ENGLISH LANGUAGE CRRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION THROUGH TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS IN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS OF ELBASAN

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate how English language curriculum of public high schools was implemented by teachers. The major areas of investigation were the teachers' perceptions of the curriculum goals and content, instructional strategies, evaluation and assessment procedures and the problems encountered during the curriculum implementation. Through a questionnaire for teachers, the data collected were from teachers randomly selected from Elbasan. The results revealed that the implementation process of the English language curriculum showed differences in relation to the facilities of schools and classrooms, teacher and student characteristics and perceptions. Majority of the curriculum goals were attained at a moderate level and there were some problems with the selection and ordering of curriculum content. Various types of teacher-centered and learner-centered instructional strategies were implemented depending on the language skill to be taught and learned. The main problems encountered in the implementation process resulted from the lack of materials and resources, the classroom environment and the curriculum. These problems influenced the attainment of goals, classroom practices and the assessment procedures. Teachers' perceptions of curriculum goals and content differed in relation to age, teaching experience and educational background.

Keywords: *English language curriculum, English language teaching, curriculum implementation, teacher perceptions, high school*

1. Introduction

Throughout the history, the importance given to the teaching and learning of English has led to the development of various approaches and methods having direct influence on syllabus design, classroom practices, and assessment and evaluation procedures. As Richards and Rodgers (1990) argue the individual and social purposes for learning English and the theories on second language acquisition have had great impact on the existence of these approaches and methods. According to Richards and Rodgers (1990) these approaches and methods can be listed under three basic views of language. The first view is the "structural view" stating the purpose of language learning as "the mastery of the structurally related 2 elements" in the form of phonological, grammatical and lexical units, and the methods listed under this view are "Grammar Translation Method", "Direct Method" "Audio-Lingual Method", "Total Physical Response" and "Silent Way" (p. 17). The second view is "functional view" revealing that language is "a vehicle for the expression of functional meaning" from which "Communicative Language Teaching" and "Task Based Instruction" are derived (p. 17). The third view is "interactional view" perceiving language as "a tool for the creation and maintenance of social

relations" to which "Suggestopedia" and "Community Language Teaching" relate (p. 17). These approaches and methods have affected the syllabuses of English courses.

2. Literature Review

The history of English language teaching (ELT) can be separated into five decades as "early period, the nineteen-sixties, the nineteen-seventies, the nineteen-eighties, the nineteen-nineties and "the new-millennium" depending on the major developments in the field (Jawarskowa and Porte, 2007, p.1). The early period of English language teaching was the time of "Grammar Translation Method," which emerged from "the study of Latin" and became the usual way of studying foreign languages (Richards and Rodgers, 1990, p. 2). As Brown states, the early 1960s were the time of shift to "oral practice through pattern drills and a good deal of behaviorally-inspired conditioning" (as cited in Jawarskowa and Porte, 2007, p. 1). According to Ellis, the 1970s was "a period of adolescence in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)," which came up with several theories of language that led to other approaches and methods in language teaching in the preceding years (as cited in Jawarskowa and Porte, 2007, p. 4). In terms of syllabus, as Bruton states the 1970s was the time of "notions and functions," and there was an interest in the skills for "contextualized communications." Oxford reveals that the 1980s was the decade that began with a "bang through Krashen's hypotheses about language acquisition" (as cited in Jawarskowa and Porte, 18 2007, p. 10). The explanation of this theory in its simplest sense can be made by comprehending the five main hypotheses which are "the acquisition/learning hypotheses … the monitor hypothesis… the natural order hypothesis… the input hypothesis… and the affective filter hypothesis" (Richards and Rodgers, 1990, pp.131-134). In brief, these hypotheses can be described as follows: As Waters reveals the nineteen-nineties was the time when the importance of "teacher development" was realized (as cited in Jawarskowa and Porte, 2007, p. 12). Actually, this was the time when publications on pre and in service training of teachers became available. According to Waters, the second main trend was "the growing number of ELT projects involving innovations in teaching, testing and training" (as cited in Jawarskowa and Porte, 2007, p. 12). Besides, the use of English as a means of "international communication" increased, but this led to concerns about its potential "negative effects on other languages and cultures" resulting from its wide-spread use (p. 12). According to Savignon, in the new millennium ELT has become the basis of "theoretical" interest involving researchers and practitioners searching for the "best practices" to meet the needs of a growing "population of learners" (as cited in Jawarskowa and Porte, 2007, p. 13). Actually, the new trends in ELT are the recognition of the assumption that there is no "best method" applicable to all cultural and teaching contexts, the significance of both meaning and form in the attainment of "language proficiency," the use of the language not only by natives but also by "nonnative users," and "dynamic instructional models" that facilitate communicative competence (as cited in Jawarskowa and Porte, 2007, p. 14).

