Intentions and realities in implementing communicative curriculum reform

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Abstract

This paper examines three teachers' implementation of a new communicative English language curriculum in Libyan secondary schools. The teachers were observed for two weeks teaching a unit of material from this curriculum and subsequently interviewed to examine the rationales for their classroom practices. The analysis highlighted considerable differences between the intentions of the curriculum and the instruction observed. In articulating the bases of their teaching, the teachers provided evidence of the ways in which their prior beliefs about language teaching and learning interacted with elements of their educational context to filter the planned curriculum. The manner in which they delivered the curriculum thus reflected their views of what was feasible in the light of their understandings of themselves as teachers, of their students, and of the demands of the system more generally, particularly in relation to assessment. Overall, this study provides evidence of the manner in which the uptake of an educational innovation can be limited when it is not congruent with and does not take into consideration the cognitive and contextual realities of teachers' work. This work thus has clear implications for the manner in which the link between intended reforms and teachers' actual practices can be strengthened.
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1. Introduction

Several studies in education have highlighted how the manner in which curricula are implemented does not always reflect what curriculum designers have in mind (e.g. O'Sullivan, 2004; Smith and Southerland, 2007). This paper examines the relationship between the intended curriculum and what happens in the classroom with reference to English language teaching (ELT) in Libya. In this context, a new curriculum based on communicative principles was introduced in 2000. It represented a significant shift, compared to the previous curriculum, in teaching methodology and materials and in the assumptions about language, teaching and learning these were based on. The curriculum thus demanded of teachers major adjustments to their thinking and practices. However, the processes involved in introducing the curriculum, as we discuss below, seemed limited in

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their ability to support the scale of the change implied by the curriculum. Additionally, no evaluations of this new curriculum had been conducted and thus little concrete evidence was available about the impact this innovation was having in the classroom. This paper is a response to these concerns.

2. Uptake of curriculum innovation

Curriculum innovation in education is characterized by an extensive literature which examines this phenomenon from multiple perspectives (see, for example, Fullan, 2001; Markee, 1997). Here we are particularly interested in the relationship between the intended curriculum and how it is enacted and in understanding the factors which may cause disparity between the two. This is an issue which has been studied in education generally and specifically in ELT (e.g. Chapman, 1997; Elmore, 1996; Gorsuch, 2000; Karavas-Doukas, 1998; Li, 2001; Nunan, 2003; Smith and Southerland, 2007; Spillane and Zeuli, 1999; Wang, 2002; Waters and Vilches, 2008). Outside ELT, for example, Smith and Southerland (2007) found that although two science teachers were familiar with the ideas promoted by a reform, their beliefs about teaching and learning science were at odds with these ideas and the latter had minimal impact on their teaching. Similar findings have been reported in ELT, often in relation to the introduction of communicative curricula. In Japan, for example, Gorsuch (2000) found that while policy emphasized the development of students' communicative ability and attention to all four macro 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" (p. 137). In Taiwan, Wang (2002) also identified a strong tension between new ELT textbooks featuring communicative language teaching activities and established grammar-translation teaching practices.

The literature on educational innovation has identified mismatches between curricular principles and teachers' beliefs as a major obstacle to the implementation of change. For example, Levitt (2001, p. 1) argues that "if teachers' beliefs are incompatible with the philosophy of science education reform, a gap develops between the intended principles of reform and the implemented principle of reform, potentially inhibiting essential change". Similarly in ELT, it is clear that curriculum innovations which conflict with teachers' beliefs are less likely to be adopted as planned in the classroom. Thus, as Breen et al. (2001, p. 472) argue, "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".

There is also evidence that how teachers interpret, filter, modify, and implement curricula will be influenced by contextual factors in and around their workplaces (e.g. Borg, 2006; Coleman, 1996; Holliday, 1994; Owston, 2007; Tudor, 2001). Factors such as students' expectations, resources, and assessment can be crucial in determining how teachers implement innovations. For example, Johnson et al. (2000), reporting on Egyptian science teachers' practices after attending a 12 week in-service program in England, indicated that most of the teachers were unable to implement the new ideas learnt on the course because of adverse local factors such as large classes, lack of resources, students' resistance, and even resistance from the school management.

