Research paper

Teacher-driven curriculum development at the classroom level: Implications for curriculum, pedagogy and teacher training

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Preservice teacher training affects classroom-level curriculum developments (CLCD).
- Teacher experience, content style, cognitive skills and soft skills are significant motives behind CLCD.
- Curriculum policy in terms of content, pedagogy and assessment affects CLCD.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper examined the motives behind EFL/ESL classroom-level curriculum development. The study was grounded in teacher curriculum development (Craig, 2006), curriculum implementation (Snyder, Bolin & Zumwalt, 1992) and teacher curriculum-making (Doyle, 1992). Individual teacher interpretations of the same (formal) curriculum drive teachers to transform a single curriculum into multiple (taught) curricula through teacher and student experiences in different contexts. Teacher interpretations also inspire teachers to adopt particular learning outcomes, content, teaching strategies, and assessment targets and methods rather than others. Since teacher curriculum interpretations drive teachers to make different decisions about the same curriculum, teachers either develop or transmit curriculum at the classroom level (Jackson, 1992). Being so, possible factors behind classroom-level curriculum developments were examined to illuminate curriculum design, implementation and development, alongside teaching, learning and teacher training. Moreover, this research design made use of the qualitative paradigm through qualitative case-studies, qualitative interviews, participant observations and the constant comparative method to understand individual constructions of the taught curriculum. Major findings indicate preservice teacher training, teaching experience, and teacher content and teaching styles were significant motives behind classroom-level curriculum developments. Other factors include curriculum policy in terms of curriculum content, pedagogical and assessment orientations, teacher curriculum development opportunities and teacher soft skills. The study provides recommendations for curriculum and instruction, teacher education and future research.

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This paper set out to examine the motives that drive EFL/ESL teachers to either make, develop or just deliver curriculum content (teacher curriculum approaches). Recent shifts in curriculum research turn to teacher curriculum approaches (curriculum-transmission, curriculum-development and curriculum-making) for their significant impact on teachers, student learning outcomes (SLOs) and curriculum (e.g., Craig, 2006; Eisner, 2002; Randolph, Duffy, & Mattingly, 2007; Remillard, 1999; Schultz &

Oyler, 2006; Shawer, 2010a). On the one hand, prior research reports numerous positive effects of classroom-level curriculum development (through adopting either the teacher curriculum-making or curriculum-development approach) on SLOs (Eisner, 1990; Erickson & Shultz, 1992; King, 2002; Shawer, Gilmore, & Banks-Joseph, 2008; Wells, 1999), teacher professional development, and curriculum improvement (Craig, 2006; Eisner, 2002; Munby, 1990; Parker, 1997; Shawer, 2010b). SLOs are statements which describe what students are expected to know or be able to do by the end of, for example, a lesson or course. On the other hand, prior research reports negative consequences of teacher curriculum-transmission for teachers, students and curriculum

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(e.g., Erickson & Shultz, 1992; Randolph et al., 2007; Shawer, Gilmore, & Banks-Joseph, 2009).

Since teacher curriculum approaches impact differently on teachers, learners and curriculum (Shawer, 2010a; Snyder, Bolin & Zumwalt, 1992), this study aimed to examine why some teachers opt for curriculum development, while others do not. This study was not, however, concerned with how teachers approach curriculum as curriculum-transmitters, curriculum-developers or curriculum-makers. For this line of research, the reader may consult, for example, Shawer (2010a) and Ben-Peretz, Mendelson, and Kron (2003). Neither was it concerned with the impact of teacher curriculum approaches on SLOs (e.g., Remillard, 1999; Schultz & Oyler, 2006; Shawer et al., 2008). Nor was this study concerned with teacher curriculum approaches impact on teacher professional development or curriculum (e.g., Craig, 2006; Eisner, 2002; Shawer, 2010b). Moreover, this study did not examine learner-driven motives behind classroom-level curriculum development because others studied it (e.g., Shawer et al., 2009).

In the research context, both exam results and course assessment surveys revealed big differences in SLOs and motivation despite studying at the same language level (for example, intermediate). Exam results indicated some classrooms obtain high scores in both productive (speaking and writing) and receptive (listening and reading) language skills. Likewise, course assessment surveys show similar disparity between these groups in their motivation on the course assessment scale. While some classrooms reported medium and high motivation, counterparts reported low motivation. Since all students followed the same curriculum (in the form of same coursebook, workbook, teacher guide, pedagogical guidelines and assessment targets and procedures), no apparent reason justified the disparity. A similar intriguing fact concerned the teachers themselves as all shared similar characteristics, including experience, qualifications and professional development training. One apparent difference was in the high performance group where teachers made changes and adaptations in their curriculum. Because they adapted the formal/received curriculum in line with student needs, the received and taught curricula were to a large extent different.

