

Challenges In Implementing ELT Curriculum From The Viewpoints Of MA Students: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: the outburst of new trends of technology, teachers' personal interests, students' demands, demographic changes, increasing need for communication and language learning, has made the need for revising ELT curricula, inevitable. As a result, it is beneficial to study stakeholders' viewpoints as a guide for curriculum developers. This study was implemented to investigate students' viewpoints towards challenges in an MA program curriculum. the conventional qualitative content analysis method was used in this study carrying out group interviews for data collection. 10 students in an MA ELT program were selected through purposive sampling. Data was analyzed using MAXQDA10. after the conduction of interviews and data analysis, 104 codes, 20 subcategories, and 4 categories were emerged including administrative challenges (inaccurateness and improperness in implementation, lack of executive programming, lack of coordination among teachers for integrated courses), instructional challenges (lack of access to sufficient information resources to justify the students, lack of time for presenting educational content, lack of access to professional teachers, inequality in education, employing unprofessional teachers, use of irrelevant content in syllabus, disregarding the preliminaries for conducting some courses, neglecting the standards of education in language teaching), subjective challenges (lack of an informative source to share the problem with and ask for practical solutions, being used to previous curriculum, negative perspective towards the new curriculum), and structural challenges (modifications in the structure of the curriculum, lack of facilities, and lack of professional human resources). the challenges proposed by students remarks the need for formation of a knowledgeable team to revise the curriculum, establishment of the preliminaries for some changes, conduction of a pilot program, supplying sufficient and efficient human resources, and the observation of the curriculum by curriculum development experts.

Index Terms: Curriculum, ELT, Faculty, Student, Viewpoint

1. INTRODUCTION

With regard to the expanding nature of the notion of the curriculum, that covers most educational concepts, it gets more difficult day by day for both experts and policy makers to plan for a full comprehensive curriculum that would provide stakeholders with a clear image and direction toward what an educational program should be. For example, as Schubert (2008, 47) mentions, education refers to 'what is worth doing and being, experiencing and knowing, needing, sharing, overcoming, imagining, and contributing'. In this viewpoint, curricular reform can be defined as a constant study of 'perfect education system', primarily due to its length [1]. The final objective of the education is to maintain desirable changes in students who are the main stakeholders. [2]. In order to reach the objectives in curriculum development, along with need assessment of the learners and defining appropriate methods to teach knowledge and skills, an adequate and fulfilling evaluation tool is needed for the maintenance of the quality of the curriculum throughout the program [3]. Curriculum assessment is usually performed to solve problems and improve the existing status. The decisions made on curricula, are concerning the parts which are interrelated and operate collaboratively [4]. As a result, curriculum policy makers evaluate the program based on the outcomes expected from the program and according to its objectives. For instance, students' performance could reveal the problems with curriculum design, implementation, and evaluation [5]. On the other hand, regarding the dynamic nature of language and

language learning, along with the emphasis on necessity of reforms in education, it is an evident need to revise the ELT curricula [6]. ELT curricula is revised annually and issued to the universities and it is implemented throughout the academic year. Taking the dynamic nature of language into account and considering the demographic changes, the rapid progress in different fields of knowledge and science, faculty members' personal interests, and basic changes in the field of education, the revision of the curricula seems inevitable [7]. Hence, in order to assess and revise a curriculum, it is essential to study the perspectives and viewpoints of the groups dealing with it as well as stakeholders including faculty members, ELT students, language teachers, language learners, and other shareholders; which can compromise an adequate reference to guide curriculum developers [8]. Several studies have investigated the necessity to revise different aspects of ELT curricula. In recent decades, several researchers have studied on aspects of curricular reform [9, 10, 11]. Due to the fact that curricular reform is not a simple process, any individual researcher has focused on a particular aspect of curriculum study. For instance, some researchers (Fullan, 1998; Markee, 1994) examined the efficacious implementation of curricular reforms. In this regard, they firstly focus on teachers' role in the application of CLT-based curricular reform in EFL contexts. The results of a study in Malaysia investigating the curriculum considering additive reforms, external reforms, regulatory reforms, and structural reforms, emphasized the interconnectedness of these aspects and the revolution in ethnic forces on the curriculum [9]. In a study by Coskun and Daloglu (2010) in Turkey, attention is drawn to lack of sufficiency in ELT curriculum to fulfill teacher students' language competency [12]. Another study in Turkey by Karakas (2012), focuses on strengths and weaknesses of the program and reveals that there are some failures in curriculum regarding the quality of the syllabi [13]. Mappiasse et al. (2014), investigated the curriculum for English as Foreign

