School Based Curriculum: A Potential Alternative to Innovate the ELT Curriculum in Mexican Higher Education Institutions

Fernando M. Peralta Castro[1], Universidad de Colima, Mexico

Abstract

This paper presents the conventional approach to design and develop an ELT curriculum in Mexican Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). The approach is described and critiqued using a range of empirical studies, which serve to illustrate the evaluation. The school-based curriculum development (SBCD) is suggested as an alternative model to design and develop the ELT curriculum in Mexican HEIs. Various limitations and challenges of SBCD are also presented.

Resumen

Este artículo explica el enfoque tradicional de diseño y desarrollo de un currículo para la enseñanza del inglés como segunda lengua en instituciones de educación superior (IES) en México. Se describe y critica el enfoque utilizando varios estudios empíricos que sirven para ilustrar la evaluación. Se presenta un modelo alterno –el desarrollo curricular basado en la escuela (DCBE)- para diseñar y desarrollar el currículo para la enseñanza del inglés en las IES mexicanas. Se presentan además las limitaciones y los desafíos del DCBE.

Introduction

Nowadays English is the main foreign language taught within the educational system in Mexico. The National English Program in Basic Education (NEPBE or *Programa Nacional de Inglés en Educación Básica,* PNIEB) is a comprehensive framework established to guide the teaching of the language throughout the country (*Secretaría de Educación Pública* - SEP, 2011). Some Mexican HEIs have also incorporated English as a compulsory subject across their curriculum. Even though the Mexican educational system has already made huge efforts in providing students with opportunities to learn English, it is suggested that the results of ELT, in the Mexican public education system in general, and in public state universities in particular, are "indeed generally extremely poor" (Davies, 2009, p. 1). Including English in the wider undergraduate curriculum seems to be an innovative institutional policy. However, the initiative is not derived from school experience and experimentation; it is not in line with the reality of the school. There is literature which suggests that centralized decisions do not always produce the expected results and a probable reason for failure is a hierarchical approach to curriculum (Glasgow, 2014).

Conversely, an alternative approach to curriculum design and development would appear to depend less on policy directives and more on curriculum design and development activities which are located at the school level. This more decentralized strategy to promote curriculum innovation has been labeled school-based curriculum development (SBCD), which can utilize action research (AR) as an effective tool to conduct research activities at school level (Elliott, 1997). Empirical studies have reported the improvement of curriculum through AR (Bat & Fasoli, 2013; Carver & Klein, 2013; Nason & Whitty, 2007).

[1] peralta@ucol.mx

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This paper presents the conventional approach adopted to design and develop an ELT curriculum in Mexican HEIs. The approach is described and critiqued using a range of empirical studies, which serve to illustrate the evaluation. An alternative model to designing and developing the ELT curriculum in Mexican HEIs is suggested. The discussion of the model is based on both theory and a number of case studies conducted in various countries. Various limitations and challenges of SBCD are also presented.

Conventional Approach to ELT Curriculum Design and Development in Mexican HEIs

English is the language of international communication, as well as the language for science, trade and technology (Graddol, 2006). Organizations, such as UNESCO (2009), explicitly recommend the teaching of second languages, giving particular emphasis to the learning of English as the "dominant language of scientific communication" (p. iv).Nowadays English language is the main foreign language taught within the educational system in Mexico as it is part of the curriculum of preschool and elementary education (*Secretaría de Educación Pública*, 2011), as well as lower and upper secondary education (Davies, 2009). Mexican education programs, such as the Education Sector Program (*Programa Sectorial de Educación*), recommend "Encouraging the teaching of at least one second language (mainly English) as part of the study plans, and encouraging its inclusion as a requirement for graduation [in higher education]" (SEP, 2007, p. 45).

Some Mexican HEIs have incorporated English as a compulsory subject across their curriculum in the belief that its addition would allow university students to become fluent English language users, and potential actors in the world of today. Traditionally, HEIs' approach to design and develop the ELT curriculum is similar to the one shown in Table 1 below.