The literature discussed here indicates that new curricula are often not implemented as planned because of unacknowledged mismatches between their principles and teachers' beliefs and also because of contextual factors which are not supportive of the changes the innovation is aiming to promote. These insights informed the goals and conduct of this study, but before discussing these issues in more detail it is necessary first to outline the context in which this work was carried out.

3. ELT in Libya

In the 1980s the focus of English language teaching in Libya was on grammar and reading comprehension. Lessons were characterized by oral drills (with a focus on correct grammar and pronunciation), memorization of vocabulary, and reading aloud. Arabic was widely used in English lessons by teachers and students. During the late 1980s, as a result of political tensions between Libya and the West, the teaching of English was banned from schools and universities across the country. Consequently, the status of teaching English in Libya deteriorated considerably for a almost a decade. In the mid-1990s, the negative consequences of this situation were becoming evident (e.g. university graduates had very limited grasp of English) and a key response by the Lib-

yan government to this situation was the introduction, in 2000, of a new curriculum for English language teaching at secondary level.

3.1. The new English curriculum

The new English curriculum is embodied in a series of course books called *English for Libya*. Course books at different levels are structured in a similar way; each unit has sections dedicated to reading, vocabulary and grammar, functional use of language, listening, speaking and writing. The broader scope of this curriculum was an obvious departure from its predecessor, where functional language use, listening and speaking had not been addressed. It is, though, in its methodology that the new curriculum departed most radically from its predecessor. The new curriculum is organized around activities based on communicative principles (for a discussion of these, see, for example, Richards and Rodgers, 2001): reading work involves pre-reading, while reading and post reading activities; a discovery approach to grammar is recommended, while the course book includes activities which promote meaningful and purposeful language use, receptive and productive, in oral and written contexts. The curriculum recommends that English be used as much as possible by the teacher and students in the classroom, as "the aim is for the students to communicate effectively and fluently with each other and to make talking in English a regular activity" (Macfarlane, 2000, p. 3). Teachers are also advised to adopt a more tolerant attitude to errors. Another key characteristic of the new curriculum is that many of the activities are interactive, asking students to work in pairs; the thinking behind this is that "it is a good opportunity for the students to speak the target language" (Macfarlane, 2000, p. 5).

Various strategies for implementing educational change are discussed in the literature (e.g. Fullan, 2001); that adopted in relation to the new English curriculum in Libya can be described as power-coercive; that is, teachers were not involved in the design of the innovation and their role was to implement the decisions about the curriculum made by the educational policy makers. The training provided to support teachers in implementing the new curriculum was also limited; they attended seminars lasting a week during which they were shown the new textbooks and given information about the curriculum. These sessions were led by ELT inspectors who themselves had been trained by the publishers of the course books.

4. Research methodology

In light of both the ELT context and the literature discussed above, this study examined the following questions:

1. What classroom practices characterize the work of Libyan secondary school English language teachers?
2. To what extent are teachers' practices congruent with those recommended in the curriculum?
3. Where curriculum principles and teachers' practices are not congruent what cognitive and contextual factors account for these differences?

Given our concern with understanding in detail what teachers did and why, these questions were addressed interpretively (see Ernest, 1994 for an extended discussion of the interpretive research paradigm) through the qualitative analysis of classroom observations and interviews.

4.1. Participants

The findings reported below are based on observations and interviews with three secondary school teachers of English working in different state schools in a city in Eastern Libya. These teachers were selected purposefully (Patton, 2002) with the key criterion for selection being that they had been teaching the new English curriculum for at least five years. The decision to opt for this minimum level of experience was based on the assumption that teachers who had been working with the curriculum for a number of years would have established ways of working with this curriculum which would provide useful indicators of the extent to which it was being implemented as planned. All three teachers taught Fourth Secondary classes. The learners in these classes were on average 15–19 years of age and had been studying English for 4–6 years. Table 1 summarizes the background to the teachers who participated in this study.

Table 1
Teachers' background.

Pseudonym	Gender	Years teaching English	Years teaching the curriculum	Qualifications
Eman	Female	7	6	BA
Fathi	Male	13	6	BA
Munir	Male	25	6	BA

4.2. Data collection and analysis

Since the goal of interpretive research is to "understand the inner perspectives and meanings of actions and events of those being studied" (Anderson and Burns, 1989, p. 67) and words not numbers are considered the primary source of data (Dörnyei, 2007), data were collected through open classroom observations (i.e. which aim to describe events fully) and follow up semi-structured interviews (i.e. focused on some predefined topics but with flexibility to cover others which emerge – see Drever, 2003). Although observations are necessary for the analysis of what teachers do, they have not been a common feature of research on curriculum innovation in ELT (questionnaires and interviews have been much more widely used).