English Language Teaching (ELT) has been affected by certain views on language and learning throughout the history. To be more specific, the 'structural,' 'functional' and 'communicative' views of language together with 'behaviorist,' 'cognitive,' 'humanistic' and 'social' views of learning have led to certain approaches and methods (Richards and Rodgers, 1990). These approaches and methods have influenced ELT with their curriculum and syllabus designs, classroom practices and materials, the roles assigned for teachers and students, and assessment and evaluation processes. In short, the traditional methods like 'Grammar Translation,' 'Audio-

lingual,' 'Total Physical Response' and 'Silent Way' are the outcomes of structural view of language which perceives the language as separable units in the form of phonological, grammatical and lexical structures. Again, especially 'Audio-Lingual' and 'Total Physical Response' rely on the behaviorist view of learning which is rooted in the stimulus response theory of Skinner (Richards and Rodgers, 1990). With the influence of these two traditional views, the 'product-oriented' syllabuses, teacher-centered activities and mechanical exercises such as drills, and outcome oriented assessment procedures like 'discrete point' tests have emerged (Nunan, 1988; Weir, 1990). Later on, 'functional' view of language which emphasizes meaning over structures, and the 'cognitive' and 'humanistic' views of learning have led to 'Natural Approach,' which enabled the use of 'functional/notional syllabuses,' learner-centered meaningful exercises both as classroom practices and assessment procedures (Oller and Richard-Amato, 1983; Nunan, 1988; Weir, 1990). Though not widespread, other methods like 'Suggestopedia' and 'Community Language Teaching' also come up as a result of 'humanistic' and 'social' views of learning and they have contributed to the field with their unique materials and classroom practices to a certain extent (Richards and Rodgers, 1990). The recent trend in ELT is the 'communicative' view of language, which incorporates form or structure, meaning and social context, and the combination of 'cognitive,' 'humanistic' and 'social' views of learning. Three basic approaches, 'Communicative Language Teaching,' 'Task-based Instruction' and 'Integrated Skills Approach,' are based on these views. These approaches find their ways in 'process oriented' syllabuses, learner centered classroom practices such as communicative, problem solving, information-gap and collaborative activities that promote the attainment of four main skills, reading, writing, listening and speaking and in turn process focused, learner centered assessment and evaluation procedures (Nunan, 1993; Richards and Rodgers, 1991; Weir, 1990). Although these approaches and methods derived basically from Second Language Acquisition research, they are widely accepted in environments where English is taught and learned as a foreign language (EFL). Actually, the implementation of them in the EFL situation is affected by the 'social,' 'economic,' 'educational,' and 'cultural' context of any country where they are used (McKay, 1992).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

1- How do teachers perceive the curriculum goals and content?
2- How do the teachers implement the curriculum?
3- What kinds of problems are encountered by the teachers during the implementation of the curriculum?

3.2 Instruments

The data collection instruments utilized in this study was a questionnaire designed for teachers by the researcher. The Teacher Questionnaire involved both close-ended items and open-ended questions. The purpose of involving open-ended questions was to get in- depth information which might not be possible to obtain by close-ended items. Another reason was the role of the open-ended questions in sustaining the internal validity of the study (Jaeger, 1988). While designing the Teacher Questionnaire, the related literature about the English curriculum under

investigation, and the theories and practices in English language teaching in general were taken into account. Teacher Questionnaire was divided into five main sections

3.3 Participants

The actual population of this study was all the English teachers implementing and all the students studying the English language curriculum offered at high school in Elbasan district, in Albania during the 2013-2014 school year. The sample included 10 high school English language teachers in Elbasan district to answer the questionnaire.