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Language in Indonesia and asserted that the existing program needs reformation and there is a need from the side of the curriculum to encourage learning [14-15]. Another study by Uztozun and Troudi (2015) to check the efficacy of the curriculum from the viewpoints of lecturers comes to the conclusion that it has neglected significant steps in curriculum development such as needs assessment and analysis, teacher training, and evaluation [16]. The above-mentioned ELT curricular studies clearly emphasize the need to examine the factors underlying the gap between the ELT curriculum intensions and what actually happens inside the classrooms. In this paper, we try to shed light on the factors that are considered important in the students' viewpoints.

2 MATERIAL AND METHODS

This qualitative study of conventional content analysis, was performed in Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch, Tehran, through academic years of 2012-2013 on a sample of 10 informed ELT students who were dealing with the last version of ELT curriculum in MA level. The sample students were selected through purposive sampling. The participators were active students in educational and practical activities taking part in student committee in Educational and Research Development Center of the faculty. They took part in sessions held for curricular revisions and teacher-student problem solving sessions held by Educational Development Office (EDO). Four more participants were added to the sample through participants recommendation who were prior members of the student committee and were recently graduated. So the participants were almost informed members of ERDC who have been active in different aspects of research and educational activities and were quite familiar to the problems with existing and previous curricula. They were mostly introduced by EDO and were admitted to the university in the same academic year. The maximum diversity in enrolling male and female students was considered for sampling. The participants were in constant contact with the head of the EDO. The sample included 2 participants from 2nd semester, 2 participants from 3rd semester, 2 participants from 4th semester, and 4 recently graduated members of the student committee. The study sample comprised 6 male students and 4 female students. The mean of the students age was 25.7 years old. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews covering open questions through group meetings. A facilitator was present in group interviews who helped with implementation of interviews and led the discussions and an assistant helped with transcription of necessary notes. The interviews were implemented for two groups of 5 participants separately in EDO for 45 minutes to 60 minutes. Data collection and interviews were continued gathering the viewpoints of participants in separated groups until saturation. The interviews were commenced with an open question (what are the challenges of the new curriculum? Do you consider this curriculum successful?). Then, the probing questions were posed throughout the discussion taking participants' responses into consideration. Prior to the beginning of every interview, all participants were asked for the permission to record their voices in order to transcribe them after implementation of the interviews. The recorded voice was transcribed word by word. Using MAXQDA10, the data was analyzed through conventional content analysis approach. Guba and Lincoln criteria was used to confirm

accuracy, validity and reliability of the study. Hence, in order to check the accuracy and validity of data, peer check and member check were implemented. After transcribing the interviews, data were codified by an expert researcher who is professional in qualitative research. After that, other researchers evaluated the codes and came into an agreement about main categories and subcategories. After codification and evaluation of the process, another session was held with the participants to share the content and introduce categories and subcategories in order to authorize the accuracy of data. All steps of the study is described and clarified in order to promise transferability. In order to assure the findings and authorize the procedure completed throughout this qualitative study, an experienced educational sciences researcher was asked for an external check. The EDO head was also asked for help because of his experience and domination over the content of the curriculum and status of the categorization. Students participated in this study voluntarily and throughout the whole study, it was asserted to keep their names as secret data so they conveyed their viewpoints totally freely.

