

RESHAPING THE EFL CURRICULUM IN ALBANIA – MAIN FACTORS COMING FROM THE HIGH SCHOOLS OF ELBASAN

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Abstract

The process of changes in the Albanian Education System has touched even the English Language Curriculum. There are a number of factors which seem to be main ones in reshaping the curriculum, by giving a great emphasis to the way things are perceived from different points of view at the same situation. Teachers, institutions, learners can influence the EFL reshaped curriculum adaptation in the High Schools of Elbasan.

This paper highlights the complex process of the implementation of ELT curriculum innovations, in Albania, by taking examples as well as even from other countries undergoing the same process. It also confirms that teachers are not simply implementers of policies that are handed down to them, but they interpret, modify, alter, and implement these policies according to their beliefs and the context where these policies are being implemented. In addition, this paper, illustrates a number of factors which influence how teachers implement and make sense of ELT curriculum innovations. It will be provided significant implications and useful messages for curriculum developers, teachers' education programs, and educational policy makers.

Keywords: EFL curriculum innovation, curriculum implementation, ELT, factors

Introduction

In the recent years many countries, included Albania, introduced ELT curriculum innovations to their educational systems on the hope to improve the status of English language teaching and learning in these countries. However, during the implementation process, these innovations often fail to achieve the intentions of those who initiated and planned these ELT curriculum innovations.

For example, in Greece, Karavas-Doukas, (1995) used one structured classroom observation and semi structured interviews with 14 teachers to examine their implementation of an EFL curriculum innovation which advocates a communicative learner-centered approach. She reported that classrooms were generally teacher-centered and form-focused. Lessons primarily consisted of activities which provided practice on discrete language items while activities that encouraged spontaneous genuine communication were almost non-existent. Most of the pair work activities were carried out between the teacher and the students rather than, as intended by the curriculum between pairs of students. Another study of relevance here is that by Gorsuch (2000:137), who conducted a questionnaire survey of teachers' perceptions (876 teachers who teach English at high schools in Japan) towards the impact of English educational policy on their classroom practices. Findings revealed that while the educational policy emphasizes the development of students' communicative skills and calls for the equal treatment of the language skills, "Japanese teachers' current orientation toward foreign language learning seems to be that strong teacher control is desirable and that students need to memorize, use written mode, and be very accurate". This

apparent mismatch between curricular principles and teachers' classroom practices is further reflected in a study in Taiwan where there was an attempt to improve the status of English language teaching. The Taiwanese government introduced new textbooks featuring activities for communicative language teaching into its junior and high schools. In this study, Wang (2002:137) interviewed six teacher educators to investigate their perceptions of this curricular innovation. These educators reported that: Most high school teaching is grammar oriented. Grammar-translation method prevails, which makes learning every day English impossible. Instruction resembles "parrot learning" wherein students make sounds without knowing why. The trend apparent in this set of ELT studies recurs in Nunan (2003) who conducted a multiple case study of the effects of English as a global language on the policies and practices in a number of countries in the Asia-Pacific region: Mainland China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam. Data were collected through a variety of methods, including document analysis (e.g. recent books, articles, government reports, syllabuses and curriculum documents) and interviews with 68 informants from these countries. Nunan concluded that: English language policies and practices have been implemented, often at significant cost to other aspects of the curriculum, without a clearly articulated rationale and without detailed consideration of the costs and benefits of such practices and policies on the countries in questions. Furthermore there is a widely articulated belief in that, in public schools at least, these policies and practices are failing. (Nunan, 2003:609)

Another study which focuses on the implementation of curriculum innovation comes from the Albanian High Schools of Elbasan. It was used an eclectic approach (interviews, semi-structured and unstructured observations, lesson observation, assessment of learners' work and an examination of documents), to examine 145 English language teachers' implementation of learner-centered approaches within the Albanian context. Findings revealed that while most teachers claimed to be implementing learner-centered approaches in their classrooms, lesson observations did not match teachers' implementation claims. Thus, although one of the curriculum aims is "for the students to communicate effectively and fluently with each other and to make talking in English a regular activity" classrooms were generally teacher centered and the Albanian language was the dominant language during classroom interaction. Teachers also spent considerable time correcting students' grammatical and pronunciation mistakes. During the reading lessons, teachers spent substantial time reading word by word and sentence by sentence, explaining vocabulary, translating into Albanian, and reading aloud. Little attention was given to activities included in the curriculum such as working out the meaning of the words from the context, scanning the reading text for specific information, matching activities, and the after reading activities. The above ELT studies clearly emphasizes the need to examine the factors and reasons which led to this gap between the ELT curriculum intentions and what actually happens inside the classrooms. In this paper, it is shed light on these factors and in doing so, we might facilitate the implementation process of ELT curriculum innovations. However, before proceeding to examine the factors which might affect how teachers implement ELT curriculum innovations, it is made clear the rationale for studying teachers' implementation of ELT curriculum innovations.