3.4 Procedure

The questionnaire administered with the teachers was analyzed. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze quantitative data collected through close-ended questions. Using descriptive statistics, percentages were calculated.

4. Results

Teachers' Perceptions of the Goals and Content of the Curriculum.

In relation to the **first research question**, data demonstrate information about teachers' perceptions of the attainment of the goals of the curriculum. In fact, nearly half of the teachers believed that their students were sometimes able to articulate sounds (49.7%), pronounce (47.9%) and dictate words (45.4%), formulate sentences by using the newly learned grammatical structures (45.3%) and vocabulary items (45.2%) accurately, and intonate sentences (42.4%). Again, a little more than half of the teachers claimed that their students were usually able to understand the meanings of vocabulary items (53.5%), comprehend a reading text (52.5%), and enjoy learning English (51.4%). Similarly, close to half stated that their students were usually capable of transforming sentences into various forms (49.7%), understanding the functions and forms of grammatical structures (47.9%) and were motivated to use English (44.6%). The teachers were divided on three of the statements concerning speaking, writing and using mechanics. While a little more than one-third of the teachers revealed that their students could usually speak in English (38%), another one third claimed this skill was sometimes attained (34.6%). Likewise, close to two-fifths of the respondents believed their students could sometimes write in English (39.1%) and use spelling and punctuation accurately (39.1%). However, 37.8% of the teachers claimed that their students could rarely write paragraphs in English, and 34.1% believed they were usually able to use the mechanics.

Considering the first research question, it was revealed information about teachers' perceptions of the content of the curriculum. As it was seen, majority of the teachers believed that frequently used vocabulary items were covered (80.1% agreeing/strongly agreeing), grammar contents were sequenced from simple to difficult (75.8% agreeing/strongly agreeing) and the activities of reading texts were designed to test comprehension (70.7% agreeing/strongly agreeing). Again, the majority felt that grammar content was comprehensible for the students (69.1% agreeing/strongly agreeing), and reading and listening texts were used to practice the language structures (66.5% agreeing/strongly agreeing). In addition, more than half of the teachers claimed that the topics of the listening and reading texts were comprehensible (57.5% agreeing/strongly agreeing), and the speaking activities could be performed by the students

(56.4% agreeing/strongly agreeing). The teachers were divided in their perceptions of content on five of the statements. While nearly half believed that vocabulary activities were interesting for the students (47.7% agreeing/strongly agreeing), close to one third either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement (32.4%). Similarly, a little more than one third of the teachers felt that grammar activities encouraged oral practice (39.5% agreeing/strongly disagreeing), whereas the other one-third did not feel so (36.7% disagreeing/ strongly disagreeing). Although there were some teachers revealing that the topics of the writing activities were not interesting for the students (43.2% disagreeing/ strongly disagreeing), there were others finding them interesting (31.7% agreeing/strongly agreeing). Likewise, some teachers felt the topics of the reading and listening texts were not interesting for the students (40.7% disagreeing/strongly disagreeing), but nearly one-third thought the opposite (36.7% agreeing/strongly agreeing). The main contradiction among teachers was about the authenticity of speaking activities and applicability of writing activities. Although a little less than half stated that speaking activities were applicable to real-life situations (47.1% agreeing/strongly agreeing), almost one-third disagreed with this statement (30.2% disagreeing/strongly disagreeing). Similarly, a considerable percentage claimed writing activities could be performed by the students (46.9% agreeing/strongly agreeing), but some disagreed with it (28.9% disagreeing/strongly disagreeing). Yet, close to one-fourth of the teachers felt undecided about the authenticity of speaking activities (22.7%) and the applicability of writing activities (24.2%).