Domains		Functions
International policy makers	SPECIALIST CURRICULUM	**Formulate international policies:** (…) the teaching of second languages, giving particular emphasis to the learning of English as the "dominant language of scientific communication" (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009, p. iv).
National policy makers		**Adopt and adapt policies**: (…) include English as a subject in the curriculum of preschool and elementary education, as well as make the necessary changes to the English subject curriculum in secondary school (SEP, 2011).
Higher Education Institution policy makers		**Adopt national policies:** Teaching a second language, especially English through courses implemented at all educational levels.
University administrators		**Adopt and implement national policy**: English language officially becomes a compulsory subject in all undergraduate programs.
Teachers		**Implement the received curriculum:** The syllabus for each level contained a list of vocabulary, grammar, and functional items organised into units, with levels of proficiency to be taught within a single semester, and based on a course book.
Learners		**Recipients of content**: Students learn the content of the language syllabus, which is determined in advance. Students' needs and interest are considered after content requirements are established. Students are prepared to pass exams applied and graded by course teachers, which vary greatly in validity and reliably.

Table 1. Curriculum decision-making in Mexican HEIs.

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Approaching the design of the ELT curriculum, as shown in Table 1, is similar to approaching the curriculum from a specialist approach defining from the top what is to be taught (Graves, 2008). This approach to curriculum is also government-oriented (Gopinathan, 2006). According to Graves (2008) an example of a specialist approach has been provided by Johnson (1989). Johnson's framework of curriculum development contains four key elements, which can also be seen as stages or domains: curriculum planning, specification of ends and means, program implementation, and classroom implementation. The framework recommends for each domain that the intervention of specialists who are responsible for generating all the necessary data to be used as the input to feed into the next stage of the process. As a consequence, specialists responsible for curriculum planning, and policy makers "determine the overall aims of the curriculum and are influenced in varying degrees by special interest groups who are able to bring pressures to bear" (Johnson, p. 3). At the next stage, syllabus writers use the policy statements to design the syllabus. Following this stage are the material writers, and the teacher trainers; in the last domain (classroom implementation) teachers and learners, through their actions, implement the received curriculum.

Even though Johnson (1989) claims that this approach to curriculum building is "coherent as it emphasizes the interdependence of the [domains] and the need for mutually consistent and complementary decision making throughout the process of development and evaluation" (p. xi), there is literature which suggests that educational policies created by specialists and implemented in the classroom, have failed. De Segovia and Hardison (2009) report the findings of an empirical study in Thailand which investigated the policy behind and implementation of the reform in English teaching following Johnson's decision-making framework for a coherent curriculum. The reform mandated a transition from teacher to learner-centered instruction for all subjects including English. The results of the study reveal that:

> *Policy statements tend to be utopian; therefore, it is not too surprising that the shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach did not evolve smoothly. It required an understanding of the language learning process in order to establish attainable goals and compatible methodology. This must be done in view of constraints on achievement including the lack of contact with the target language outside the classroom. Program implementation involved additional obstacles, including the lack of sufficient teacher training, resources, mentoring support, and the cost of further education for in-service teachers. (…) The learners' lack of interest in learning English and perception of its lack of values were not conducive to building coherent curriculum based on a learners-centered philosophy. (de Segovia & Hardison, 2009, p. 161)*

One of the main issues of Johnson's approach is that there are discrepancies between what the policy states, the specialists, and the reality of the teaching context.

A case similar to that of de Segovia and Hardison is the one presented by O' Sullivan (2002) who provides details of the results of a three-year research study in Namibia. O'Sullivan investigates the implications of the reform policies for English language teaching developed by the Ministry of Education of that country. The policy states that subjects in upper elementary should be taught in English. This author reports that the reforms were significantly beyond the capacity of the teachers participating in the project. Evidence provided a number of both subjective and objective factors rooted in the classroom, which inhibited the effective implementation of the reforms. Similarly, Nunan

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(2003) presents the results of an investigation into the place of English in the curriculum in several countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The study indicates that the emergence of English as a global language has considerable impact on policies and practices in all countries surveyed. However, it also reveals significant problems. For instance, teachers were inadequately trained in language teaching methodology, teachers' own language skills were poor, classroom realities did not meet curricular rhetoric, and students did not have sufficient exposure to English in instructional contexts. Further research was needed on the English requirements of workers in workplaces and occupations. The study demonstrates that simple ELT policies embedded into the curriculum of a country, or an educational institution does not necessarily guarantee successful language learning and teaching.