I.

Factors influencing teachers' implementation

A number of researchers have attempted to identify factors, which have an impact on the adoption and implementation of curriculum innovations (Chang, 2011; Fullan, 2001; Karavas-Doukas, 1995; Owston, 2007; White et al., 1991). Below there are considered the following factors as being crucial in the implementation process of ELT curriculum innovations: the nature of the innovation; the role of teachers' beliefs, teachers' training and

development; the examination system; and finally the context where the innovation is implemented.

The nature of the innovation

The nature of the innovation itself can have a crucial impact on the acceptability and implementation process. (Fullan, 2001; Rudduck, 1986; White et al., 1991). The nature of the innovation can be viewed in terms of its originality, complexity, clarity, and triability (Fullan, 2001). Originality means that the innovation includes new practices which are different from the existing practices. This however may lead to consistency problems. In a curriculum innovation, for example, inconsistency may include the mismatch between the curriculum materials on the one hand and an existing examination, or between the curriculum principles and the teachers' beliefs and practices. Complexity is related to the difficulty and extent of change required of the implementers of the innovation. Brindley and Hood (1990:183) argue that "the more complex an innovation is perceived to be, the less likely it is to be adopted". They go further to propose that "when complex changes are required in teacher behavior, it is more difficult to bring about the successful adaptation of an innovation in teaching methods". This position is not shared by Fullan (2001:78) who suggests that "while complexity creates problems for implementation it may result in greater change because more is being attempted".

In a study of teachers' responses to the introduction of task based learning in the high schools of Elbasan, it is reported that teachers could not make sense of the innovation because of its complex structure and very theoretical orientation. In addition, when teachers began to feel that the ideas endorsed by the reformers were inconsistent with reality, many teachers switched back to their traditional approaches of teaching. The clarity of the innovation will also have a significant impact on the implementation stage. Teachers are often asked to implement a curriculum innovation without being given a clear explanation of how to put the innovation into practice. Fullan (2001:77) warns that "lack of clarity, diffuse goals, unspecified means of implementation represent a major problem at the implementation stage, teachers and others find that change is simply not very clear as to what it means in practice". He goes further to suggest that "unclear and unspecified changes can cause great anxiety and frustration to those sincerely trying to implement them". (Fullan, 2001:77) In ELT for example, Karavas-Doukas (1995), in an examination of a communicative language teaching curriculum being implemented in Greek high schools, found that teachers showed incomplete understanding of the innovation they were asked to implement and that this misunderstanding resulted in negative perceptions of the innovation. Whether or not an innovation can be tried and tested on a small/large scale is also an important factor. Conducting an innovation on a small scale reduces the risks involved in large scale adoption without testing or experimenting. For example, it might be advisable to try out a new curriculum in one or two schools before making decisions to implement this curriculum more widely. This experiment would give all the parties involved in the curriculum innovation some idea about any obstacles that might affect the implementation process.

The role of teachers' belief

Educational innovations frequently require teachers to change their behaviors and practices. However, "we are unlikely to bring about change in practice unless we face up to and, if necessary challenge teachers' deep rooted beliefs about the nature of knowledge transmission" (Adey & Hewitt, 2004:156). Spillane et al. (2002:415) state that: Reform cannot be accomplished by having teachers learn only the surface form of reform practices. It requires grappling with the underlying ideas and may require deep conceptual change, in which teachers rethink an entire system of interacting attitudes, beliefs and practices. Thus, as

Breen et.al (2001:472) have proposed “any innovation in classroom practice from the adoption of a new technique or textbook to the implementation of a new curriculum has to be accommodated within the teacher’s own framework of teaching principles”. According to Breen et al., these principles stem from underlying beliefs or personal theories the teachers hold about nature of the broader educational process.

Tillema (1994:602) has argued that “beliefs serve as filters which screen new information, ultimately determine which elements are accepted and integrated in the professional’s knowledge base”.

