, limited allotted time for English, etc.). One of the head teachers described such meetings as sympathy and empathy sessions to just relieve.

5.6 Feedback Processing Mechanisms

Teachers' and students' feedback is also valuable sources of information flow from micro practice level to higher level of planning when a given program is evaluated. Feedback loops seemed to be ill-functioning in Iranian ELT curriculum planning since feedback was either paid no heed to or no feedback was sent at all. More than half of the head teachers (i.e., 57.14%) stated that they collected teachers' and students' feedback on various aspects and sent them to officials in NELS or ministry but received no answer or feedback at all. More than sixty-eight percent of practicing teachers (i.e., 68.16%) reported that they were not asked

for any kind of feedback-formal or informal- by officials. More than half of the practicing teachers (54.28%) did not ask for their students' feedback at all- reminiscent of Allright's (1984, p. 167) concern: "very many teachers seem to find it difficult to accept their learners as people with a positive contribution to make to the instructional process". Therefore, there is a lack of a *feedback processing mechanism* at this level which can be attributed to a broader problem in the Ministry of Education; so far, there has been no systematic evaluation system of educational programs, let alone ELT. The need for practice level feedback will not be felt unless such an evaluation system is launched within the Ministry.

6. Conclusion

Nowadays, an increased emphasis is attributed to the way a given educational initiative or curriculum is perceived, appropriated, propagated, and implemented by local policymakers in micro contexts (Kırkgöz, 2009). It is argued that if language and educational policymakers turn a blind eye to the way their decisions and policies are perceived, interpreted, and practiced, the gap between policy rhetoric and practice level realities will grow. Therefore, the involvement of policy implementers in policymaking process is considered to be effective in lessening such a gap. In other words, the extent a policy is supported by bottom-up involvement and consultation, called community policy by Baldauf, Li, and Zhao (2008), affects its successful implementation considerably.

The present study investigated was an attempt to investigate how what is planned by ELT planners and policymakers in the Ministry is perceived, appropriated, and implemented by Iranian curriculum implementers. The results suggest that the gap between policy and ministerial rhetoric and practice level realities in Asia-Pacific countries, Turkey, and China discussed by Nunan (2003), Kırkgöz

(2009), and Wang (2010), respectively, exists in Iran too. ELT planners and policymakers in Iran's Ministry of Education develop and propose the curriculum and expect English teachers to implement it as expected. The findings, however, revealed that there are problems that contribute to the gap between curriculum planners and curriculum implementers. Inefficiency of communication loops between these two layers means that the valuable context-informed feedback of curriculum implementers is not important to the ELT planners and policymakers. Serious problems pertaining to evaluation policy, community policy, methods and techniques policy at micro practice level suggest that the gap between ELT planners and ELT implementers will keep growing.

O'Sullivan (2002) describes the process of curriculum implementation as a 'black box'. This study was an attempt to throw some light on Iran's ELT curriculum implementation and thus help with understanding the black box to some extent.

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Appendix A: Interview protocols for the head teachers

Part one

- (1) How do you pass on the latest of the ELT field to teachers?
- (2) What are your communication channels with teachers?
- (3) What are your communication channels with higher level officials?
- (4) Do you ask for and collect teachers' and students' feedback/views systematically and regularly? If yes, what do you do with them?

(5) How are English teachers evaluated? Are pre-defined criteria (at higher levels) taken into consideration?

(6) Do you provide higher level authorities with an official report of your activities and experiences? Who is responsible for reviewing them? What do they do with your reports?

(7) Is there an assessment model-developed and approved by the officials- for assessing your students?

Part two

(1) What other criteria should be used for English teachers' evaluation? Which criteria should be removed from the existing evaluation system?

(2) Are the books well-tuned (in terms of cognitive and affective considerations) to the students in your province? What would you like to say?

(3) Have you ever sent your views or comments to CPC (Curriculum Planning Center)? Have you received any answer or feedback?

(4) If your answer was positive to question 7 in part one, what do you think of its pros and cons (the assessment model provided by officials)?

(5) How much do teachers go along with and follow the regulations in terms of how to teach and test? What would you like to say?

Appendix B: Teacher questionnaire

- (1) How do you communicate with the head teacher in your city/town?
- (2) How are new teaching techniques and practices transferred to you?
- (3) Do you collect your students' feedback on textbooks and your teaching behavior systematically? If yes, what do you do with them?
- (4) Do you know the criteria you are evaluated with? Is your teaching evaluated systematically?
- (5) What criteria are missing in your evaluation? What criteria should be disregarded?
- (6) Do you provide the officials in education office with a formal report of your teaching activities and experiences? Who is responsible for this in the office? What do they do with your reports?
- (7) Is there an assessment model-developed and approved by the officials- for assessing your students?
- (8) Have you ever sent your views or comments to CPC (or other officials)? Have you received any answer or feedback?
- (9) Is there a document or a guideline of some sort for teaching different lessons? If yes, how much applicable are they?