In relation to the *second research question*, data collected about the instructional methods, techniques and materials used to improve the two language areas, vocabulary and grammar, and the four main skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing, are presented and discussed separately considering that each requires implementation of different instructional strategies.

Teaching Vocabulary and Grammar

The examination reveals that teachers make use of several techniques and materials to enable their students to practice the vocabulary items. However, compared with the presentation techniques, fewer teachers reported on this issue. Among the techniques used for practice, the most common ones were stated to be having students pronounce the vocabulary items (29.1%), formulate their own sentences (26.4%) and play games (25.6%). A little more than one fifth stated that they assigned their students to write the vocabulary items a couple of times in order to enable them "to learn the spelling" (21.7%). Though mentioned by a smaller group of teachers, supplementary vocabulary exercises (6.5%), vocabulary notebooks and puzzles (3.8%) were the materials used to practice vocabulary items. Similarly, few teachers stated to be encouraging the students to use the new vocabulary items by getting them to prepare visuals like posters and flash cards (4.4%), and by asking questions which necessitate students to use the new words in their answers (3.8%).

Similar to a vocabulary lesson, an analysis of the data reveals that between the two main methods of teaching grammar, deductive teaching was the most frequently used one as the majority stated that they explained the grammatical rules and functions themselves (66%). Considering the techniques used to teach grammar, a little more than one third of the teachers implementing this method also revealed that while explaining the grammatical rules and functions, they provided example sentences (37.5%). There were also some teachers who

formulized the rules in charts (20.1%) and compared the Albanian rules with English ones (19.6%). In addition, a few teachers claimed that they explained by forming relations between the new structures with what was already known (9%). Compared with the deductive teaching, inductive teaching was used less frequently. Only a little more than one fifth of the teachers responded that they taught grammar by eliciting the rules and functions from the students through asking questions (22.6%). A little more than one third of the teachers revealed that they used mainly meaningful grammar exercises in the form of sentence completion, matching, rewrite and error correction (38%). Besides, a few teachers claimed that they implemented communicative activities in the form of role-plays, games and discussions (15%). There were also few teachers implementing mechanical exercises such as substitution drills (6.8%). Similarly, few teachers used translations (4.3%). The respondent rate about the materials used to present and practice the grammatical structures was the lowest. Concerning this issue, slightly more than one fifth of the teachers stated that they prepared and delivered worksheets as handouts (21.5%). In addition, a few teachers reported that they made use of other grammar books available in the market (16.5%). Again, a few revealed that they used only the course-book and work-book (12.5%). There were also few teachers responding that they used visuals such as pictures and posters to present the grammatical structures, and administered quizzes to practice them (7.7%).

Teaching Listening and Reading

According to the related literature, the types of listening texts, the ways they are presented to the students and the type of activities carried out all play crucial roles in the development of this skill (Lewis and Hill, 1992, pp. 62-63). A close examination of the information collected reveals that majority of the teachers presented the listening texts in the book by reading them aloud (71.7%). Again, a little more than one fifth of the teachers informed that they used CDs and cassettes in the listening lesson (21.5%). In contrast, videos were reported to be hardly ever used (9.5%). A few teachers claimed that they assigned one or two students to read the texts aloud, and the others followed from the books (15.2%). Again, close to one fifth of the teachers revealed that they used popular songs as materials to conduct their listening lesson (18.2%). There was a small group of teachers claiming that they used listening texts from other English course books available in the market (11.7%). Few teachers stated that they did not conduct a listening lesson at all, and the students had the chance to listen to the classroom talk only, specifically the jokes, anecdotes and stories told by the teacher (6.3%).

Similar to a listening lesson, the types of reading texts, the ways they are presented to the students and the type of activities conducted are all important in a reading lesson (Lewis and Hill, 1992, pp.106-115). The data obtained reveals that majority of the teachers used reading aloud technique while presenting the reading texts. In fact, more than half of the teachers stated that they read aloud and assigned their students to follow from their books (56%). Again, half of the respondents informed that they asked some of their students to read aloud by changing roles (50.8%). These same teachers also added that they applied these two techniques one after the other. Silent reading was reported to be used only by nearly one fifth of the teachers (19.3%). The most frequently used materials in the reading lesson were the passages and dialogues in the course books as stated by a considerable percentage of teachers (44.8%). There were a few teachers informing that they delivered stories as handouts or they gave story books to their students to be read at home (15.2%).

