

Teachers' Perception regarding the Effect of Curriculum and Examination System on Pakistani College Students' English Language Performance

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Abstract

A successful curriculum and examination system involves all the stakeholders to create its ownership. Curriculum for schools and colleges in Pakistan is generally planned without consulting the end users i.e. teachers, who therefore, cannot deliver effectively.

To find out teachers' perspective in this regard, focused group discussions with two groups of teachers, one male and the other female were conducted. One curriculum officer responsible for designing and implementation of English curriculum was also interviewed to get the government viewpoint on curriculum designing.

Findings revealed that college teachers' didn't consider the curriculum and examination system useful for English language learning and teaching in Pakistani colleges. They claimed that the prevailing system has failed to address practical problems and difficulties faced by the teachers in the implementation of the curriculum at the college level. The generalizations that can be drawn from the study are that it is crucial to take into account teachers' points of view in the development of curriculum and the examination system. Teachers' involvement will create ownership and they will play their active role in teaching English with more devotion and commitment. This will lead to significant improvement in the ELT provision at college level in Pakistan.

Keywords: Curriculum, English Language Teachers, Language Learning

1. Introduction

Curriculum means different things to different writers. Cuban (1995) considers official curriculum as the curriculum frameworks and courses of study set forth by the state and district officials to be taught by the teachers and learnt by the students. Under this view, the curriculum is a framework imposed by the authorities and is limited to the courses of study to be taught. The curriculum in this sense is a strict regime to be strictly followed by different stakeholders. In contrast, Majeed (2009) holds that curriculum 'is multi-dimensional and provide [s] holistic opportunities to students for developing language skills by providing appropriate conceptual knowledge and use of the English language in order to build students' ability to communicate in real life situations'. In this view, the curriculum is taken in a much broader sense which includes not only what to teach but also how to teach. Akhtar (2004) presents the same idea by saying that curriculum addresses the fundamental questions, What to teach? How to teach? When to teach? And what is the impact of teaching?

Curriculum development is a most important stage in the educational system of any country. In this regard, Lunenburg (2011) suggested that objectives, content or subject matter and learning experience are the three major components of the organization of the curriculum. Objectives points towards the main aim, content takes into account what to teach and learning experiences include both teachers and students. Thus, curriculum effects as well as affected by three major contributors: Curriculum developers, who are responsible for the development of curriculum; students, for whom it is developed and teachers, who exploit it in such a way to give their best to the students.

Teachers' role in curriculum development is of utmost importance. Teachers' involvement and knowledge of the orientation of the curriculum give them a chance to exploit the current sources at their best for optimum results. In Pakistan, teachers have a very nominal representation in the development of the curriculum.

This study takes up the issue of English college teachers' perspective on curriculum, syllabus and examination system. It addresses the following research questions:

What do the college teachers think about the curriculum? What is their role in the development of curriculum? Do they think they are actually delivering at their best in the current scenario of learning/teaching? What is the

benefit of bringing in teachers' perspective in curriculum development? How is it going to help improve the prevailing situation of English language learning in Pakistan?

In order to know the prevalent system of curriculum development in Pakistan the following section presents the course of its development.

2. Curriculum Development in Pakistan

The study of curriculum development in Pakistan is a sad story of ruptures. In 1947, the first educational conference was held, aiming at restructuring and reshaping of the full educational system. In addition, it targeted effectiveness of the curriculum to the needs of the citizens of Pakistan. But, unfortunately, expected outcomes envisaged could not be achieved (Akhtar, 2004).

Consequently, in order to review the entire educational system the National Commission on Education was formed in 1959. The goal was again to restructure the system to promote education but its fate wasn't any different from its predecessor. In 1969, the new policy emphasizing educational quality and new generation character building was announced. The policy sounds flawless but it fails to comprehensively outline its practical implications for classroom through an effective curriculum. This necessitated a review and was replaced by the new educational policy in 1972, listing objectives comprehensively and guideline how to translate them into classroom practices. The policy liked its forerunners also failed to achieve its goals (Akhtar, 2004).