The filtering effect of beliefs has been also been stressed by Pennington (1996), who claims that teachers’ existing beliefs function as filter, hindering or modifying new information coming in.

The above discussion leads us to consider the crucial role of teachers’ beliefs in determining teachers’ rejection or adoption of educational innovations. With reference to ELT curriculum innovations, Orafi and Borg (2009) suggested while the ELT curriculum being implemented in Libyan schools emphasizes that “it is possible to understand the gist of the text without having understood every word” (Macfarlane, 2000:3). The beliefs about teaching reading teachers expressed during the interviews were at odds with the curriculum’s approach to this aspect of language teaching. A common belief among the teachers in this study was that the goal of reading is to develop accurate pronunciation. There was little evidence in the teachers’ comments that they were aware of the communicative orientation towards teaching reading embedded in the curriculum. Similar difficulties in promoting communicative reading instructions were noted by Musai (2008). In the Albanian context, he employed a survey design to elicit 290 EFL teachers’ assumptions towards reading in relation to curriculum innovation in Albania. The study found that while the curriculum encourages the development of reading skills, teachers’ theoretical views about reading were inclined towards the development of pronunciation. The author suggested that one possible explanation for these results is that the majority of the teachers have not been exposed to the recent trends and methods of teaching EFL reading. The lack of exposure to communicative approaches to teaching EFL reading might be one factor which led to the inconsistency between what the curriculum proposes with respect to teaching reading and what teachers do when they teach reading.

Teacher training and development

Since many educational innovations require teachers to change their classroom practices and adopt new ways of teaching, teachers’ training and development are also regarded as an essential factor in the implementation process. 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”. Carless argues that “teachers need to acquire the skills and knowledge to implement something, particularly if it is slightly different to their existing methods”. Thus, it is important to recognize that while teachers examine and assess the innovation, they need to be monitored and supported in a way that their personal practical understandings and knowledge of the innovation are enhanced. Carless (ibid) highlights the consequences of neglecting the retraining of teachers: If teachers are not equipped to deal with the implications of a new approach, they are likely to revert to the security of their previous behavior and the desired change may not take place. Without sufficient retraining, even teachers initially enthusiastic about an innovation can become frustrated by the problems in innovation and eventually turn against it. (Carless, 1999:23) However, it should be noted that briefing teachers with short sessions about the innovation 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 center removed from the teacher’s own classroom”. Returning one year later after conducting a two week training sessions for English language teachers in Indonesia, Lamb (1996:147) commented that “a great deal of our original input had simply been lost, and what was taken up was reinterpreted by teachers to fit their own beliefs and their own concerns about what was important to them and their students”.

Furthermore, 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”.

Thus, change does not only mean adopting new skills and practices, but it also means grappling with one’s beliefs and values, and to achieve this level of change, teachers need to be given opportunities to reflect upon their own practices. As Harris (2003:378) explains: For teachers to learn effectively they need to be able to reflect on their own learning and internalize new knowledge. Change in the classroom therefore involves much more than acquiring new skills or knowledge. It essentially means changes in attitudes, beliefs and personal theories in order to reconstruct a personal approach to teaching. This cannot be achieved unless there are opportunities to reflect upon their practice and the practice of others. Teachers often encounter different obstacles while trying to implement educational innovations. Shamim (1996:120) claims that many teacher training programs do not take the dynamics of change, and the potential obstacles encountering change into consideration. According to Shamim, this makes teachers unable to face the problems that follow their attempts to implement change in their classrooms and institutions. She insists on the need to advise teachers of the various obstacles that might face them in the implementation process. She writes: It is important for teacher trainers to encourage participants in teachers training programs to discuss both overt and ‘hidden’ barriers to the successful implementation of change in their own teaching/learning contexts. This will not only make trainees aware of potential sources of conflict but it will also enable them to develop strategies and tactics to deal with anticipated problems in initiating and managing change in their own classrooms. (Shamim, 1996:120)

The socio-cultural context

The educational process in any context is not only an exchange of information between teachers and students, but it is also a set of conventions which decides what happens between these parties (teachers and students). These conventions are determined by the social and cultural norms within this particular context (Coleman, 1996; Holliday, 1994; Tudor, 2001; Tudor, 2003). Stressing the central role of the social context, Tudor (2001:35) indicates that “the classroom is a socially defined reality and is therefore influenced by the belief systems and behavioral norms of the society of which it is part”. This coincides with Locastro’s (2001:495) argument that “classrooms are social constructions where teachers, learners, dimensions of the local educational philosophy, and more general socio-cultural values, beliefs, and expectations all meet”. Nunan and Lamb (2001:33) add that “classroom decision making and the effective management of the learning process cannot be made without reference to the larger context within which instruction takes place”. Holliday (1994:24) also notes that “the culture of the classroom provides tradition and recipe for both

teachers and students in the sense that there are tacit understandings about what sort of behavior is acceptable”.