Teaching Speaking and Writing

Actually, half of the teachers stated that they implemented role-plays in the classroom (50.3%). Majority of the respondents who used role-plays also gave detailed information on the issue. Two fifths of the teachers stated that speaking in the classroom was done in the form of question and answer (40.2%). In addition, close to one fourth of the teachers responded that they enabled their students to carry out discussions on a given topic or picture (23.1%). Few teachers indicated that they assigned their students to do presentations (3.8%) and take part in communicative games (3.5%).

Moreover, a careful analysis of the data reveals that free-practice writing activities were implemented more than the controlled practice writing activities. In fact, more than one third of the teachers stated that they wanted their students to write paragraphs on topics about their life styles, families and hobbies (37.5%). On the other hand, a few teachers claimed that their students were not able to write paragraphs or compositions, so they assigned them to write their own sentences instead (11.7%). Similarly, few informed that they wanted their students to write letters (7.6%), prepare post-cards (3.8%), and write summaries (3.8%). There were also teachers who carried out other writing tasks such as describing pictures, keeping journals. (4.1%), but these were reported to be rarely done. Dictation carried out by close to one fourth of the teachers was the most frequently stated one (23.1%). There were also teachers who perceived writing not as a skill to be taught but as any kind of writing done in the classroom such as writing answers to exercises (12%), taking notes of what was written on board (7.9%) and rewriting the dialogues and texts in the course books (4.6%). Only few teachers revealed that they collected the writings and provided written feedback for each (6.8%). There were also few teachers who required their students to read what they had written in class to get feedback from the teacher and their classmates (3.8%).

Problems Encountered By Teachers in Implementing the Curriculum

In relation to the **third research question**, the problems that teachers face in implementing the curriculum were collected in various sections of the questionnaire. For instance, the teachers were asked to comment on the reasons that hinder the achievement of the stated goals in Question 2 at Part B, the problems about the content of the curriculum in Question 2 at Part C, the problems encountered while teaching the stated language skills in Question 2 at Part D and their overall opinions related to the problems and suggestions in Part F. While examining the data provided in these sections, it was observed that teachers mentioned their problems in general without paying attention to the specific thematic divisions. Besides, there were some teachers who repeated their problems in each section as they thought these affected instruction in several respects. A close examination of the data introduced reveals that majority of the teachers complained about lack of materials and equipment (84.5%) and the appropriate course book (63.9%). More than half of the teachers stated that their problems resulted from the students (56.3%). Again, close to half had complaints about the curriculum (48.4%), and one forth about the classroom environment (25.3%).Finally, almost all the teachers having problems with the classroom environment complained about crowded classrooms (22.3%).

5. Conclusion

Discussion of the Results about Teachers' Perceptions on the Curriculum Goals and Content

The only disagreement was on the reading skill in that teachers believed it was the most attained skill. In terms of phonological knowledge, teachers believed articulation of sounds and pronunciation as curriculum goals were achieved a little more than intonation, but still not at the desired level. Comprehension of vocabulary and grammar was attained more when compared with their application in the form of formulating sentences. There were more problems with paragraph writing than the use of mechanics (i.e. spelling and punctuation) and doing dictations. Actually, writing was stated to be the least attained skill. Considering the curriculum content, both teachers and students seem to agree with each other in that they believed frequently used vocabulary items were taught, majority of the classroom activities were on grammar, and these grammar activities were comprehensible. Again, teachers thought the topics of listening/reading texts and writing activities were sometimes interesting. The detailed information obtained from the teachers about the content of the curriculum also revealed that they were undecided about the motivation level of vocabulary activities, the comprehensibility of the texts, their aims, whether they were for the improvement of grammar or listening/reading comprehension, and the applicability of speaking and writing activities in the classroom environment. The related literature states that teachers have more in-depth information about any curriculum when compared with the learners (Nunan, 1993). Therefore, in such a study teachers' perceptions regarding the attainment of the goals and content of the curriculum could be more indicative of this process.