The salient features which distinguished educational policy of 1979 from its previous counterparts were that it placed a great deal of emphasis on the integration of curricula and textbooks. Notably, it didn't target to revise the curriculum straight away; rather it pointed out the ineffectiveness of the prevalent curriculum and desired to pinpoint its shortcoming before planning its revision. National educational policy 1992-2001 was publicized after 13 years stressing Islamic order. It reiterated the importance of curriculum development where major reforms were mandatory. For the first time, under this framework professionals were hired to develop curriculum at all levels (Memon, 1999).

Educational policy 1998-2010 was announced aiming to bring curriculum and content of education in deeni madaris 'religious schools/institutions' and modern schools close together by evolving an integrated system of national education. Revisions from Early Childhood Education to Higher Secondary School level in the scheme of studies were aimed which were notified in 2006. 23 core subjects were revised and the rest is in process. New curriculum for English for 1 to Class 12 was developed.

The government declared the implementation of the new curriculum in 2007 without anticipating the complexities in the process of textbooks development and production (The Daily Times, June 20, 2007).

One of the major challenges is the productions of textbooks. The Punjab textbook board sent 25 manuscripts to Ministry of Education for issuance of No Objection Certificate. Only two of them were able to obtain clearance. Due to lack of availability of textbooks the implementation of curriculum yet remains a far cry.

One of the reasons why educational policies couldn't be effectively implemented was a failure to understand the objectives by the curriculum planners. Teachers and curriculum planners, therefore, need to work together to share practical experience to address challenges of curriculum development (Memon 1999).

Another reason is that the curriculum was mainly developed by non-professionals. Akhtar (2004) pointed out that bureaucrats and educationists who lacked first-hand experience with the classroom dominated the curriculum planning. School teachers had no proportional representation in curriculum development. Tanner and Tanner (1980) stated that those who are not involved cannot accept and adopt the new ideas as compare to those who are a part in bringing change in a system. So, in order to make curriculum development effective, teacher availability and willingness to participate is important.

Asif (2001) who studied the curriculum development process at the elementary level concluded that the prevailing situation in schools is not considered while developing the curriculum because all the decisions are taken 'at the highest level of echelons in the department'. He further stated that this is the real cause of disowning the curricula by the teachers at the school level. They are not aware of the innovations conceived and thus cannot implement them in their teaching methodologies.

S. Tajammal (2007) in his study mentioned researches by Mirza (1987) and Ahsan (1999) and points out that these studies enforced prior consultations with civil society especially teachers, students and parents for curriculum reforms. It has been pointed out by the researchers that the curriculum is developed without consulting the stakeholders. Hence it lacks the confidence of the society and the learners. He pointed out that the teachers are not consulted for selecting contents.

The main shortcoming in the development of the curriculum is the non-involvement of teachers. Teachers are the end user and when they are not aware of the objectives and the curriculum developers are not familiar with the issues faced by the end user it will not be possible to work for a practical curriculum. It is crucial for the teachers to know the spirit of the curriculum. They have the first-hand knowledge of the ground realities in the classroom and their involvement in the curriculum will create an ownership. What the teachers themselves think about their role in the current scenario is the main focus of this study. The next section presents the methodology of the study.

3. Methodology

The main tools used for this study is the focus group discussions and an interview. A focused group discussion (FGD) is a semi-structured data collecting method in which researcher/facilitator draws a list of key issues, concerns and themes to be discussed by the purposefully selected set of participants (Kumar 1987). Learning from the targeted audience is fast which makes this method very popular (Debus 1988; US Department of Health and Human Services 1980). The focused group discussions with two groups of teachers, one consisting of male and the other comprising female were conducted. For this study teachers from two Federal colleges in Islamabad, the capital city of Pakistan, were selected to collect data. In all, 20 female teachers and 12 male teachers participated.

One curriculum officer responsible for designing and implementation of English curriculum was also interviewed to get government perspective on curriculum designing.