Since we had some evidence the problem rested with the teacher curriculum approach, a study was needed to uncover why some teachers develop curriculum at the classroom level, while counterparts just transmit curriculum content regardless of learner needs and styles. A study like the present one may have important implications for learning, teaching and curriculum improvement. Although some teachers may seem to have the required qualifications and training, they fail to achieve effective teaching in practice. The present study may thus account for such a case of discrepancy between theory and practice by highlighting some knowledge, skills and attitudes to be incorporated into teacher education programs. The present study may also suggest new procedures to overcome the constraints of centralized curricula and coursebook use. Addressing such curriculum and teacher development issues can hopefully improve SLOs and motivation.

Examining teacher-related motives may therefore help identify possible factors which encourage and hinder teacher curriculum developments. Once identified, preservice and inservice teacher training programs may address them in their courses. For example, training programs may train teachers to use the positive factors to undertake classroom-level curriculum developments, while finding ways to help teachers overcome factors deterring teacher curriculum developments. Having helped teachers develop their curriculum at the classroom level, a significant strategy has been activated for development of teachers, curriculum and SLOs.

1. Teacher curriculum approaches

When teachers implement curriculum, they usually follow a *curriculum fidelity*, *curriculum adaptation* or *curriculum enactment* approach (Ben-Peretz, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Eisner, 1990; Erickson & Shultz, 1992; Jackson, 1992; Munby, 1990; Snyder et al., 1992). The three approaches differ in their treatment of *curriculum conceptualization*, *curriculum knowledge*, *curriculum change*, and the *teachers' role*. In a *fidelity approach*, curriculum conceptualization is just "a course of study, a course-book series, a guide, a set of teacher plans" alongside pre-determined and standardized evaluation instruments and guidelines (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 447). Since an external curriculum team always defines *curriculum* for teachers, *curriculum change* starts from the center to the periphery in rational, linear and systematic procedures. In a context similar to this, the *teachers' role* is that of a consumer who just delivers the curriculum message as intact as possible according to specific curriculum implementation instructions (Jackson, 1992; Snyder et al., 1992).

The *mutual-adaptation approach* involves a process "whereby adjustments in a curriculum are made by curriculum developers and those who use it in the school or classroom context" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 410). The external team discusses with the teachers the necessary adjustments needed to make curriculum relevant to their settings. Despite enfranchising teachers to make adaptations in the received curriculum under curriculum experts' supervision, *curriculum knowledge* did not differ significantly from the fidelity approach. External developers still define and provide curriculum knowledge. In contrast, improvements have been made to curriculum change and teachers' role. *Curriculum change* no longer follows linear procedures, whereas the *teachers' role* has become active (Ben-Peretz, 1990; Snyder et al., 1992).

The *enactment approach*, on the other hand, involves major differences in curriculum conceptualization, since curriculum is "jointly created and jointly and individually experienced by students and teacher" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 428). This suggests classroom-level curriculum development may not rely on an external curriculum. Moreover, curriculum *knowledge* changed from an externally defined body into an ongoing process of constructions of experiences that result from teacher and student interactions (Erickson & Shultz, 1992; Munby, 1990; Snyder et al., 1992). As a result, external curriculum knowledge is "viewed as a resource for teachers who create curriculum as they engage in the ongoing process of teaching and learning in the classroom" (p. 429). *Curriculum change* also changed from implementing or even adapting curriculum into "a process of growth for teachers and students, a change in thinking and practice" (p. 429). Such changes in curriculum knowledge and curriculum change engendered further changes in the *teachers' role* to range from using, adapting and supplementing external curriculum materials to developing curriculum in consultation with learners. "While teachers may use externally designed curriculum and benefit from the stimulation of an 'outside', it is they and their students who create the enacted curriculum and give meaning to it." This means "teachers are creators rather than primarily receivers of curriculum knowledge" (p. 429).

2. Classroom-level curriculum development

Classroom-level curriculum development involves curriculum-development and curriculum-making processes that teachers make in the official curriculum at the classroom level. An official/received curriculum includes intended learning outcomes, topics, material (usually coursebooks), pedagogical instructions (teacher's guides accompanying coursebooks), and guidelines about