3 RESULTS

After transcribing the interviews and analyzing the data, 145 primary codes were emerged. Having the similar codes integrated, and eliminating the redundant codes, a total of 104 codes related to the challenges of the new curriculum were emerged. These codes were sorted into 4 main categories of administrative challenges, instructional challenges, subjective challenges, and structural challenges. A total of 20 subcategories also developed (table. 1).

Table 1. Main Categories and Subcategories Emerged from Content Analysis

	Main Category	Subcategory
1	Administrative challenges	Lack of experience in implementation
		Lack of an implementational program
		Lack of coordination between teachers for integrated courses
		Lack of time for presentation of the material
2	Instructional challenges	Lack of sufficient information sources to justify students
		Lack of access to professional teachers
		Inequality in education
		Censorship
		Employing unprofessional teachers
		Material presentation methods
		Utilization of irrelevant content in syllabi
		Disregarding the preliminaries for conducting some courses
	Neglecting the standards of education in language teaching	
3	Subjective challenges	Teachers' inclination toward a special field of study
		lack of access to an informative source to share the problem with and ask for practical solutions
		Being used to previous curriculum designs
	Negative attitude toward new curriculum	
4	Structural challenges	Modifications in the structure of the curriculum
		Lack of facilities
		Lack of professional faculty members

3.1 Administrative Challenges

One of the main categories emerged in data analysis, was administrative challenges. In this category, problems with the latest version of the ELT curriculum issued to the universities were investigated from the viewpoints of participants. The subcategories in this area included lack of experience in implementation, lack of an implementational program, lack of coordination between teachers for integrated courses, and lack of time to present the material. In the subcategory of "lack of experience in implementation", cases such as lack of management in instruction, lack of quality in instruction, having problems with implementation of new curriculum, and inapplicability of the new curriculum in terms of time and content were raised. In subcategory of "lack of an implementational program" cases such as inaccurate way of implementing the curriculum, inappropriate schedule for presenting preliminary courses from the side of the faculty, and lack of arrangement in designing the schedule in a logical manner were introduced. In the subcategory of "lack of coordination between teachers for integrated courses" cases such as change in staff (faculty members and instructors) during the academic year, lack of coordination for integrated courses, need for presentation of some lessons by faculties of different disciplines (ELT, statistics, and computer sciences) simultaneously, inharmonious teaching, time interval between related courses, and lack of a full-fledged and profound integration, were represented. In the subcategory of "lack of time for presenting the material" students pointed to cases such as limited time for presentation of some titles, lack of time to present lessons according to the syllabus, and reduction of teaching hours in the new curriculum.

3.2 Instructional Challenges

Another main category emerged from data analysis was instructional challenges. In this category, the problems before and during the implementation of the curriculum were emerged from the viewpoints of participants. Subcategories proposed here were lack of sufficient information sources to justify students, lack of access to professional teachers, inequality in education, censorship, employing unprofessional teachers, material presentation methods, utilization of irrelevant content in syllabi, disregarding the preliminaries for conducting some courses, and neglecting the standards of education in language teaching. In the subcategory of "lack of sufficient information sources to justify students" cases such as unfamiliarity of the students with practical lessons and lack of knowledge about references utilized in the curriculum were proposed. In the subcategory of "lack of access to professional teachers" participants mentioned cases such as employing teachers with unrelated specialty, being careless to train teachers with new techniques, inadequate teaching, and inappropriate ways of presenting new titles. In the subcategory of "inequality in education", the participants noted that some courses are titled as optional courses but they are compulsory indeed. They discussed that instead of representing few titles as optional courses, only one optional course is presented by the faculty and students are obliged to take the course. Inequality in training international students compared to ordinary students, difference in quality of instruction, priority of education to senior students compared to juniors are among other cases noted in this subcategory. In the subcategory of