Discussion of the Results on Teachers' Instructional Methods, Techniques and Materials

Teachers make use of different instructional methods, techniques and materials to teach different skills, which is supported by the related literature (Lewis and Hill, 1992; McDonough and Shaw, 1998; Nunan, 1993; Richards and Rodgers, 1990; Willis, 1983). Therefore, the instructional strategies used for the teaching and learning of each skill are discussed separately. The related literature reveals that the two main stages of a vocabulary lesson are "presentation" and "practice" (Willis, 1983, p.115). Thus, the instructional strategies used to teach vocabulary are grouped under these two categories. In relation to presentation techniques, the teachers revealed that they made use of visual materials such as pictures, drawings, mimes, real objects and flash cards to demonstrate the meanings of concrete terms. They also claimed to be giving the Albanian equivalents of words only when they were teaching abstract concepts. Most of the teachers supported the teaching of vocabulary in context, so they revealed to be providing example sentences to their students in order to make them aware of not only the meanings but also the uses of new words. Therefore, the instructional strategies for teaching grammar are again grouped under these two headings. In this regard, most of the teachers stated that grammar was taught deductively by providing example sentences, formulizing rules, comparing English and Albanian structures and comparing the new structures with the already known ones. There were also some teachers preferring the inductive teaching of grammar through eliciting the rules and functions from the students by providing context and asking questions about it. When the two methods were compared, deductive teaching was used more frequently than inductive one.

When the instructional strategies of listening and reading skills are considered, it is observed that they were taught and learned in combination. In fact, as the teachers and students admitted, reading was emphasized more than listening due to the lack of materials and equipment such as cassettes, CDs, videos and tape recorders. In other words, the number of teachers and students revealing that the classroom talk was the sole listening activity was considerable. Listening was mainly conducted by teachers' reading aloud the texts two or three times either with books closed or open, or by students' reading aloud the texts by changing roles and others' following from their books. Thus, reading aloud was more frequently used than silent reading. There were also teachers who assigned their students to read the texts at home, but to leave the reading exercises for classroom practice.

Finally, writing activities were claimed to be one of the least frequently used practices. Some teachers stated that they mainly implemented dictation practice, paragraph-writing and letter or postcard writing in an ascending order of frequency. The number of teachers claiming that at this level they assigned their students to produce sentences rather than paragraphs was considerable. In this regard, most of the students stated that they had serious problems with writing, so they found dictations, paragraph-writing and letter-writing partially useful.

Discussion of the Results on the Teachers' Problems about the Implementation of the Curriculum

The first factor influencing curriculum implementation is the problems with the facilities of the school, especially lack of audio, visual and supplementary materials and the lack of teachers. In this respect, lack of audio materials such as tapes, videos, cassettes and CDs hinders especially the acquisition of phonological knowledge and listening skill. Again, lack of visuals such as pictures, flash cards, and supplementary materials like dictionaries, story and resource books influence the attainment of not only listening and phonology but also vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing and speaking. The teachers have revealed that they wanted to prepare exercises and communicative activities from outside resources, but the readily available ones on market were above the level of the students. The second factor that affects curriculum implementation is the various types of course books, as they have serious limitations in terms of their content and layout. Again, some of the unknown grammatical structures and vocabulary items were claimed to be appearing in texts without reference to them in the exercises. Furthermore, the themes and topics between and within units were stated to be irrelevant to one another. The use of different series of course books in different grade levels was revealed to be problematic in attaining continuity and integration in the curriculum within and among grade levels. The third factor having an impact on curriculum implementation is the students. They were revealed to be preventing the effective implementation of the curriculum, mainly because they lacked interest in the lesson, skills in performing reading and writing even in Albanian, and background vocabulary and grammar knowledge in English. The issue related to the lack of interest seemed to be in line with the findings about the teachers' perceptions of the students' attitudes, as they have already shown there were some students not interested in the lesson.

6. References

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