One of the problems with the specialist approach to language curriculum is that there is a gap between the domains, policy makers, syllabus designers, teachers, and learners as they perform different curricular functions, and produce different curricular products (Graves, 2008). This can be frequently observed when ministries of education incorporate the teaching of English into the national curriculum, as Yulia (2014) illustrates in the evaluation of the English language teaching in junior high school in the Indonesian province of Yogyakarta. Here, an English communicative curriculum was mandated to be taught in all schools in Indonesia. The results show a "(…) disjuncture between the district level and the individual schools resulted in role confusion among district staff and individual schools" (Yulia, 2014, p. xiii). Similar implementations and issues are shown in other studies conducted in different countries (Ahmad & Khan, 2011; Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Chen et al., 2014; Ebo, 1980; Glasgow, 2014; Goh, 1999; Gunal & Li, 2010; Holmes & Celani, 2006; Orafi & Borg, 2009; Sano et al., 1984; Stewart, 2009; Underwood, 2012; Waters & Vilches, 2008; Zappa-Hollman, 2007).

An Alternative Approach to Designing and Developing the ELT Curriculum in Mexican HEIs

According to Stenhouse (1975), the separation between the people, the process and the products generates a gap between the teaching language policy issued and the attempt to operationalize it. This was clearly demonstrated in the empirical studies presented earlier. It is therefore appropriate to design and develop an ELT model, which depends more on activities located at the school level: a model which shares the decision making with the teaching context represented by language teachers and learners and creates a curriculum more aligned to the needs of the school. This model enhances language teachers' professional development to be able to devise for themselves a curriculum based on sound theories and experiences in the ELT field. It relies on local knowledge to identify problems, find solutions, and try them out to see what works and what does not in the specific context and to generate knowledge grounded in practice. To reach such an ambitious goal, it is necessary to employ a strategy within the field of curriculum which advocates curriculum decision-making determined by individual schools and teachers. This strategy is labeled school based curriculum development (Eggleston, 1980; Marsh, 2009; Marsh et al., 1990; Skilbeck, 1984).

SBCD emerged as a strategy within the field of curriculum design which advocated curriculum decision-making determined by individual schools and teachers departing from the centrally based view (Marsh, 2009). According to Skilbeck (1984), SBCD refers to "the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of a program of students' learning by the

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educational institution of which those students are members" (p. 2). Accordingly, SBCD is situated on the opposite side to the specialist approach, and advocates the participation of teachers in the design and development of curriculum materials within a particular school (Marsh et al., 1990).

SBCD Enhancing ELT Teachers' Level of Professionalism and Improving Curriculum through AR

The trend towards SBCD is primarily based on the assumption that teachers' involvement in curriculum decision-making would enhance their level of professionalism and result in more relevant teacher autonomy, professionalization, and the pursuit of curriculum better designed to meet the diverse needs of learners and communities (Chun, 1999; Hardman & A-Rahman, 2014; Hardman et al., 2015; Law et al., 2010; Power et al., 2012). Gopinathan (2006) maintains that advocates of SBCD assert that having the responsibility to develop and implement curriculum is crucial to the professional identity of teachers. SBCD is, thus principally, a way to develop teachers' professional competence and empower them (Gao & Chow, 2012; Sales et al., 2011; Xu, 2009; Zohrabi, 2014).

The concept of SBCD is directly related to action research. Action research emerged as a tool for school-based curriculum in the 1960s which attempted to innovate a curriculum to meet the needs of students (Elliott, 1997). AR's main goal is to understand and to improve practice through an ongoing cyclical process. Evidence of curriculum improvement through AR has been provided by a number of researchers (Bat & Fasoli, 2013; Carver & Klein, 2013; Nason & Whitty, 2007). Nason and Whitty (2007) included AR as an essential component of a project to develop a childcare curriculum for children from birth to age five in the Province of New Brunswick in Canada. AR was included because the authors believed it could help them improve their own practices as project directors, curriculum developers and teacher educators. Carver and Klein (2013) conducted an AR project to examine the content and outcomes of their own university-based principal preparation program. The authors found that AR was a functional strategy for program renewal and instructional development, as the systematic collection of data and the application of findings "supports transformed practice innovation and continued inquiry" (p. 174). Bat and Fasoli (2013) provide an example of how AR can enlighten an approach to education and training. The project was undertaken through a veteran program at the Bachelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education in Northern Territory of Australia. An AR framework (plan, act, observe, reflect) was applied to the curriculum, from the design of the whole curriculum, to the content, activities and tasks "embedded within the curriculum that learners engage with as they progress through a series or workbooks" (Bat & Fasoli, 2013, p. 60).