"censorship", participants pointed to the titles that are necessary to learn for an ELT student that are eliminated by the curriculum and thus teachers refuse to note these titles in their syllabus. In the subcategory of "employing unprofessional teachers", participants indicated cases such as lack of knowledgeable teachers for specialized cases and questions, making several mistakes by the teachers, correction of teachers' errors is time-consuming, teachers' lack of proficiency in administrating the discussions and responding to students' questions, and representation of basic courses by unprofessional teachers such as research methodology. In the subcategory of "material presentation methods", cases such as the absence of link between the topic and learning, low quality of education (students assumed that the quality of education is not suitable for an MA level student), dispersion of topics, large number of topics and material, and lack of deep learning were discussed. In the subcategory of "utilization of irrelevant content" participants noted cases such as challenges in representing the course syllabus, lack of congruity between references introduced in curriculum and the ones taught in the class, redundant and unrelated material, the overlap of some topics in lessons taught by different teachers, and presence of topics irrelevant to the title of the lesson. In the subcategory of "disregarding the preliminaries for conducting some courses" many cases were raised by the participants such as lack of observation on priority of introductory concepts and posteriority of advanced ones, lack of opportunity to learn theoretical lessons prior to practical ones, changing the title of the course without observing the preliminaries, lack of control on deep understanding of basic concepts before implementation of practical courses, and lack of proficiency among students for conducting a research or other practical works. In the subcategory of "neglecting the standards of education", participants stated cases such as lack of opportunity for discussion and practice, lack of workshops for practical lessons, lack of learning opportunities due to large number of students that is more than standard number of MA level class size, lack of access to hard copy of the introduced books, lack of compatibility between teachers choice and what is declared in the curriculum, huge amount of self-study, and lack of willingness among teachers.

3.3 Subjective Challenges

The third category emerged from data analysis is "subjective challenges". In this category, the problems of the curriculum were discussed by the participants in terms of their own attitudes and perspectives. The subcategories placed in this category are teachers' inclination toward a special field of study, lack of access to an informative source to share the problem with and ask for practical solutions, being used to previous curriculum designs, and negative attitude toward new curriculum. In the subcategory of "teachers' inclination toward a special field of study", participants blamed teachers' predisposition toward their own field of study or specialty which results in students getting confused in finding their own interests and losing confidence because of interest in another area of study. In the subcategory of "lack of access to an informative source to share the problem with and ask for practical solutions", participants declared that they hardly have access to senior principals in the university to pose their objections or opinions toward the curriculum in practice and ask for solutions or assistance. In the subcategory of "being

used to previous curriculum designs” participants discussed cases such as reduction in the efficiency of students in mid-semester examinations, tiredness in the middle of the semester because of the huge size of educational material, their satisfaction with older curricula which observed preliminaries of each course. In the subcategory of “negative attitude toward the new curriculum” participants acknowledged teachers’ lack of proficiency in handling the new curriculum, their lack of confidence in performing independent work, and dissatisfaction with all aspects of the new curriculum.

3.4 Structural Challenges

The Fourth category emerged from data analysis is “structural challenges”. In this category, the problems related to the structure of the curriculum, facilities, and frameworks needed to implement such curriculum were discussed from the viewpoints of the participants. The subcategories of modifications in the structure of the curriculum, lack of facilities, and lack of professional faculty members were raised. In the subcategory of “modifications in the structure of curriculum”, cases such as non-optionality of optional courses, losing a whole academic year in case of failure to pass some optional courses, limited representation of optional courses in a semester, lack of substructures to represent all optional courses, lack of proficiency in integration of related courses and lack of management in this regard. In the subcategory of “lack of facilities”, students blamed the shortage in providing educational equipment for students, and limited facilities provided for the students due to huge number of admitted students, lack of workshops and practical exercises. In the subcategory of “lack of professional faculty members”, participants declared that the faculties are not trained to handle new curriculum, and the number of faculty members is so limited compared to the increase in the number of students admitted annually to the university.