4. Results and Discussion

Both male and female teachers while responding to the question on what do they think about English language learning at college level stated the fact that English language learning is not what is happening in the classroom these days. The main aim of the teacher is to prepare the students for the forthcoming exams. The students are also aware of it and use all fair or unfair means to pass the exams. For them learning English, having the knowledge of the language or developing his skills for learning is not important. The teachers pointed out that in our curriculum there is no focus on speaking, reading or listening skills. There is a written annual exam whereas there is no system to examine the skills of speaking, listening or reading. As a result to learn or improve them is neither demanded by the students nor taught to them.

Teachers considered learning of English in the colleges as superficial. There, the competency of the student in the language doesn't matter. Language teaching is restricted to learning the rules of grammar without practical usage. For literature, there are certain extracts from a foreign context which is neither comprehensible nor fully understandable for the students. The teachers are bond to do written practice once in a month and for the rest of the time the teacher is lecturing with no spoken or reading practices for the students.

The teachers pointed out that English for the students is a monotonous area and the teachers have to make it interesting but the teachers don't have enough authority to conduct the class as they want. They want to bring in everyday life experiences in the class, want students to be independent and write on their own. They ideally want to do a lot of things. The teachers understand that in colleges there are mixed ability students so they need a flexible curriculum whereas the current literature based curriculum force all students to digest it to pass the exams. The outcome is that students find refuge in memorizing the whole answers without comprehending them. The final results are sometimes good if the memory of the student is good but if he forgets one line then disappointment with a slogan of 'incompetent' is what he gets.

The teachers are enthusiastic and want to explore the textbooks in all possible ways but 'are not given that much liberty to work as we want in the classes'. They want to work out their teaching strategy after doing the need analysis of the students and determining their level. They want to use different aids for teaching. They want to use newspaper article for precise writing, different picture for picture description and charts in the class.

The teachers revealed that the examination system is not supportive to the innovations. The same questions are repeated year after year which makes the students rote learn the questions instead of putting efforts to learn the language. This attitude of curriculum planners and examination system has created a fear of the language in the students. They are highly demotivated to learn the language thinking it to be something they can never learn.

The curriculum planners are not at all aware of the situation probably for the reason explained by Hawes (1976). He suggests that awareness of local problems and conditions is very important for curriculum development and these gaps can only be filled by the teachers.

When a curriculum planner officer was questioned about the role of teachers in the curriculum, he said that there is a fair representation of teachers in the curriculum development process. The answer is more obvious in UNESCO statistical yearbook, 1998, stating that there are some serving teachers involved in the curriculum development. Their lack of expertise in the field makes their contribution insignificant. One of the reasons is their academic qualification which lack up to date training as the existing/current training program have very less to offer in this area of curriculum creativity.

It is acknowledged by the Ministry of Education task manager (Aly, 2007) that ‘the Curriculum review exercises in Pakistan have been sporadic. Historically, the process has been non standardized. However, in the last one year curriculum review has received great attention and has been reviewed systematically. Curriculum development is a specialized task... there is no mechanism for feedback once the curriculum is implemented and, ... the government lacks the requisite evaluation capacity’. (p. 18).

Ayaz Ahmed & Sarfraz Khan 2011 suggested that teachers’ recommendations and opinions should be included in forming native education policy and language policy through national and international forums.

5. Conclusion/Recommendations

A practical curriculum realizing the current scenario in the classroom, knowing the pitfalls of the system, filling the gaps will remain a dream until and unless teachers’ viewpoint is taken into account for its development. Following are some of the proposals for a practical English curriculum in Pakistan:

- Proper System of feedback for curriculum to be established at the gross root level.
- Establishment of curriculum feedback committees at the city level meeting every month and submitting reports after every three months to the Ministry of Education.
- Inclusion of at least one subject teacher from every college in the committee.
- The proper system of evaluation and discussion at the college level so as to give recommendations and feedback to the committee about the problems/issues in the implementation of curriculum.
- Workshops/short programs to be organized for teachers and curriculum developers to work in collaboration for understanding the objectives of the curriculum and putting them into practice.
- A separate comment and feedback wing to be established in the Ministry of Education dealing with the collection and interpretation of the comments and feedback of the committees to give suggestions/recommendations to the curriculum planners.

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