To sum up, SBCD has had positive effects on teachers' understanding, practice and morale, with consequent benefits for learners. SBCD has allowed participants to play key roles in the development of research projects. It has also allowed educational institutions to improve in different areas, including curriculum. It has also contributed to generate comprehensive knowledge about the current situation, which has provided input into the institution's decision-making process.

Limitations of SBCD

SBCD also has challenges and limitations. For example, it can also become a centralized policy of the ministry of education of a country or of an education system (Al-Daami &

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Stanley, 1998; Beattie & Thiessen, 1997; Xu & Wong, 2011), especially in countries where the education system is highly centralized. Such is the case of Hong Kong, where according to Chun (1999), SBCD was introduced into the education system in 1988. Chun reports that the aims of the project were to meet the needs of pupils and schools, as well as to improve the overall strategy of curriculum development. But in reality, the scheme resulted in the education department's maintaining control of the process and products of the scheme. Besides the keeping of the old centralized system, other points also emerged. For example, there was more focus on teachers' interests and little focus on pupils' needs, teachers worked in isolation, and the decision-making style reflected the administrative expectations of the education department, instead of the operational models advocated in SBCD literature. The project was incorporated into the organizational cultures prevailing in the schools, which did not necessarily create benefits associated with SBCD.

As illustrated earlier, SBCD promotes teachers' professional development, but people who have gone through SBCD have also encountered numerous problems. Empirical studies have shown that teachers experience great pressure when adopting the role of curriculum developers, and they are not always adequately trained to undertake curriculum design tasks (Coklin et al., 1995; Hannay, 1990; Key, 2000). Teachers have also experienced:

> *lack of time to plan to reflect to develop curricula, lack of expertise knowledge, understanding skills, lack of finance for materials for teacher relief days, externally imposed restrictions, by employers, parents, a threatening school climate, numerous restrictions, lack of effective leadership (Marsh, 1992, p. 131).*

Additionally, when the curriculum development process is limited to SBCD, without any external intervention, issues similar to those of Marsh (1992) could appear. In addition to that, in some cases teachers may not have the practical experience to design and develop a curriculum, which could prove counterproductive (Gopinathan, 2006).

Summary and Conclusions

English has become the main foreign language taught within the educational system in Mexico, including in many HEIs. Although the Mexican educational system has already made huge efforts in providing students with opportunities to learn English, there is still plenty of room for improvement. Teachers' professional development is perhaps one of the largest deficits of the system (Mora et al., 2013). Another possible area of improvement is curriculum decision-making. Traditionally, the Mexican educational system has adopted a centrally-based approach. However, a number of previous studies suggest that educational policies created by specialists to be implemented in the classroom have failed. There is a gap among relevant stakeholders, as they perform different curricular functions, and produce different curricular products (Graves, 2008). In the process of top-down decision making, key elements of education are often neglected, which in many occasions represent the diverse needs of students and teachers, and could hinder the success of any curriculum improvement initiative.

This paper proposes the implementation of SBCD as an alternative approach to design and develop ELT curriculum. SBCD would appear to depend less on top-down decision making and more on activities carried out at a school level. The trend towards SBCD is primarily based on the assumption that teachers' involvement in curriculum decision-making would enhance their level of professionalism and result in more relevant teacher autonomy, professionalization and the pursuit of curriculum better designed to meet the diverse

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needs of pupils and communities (Chun, 1999; Law et al., 2010). Although this paper has suggested that SBCD has helped to improve curriculums at school level, it also faces challenges and limitations. Perhaps the biggest issue is that it can also become a centralized policy. Because there is evidence that SBCD has been successfully implemented in certain contexts and conditions, policy makers could think that SBCD can be a solution for curriculum improvement and insert it into national or local curriculums, but it is not possible for such ideas to have general use due to local restraints. Therefore, SBCD implementation should also be a matter addressed at school level, which implies conducting inquiry to test if SBCD is an effective alternative to innovate the ELT curriculum in Mexican HEIs.

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