4 DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

This qualitative study was performed to investigate the challenges in implementation of the ELT curriculum at MA level from the viewpoint of students. The results of current study, evaluated different aspects of the challenges experienced by the students in the latest revision of ELT curriculum. These challenges comprised four main categories including administrative, instructional, subjective, and structural challenges. Investigation of curricular challenges considering “lack of experience in implementation, lack of an implementation program, and lack of coordination between teachers for integrated courses”, reveals the necessity to justify students about the details of new curriculum. On the other hand, teachers and faculty members should be trained on barriers to implement the new curriculum and how to deal with them. Faculty members must be instructed about trends of integration and how to be in harmony with other colleagues. It is necessary to hold monthly sessions for faculty members and persuade them to cooperate with other departments (statistics, mathematics, etc.). The new curriculum also implies the consideration of preliminaries for some courses that are neglected in the new design. The theoretical lessons should be represented prior to practical ones not vice versa or at the same time. Enough time should be specified for the topics to be mastered by the students before taking the next courses. There must be a sense of coherence among faculty members

and the head of the department and faculty in order to guarantee the practical coordination needed to perform the new integrated curriculum. Instructional challenges of the curriculum included lack of sufficient information sources to justify students, lack of access to professional teachers, inequality in education, censorship, employing unprofessional teachers, material presentation methods, utilization of irrelevant content in syllabi, disregarding the preliminaries for conducting some courses, and neglecting the standards of education in language teaching. This category was one of the most emphasized and significant categories posed by the participants. Students clearly emphasized the need for having professional faculty members. On the other hand, pilot studies and continuous accreditation is needed to solve the problems with the curricula issued by the ministry of science and research to the universities. Students should be justified about the curriculum and teaching and learning procedures at the beginning of their entrance to the university. Considering the case of inequality in education, the universities should be careful about their short-term and long-term policies. In order to train efficient students, the number of admitted students must be compatible with facilities and human resources available to the universities. In the category of subjective challenges, including teachers’ inclination toward a special field of study, lack of access to an informative source to share the problem with and ask for practical solutions, being used to previous curriculum designs, and negative attitude toward new curriculum; it can be concluded that in order to endorse the accomplishment of a curriculum, some groundworks and underpinnings are needed for both students and faculties. Students language performance needs to be investigated prior to skills of language teaching itself. Specified committees should be set up in order to engage students with curriculum and encourage teachers to be more responsible toward the true implication of the details of the curriculum. The last category of challenges is structural ones. Structural challenges included subcategories of modifications in the structure of the curriculum, lack of facilities, and lack of professional faculty members. It seems that lack of substructures (facilities and human resources as faculty members) to represent all optional courses has resulted in the curricular problem of optional courses to be regarded as obligatory ones. It is necessary for the universities to provide needed prerequisites to represent applied optional courses which are mostly demanded by the students. Several studies have investigated ELT curriculum in terms of innovations, reformations, and changes through years and decades. Fterniati (2006) asserts that educational transformations and reformations are needed to reflect the alterations and amendments in educational theories and praxis in 21st century [17]. These studies have mainly investigated the phenomenon from the viewpoints of experts, teachers, universities, faculties, administrations, and other stakeholders rather than students. Most of these studies are quantitative ones with focus on viewpoints of faculties or experts who are dealing with modifications made to the curricula. Anyway, most of the studies have emphasized the necessity for a systematic revision of the curricula under investigation and the obligation for need assessment and prioritization to ensure the accomplishment of a curriculum. In his study of secondary English teachers’ implementation of curriculum reform in China, Yan (2012), concludes that there is a considerable lack of support from the side of

administrators and moreover, the backwash effect of the predominant examination culture or the older curriculum design. The study recommends the requirement to address teachers' challenges and complications in the curriculum reform procedure to facilitate their implementation of the new curriculum. Most of the challenges discussed in this study by the student participants and other challenges posed by teachers and administrators in other studies, imply the necessity and need for further reform in curriculum and train teachers to cope with them. Students require to be justified about the procedure and the curriculum should be revised. Considering the limited number of studies on viewpoints of the students as one of the most important stakeholders of the curriculum, it is recommended to perform further research to investigate their perspectives toward the curriculum.

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