The socio-cultural context where an innovation is to be implemented therefore will play a major role in the adoption or resistance of the innovation. For example, commenting on the process of curriculum innovation, Morris (1998:120) argues that “the implemented curriculum can be far removed from the intended curriculum, particularly if insufficient consideration is given to the context in which the reform is to take place”.

Goodson (2001:53) also highlights the consequences of ignoring the context where the innovation is to be implemented: Without sensitivity to context, the new change forces may be shipwrecked in the collusion with hard sedimentary rocks of existing school contexts. Externally mandated change forces are all very well as a triumphalist symbolic action pronouncing the new world order, but unless they develop sensitivity to school context and to teachers’ personal missions, the triumph may be short-lived and unsustainable, or we will see the emergence of a new purpose and function for teaching and schooling far removed from the mandated intensions. If an innovation is implemented without consideration of the socio-cultural structure of the society, conflict and resistance might arise. If an innovation entails new behaviors and roles which contradict the behaviors and roles inherent in the society and culture, receivers of this innovation might not easily accept these new roles and behaviors. Shamim (1996), in her attempt to introduce a process approach to English writing classes in Pakistan, found that conflicts between the learners’ assumptions about knowledge, their learning behavior in the classroom inherited from the culture of the wider community, and the assumptions of the innovation impeded its successful implementation. Shamim explains the reasons behind learners’ resistance to this particular innovation. As she notes: The lack of ‘fit’ between the ‘users’ (learners) and the assumptions of the innovative methodology was largely as a result of ‘value conflict’. On the one hand, learners’ beliefs and assumptions about the norms of appropriate classroom behaviors shown to be entrenched in the culture of the community clashed with the assumptions of the innovative methodology. On the other hand, the affinity between their expectations of the etiquette of teacher/learner behavior in the classroom and the culture of the community made it easier for them to reject the innovation (Shamim, 1996:119). She also makes suggestions regarding introducing educational change in general. They are as follows: 1. The need for behavior change is not limited to teachers. Students, parents and communities also have to change for the successful implementation of the innovation. 2. It is easier to implement change that is congruent with ways of thinking and believing and the norms of interaction prevalent in the culture of the community. 3. An innovation, if it clashes radically with the culture of the community, should be adapted to the local culture before being introduced. Holliday (2001:169) calls for innovations “to be sensitive to the cultural expectations of the recipients of the innovation, whether they are students or teachers encountering new teaching methodologies, or stakeholders in curriculum projects”.

In addition to the socio and cultural factors, other elements of the educational context such as the availability of the resources, and the structure of the examination system can have a significant impact on the extent educational innovations can be implemented effectively.

The examination system

A number of researchers have pointed to the crucial role exams play in shaping what teachers do inside the classroom (Andrews, 2004; Cheng, 1997; Cheng & Watanabe, 2004; Choi, 2008). For example, Lamie (2004:127) indicates that: If the tests are perceived by the teachers to have significant effects on their students’ lives, then they can see it as part of their duty to make sure that their pupils have the best possible chance they can to succeed.

Several ELT studies show that one of the factors which led to the mismatch between the curriculum intentions and teachers' actual classroom practices is that teachers often focus on teaching the skills that are tested in the exams and ignore those that are not included in these exams. For example, nowadays in Albania it can be pointed to a mismatch between the focus of the exams and the aims of the curriculum. Although the curriculum aims to extend students' abilities in the four language skills of reading, listening, speaking, and writing, exams still focus on grammar memorization and vocabulary knowledge, and ignore other language skills such as speaking and listening. This mismatch in turn, leads teachers to focus on reading and grammar and to pay little attention to the development of students' communicative skills. The findings of this study also reflect those of Gorsuch (2000), who investigated teachers' practices in relation to an English curriculum innovation in Japanese high schools. Gorsuch reported that while the curriculum innovation calls for all four skills to be treated equally, the exams written by the Ministry of Education in Japan focused on knowledge of grammatical points, vocabulary, and English usage. He added that because speaking and listening activities are not tested in the exam, students resisted teachers' attempts to implement these activities in the class.

Another study which points to a mismatch between the aims of the innovation and the focus of the exam is Agrawal (2004), who investigated the implementation of an English curriculum innovation in secondary schools in India. Findings revealed that although the curriculum emphasized the development of oral skills, teachers tended to ignore these skills because they did not form a part of the exams written by the Ministry of Education.

Fotos' (2005:666) description of many EFL settings appears to coincide with the findings of the above ELT studies: Many EFL situations have a centrally controlled education system with a set curriculum, prescribed textbooks, and highly competitive nationwide examinations determining admission to middle, secondary and tertiary institutions. Such examinations usually have an English component requiring reading comprehension, knowledge of grammar rules, vocabulary. As a result, English language teaching is often aimed at mastery of points tested on such examinations. Therefore, it is not surprising that traditional EFL instruction usually emphasizes the development of knowledge about English, rather than the development of communicative ability.

In many EFL settings, it is often regarded that it is the teachers' responsibility to make sure that their students can pass the exams. If students cannot achieve this goal, teachers will be blamed for not doing their job. This obligation may force teachers to focus on teaching the skills that are tested in the exams and ignore the ones which are not. Students as well are pressured by the exams and require their teachers teach for the exams.

Conclusion

In this paper, there are mentioned a number of the key factors which influence how teachers implement and make sense of ELT curriculum innovations. In addition, this paper showed that the implementation of ELT curriculum innovations is a complex process, not only in Elbasan, Albania, but even in other countries. In this aspect every ELT curriculum innovation needs to be planned very carefully, and take into consideration the various factors discussed here which may influence its successful implementation.

Thus, this paper provides significant insights and messages for curriculum developers, teachers' education programs, and educational policy makers. Firstly, teachers should not be left alone to find ways of implementing the innovation. In this respect, Leithwood et al. (2002:12) stresses the importance of providing teachers with clear description of how to put an innovation into practice. They suggest: The curriculum to be implemented should be described in exceptionally clear and concrete language. This is not meant to diminish the necessity and value of dealing with relevant conceptual and philosophical matters in

curriculum frameworks and related materials. It means however, that the actual practices emerging from such consideration need to be outlined very clearly, and with plenty of illustration if they are to be uniformly understood. Thus, teachers need to understand why they are being asked to behave and act in certain ways. This can be done by explicitly explaining the rationales and principles which underlie the practices which teachers are asked to implement. As McLaughlin & Mitra, (2001:307) contend: Absent knowledge about why they are doing what they are doing, implementation will be superficial only, and teachers will lack the understanding they will need to deepen their current practice or to sustain new practices in the face of changing contexts. Secondly, as mentioned in this paper, teachers' beliefs play a significant role in teachers' implementation of ELT curriculum innovations. However, teachers may not be aware of their beliefs. Therefore an important role of teacher training programs is to raise teachers' awareness of their existing beliefs and the principles behind change. The need to raise teachers' awareness about their beliefs has been echoed by Hedge & Whitney (1996:122) who suggest that: All teachers operate according to set of beliefs about what constitutes good classroom practice, but some may never have made those beliefs explicit to themselves. Thus an essential part of in-service education is to encourage teachers to reflect on their own professional practice, to make explicit to themselves the assumptions that underlie what they do and then to review those assumptions in the light of new perspectives and practices. Thirdly, it is important for the culture of the proposed innovation to be consistent with the social-cultural norms of the context where the innovation is to be introduced. As Markee (1997:84) points out, "the likelihood of an innovation to be adopted is always contingent on its appropriateness in a specific context of implementation".

Fourthly, given the crucial role of exams in determining what happens inside the classroom, one could argue for a change in the examination system to match the aims of the proposed change. Wedell (1992:338) claims that "the success or failure of any proposed changes in teaching content and methods depends on whether the examination system is altered to reflect the proposed changes". It is clear, then, that the mismatch between assessment and the curriculum is another factor that works against the successful implementation of ELT curriculum innovations in many EFL settings. Finally, it should be realized that the implementation of ELT curriculum innovations is a complex process, and that the introduction of ELT curriculum innovations needs to be planned very carefully, and take into consideration the various factors discussed here which may influence its successful implementation.

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