The teachers initially participated in an introductory interview (lasting about 35 min and audio-recorded) which elicited information about their educational background, teaching experience, and general views about the English curriculum. This was followed by a two week phase of classroom observation during which each teacher was observed teaching one unit (8–9 lessons) from the same course book (*English for Libya*, Fourth Secondary, Unit 2). To maximize the completeness and accuracy of the data collected (and to enhance what Maxwell, 1996 refers to as descriptive validity) digital audio-recordings of all lessons were made in addition to written field notes.

In analyzing the observations, we first focused on describing what teachers did at each stage of the unit. These descriptions were then compared to the approach recommended by the curriculum (the course book and the teacher's book were the sources of these recommendations). The analysis of the observational data generated a number of questions, issues, and themes which provided the framework for two follow up semi-structured interviews of an hour each with each teacher. The interviews were necessary because, as Breen et al. (2001, p. 498) explain, "we cannot infer the intentions of teacher action or the reasons why teachers work in the ways they do in particular lessons with particular students only from observed practices". During the interviews, teachers were shown extracts from their lessons and asked to comment on what they were doing and the rationale for their practices. The interviews were conducted in Arabic to enable the teachers to express their ideas more fluently and confidently. The interviews were also audio-recorded and then transcribed in full and translated into English.

The interview data were analyzed with reference to this study's research questions. During this analysis we looked for comments related to the beliefs teachers held and to contextual factors which influenced the way teachers interpreted and implemented the curriculum. Interview data were initially coded under these two broad headings then gradually refined into sub-categories referring, for example, to different types of beliefs the teachers articulated and different kinds of contextual factors they felt influenced their teaching.

5. Findings

As noted earlier, two fundamental principles underlying the new ELT curriculum in Libya are that pair work should be promoted and that English should be used as much as possible in the classroom. The prevalence of pair work and the use of English are therefore key indicators of the extent to which the curriculum is being implemented as intended. Thus below we will first examine the extent to which these features of the curriculum were evident in teachers' classroom practices, then focus on the factors influencing those practices.

5.1. Classroom observations

5.1.1. Use of pair work

Unit 2 of the course book used by the teachers in this study (on the topic of 'weather and climate') includes an activity which presents students with pictures of groups of people who come from different climates and whose clothing reflects these climates. The instructions in the course book ask students, in pairs, to discuss

where these people come from, what they think the climate is in these people's countries, and what these people are wearing. The teacher's book advises the teacher to move around the class, monitoring students' answers and joining in and supporting their discussions. The extract below illustrates how Munir handled this activity (T is the teacher, S and SS individual or groups of students, respectively).

Episode 1

T: [To the class] Now, where does Wendy live?
T: [In Arabic] The answer is in the picture, just read it.
T: I ask you where does Wendy, Wendy, Wendy only. Where does Wendy live?
S: Wendy live in......
T: Wendy lives, Wendy lives in Alaska, in Alaska. Now we can say Wendy's hometown is Alaska or Fairbanks.
T: This is number one. Number two, who can read [question] number two?
The students are raising their hands and calling out.
SS: Yes teacher. Yes teacher.
The teacher selects one of the students.
The student stands up and starts reading from the textbook.
S: What do you think the climate is like in these places?
T: In these places. What do you think the climate is like in these places?
T: From this picture how is the climate like? How is the climate in Oman, and how is the climate in Alaska?
T: In Oman what is the weather like in Oman? Very cold, in Oman the weather is very hot. In Fairbanks, what is the weather? What is the climate like?
SS: Inaudible. (Munir, Lesson 1)

Munir clearly transformed this activity from one which was intended as pair work to a teacher-fronted question-and-answer session. Students were not asked to work together; rather, Munir asked questions (or asked the students to read these out) and selected individual students to reply (although generally students seemed unable to do so). This pattern was observed not only in Munir's work but throughout that of the other two teachers. Episode 2 is further evidence of this from the work of Eman. The activity here was guided story telling in which students were first meant to work in pairs to put jumbled pictures in order, then to work in pairs to write some notes about these pictures, and finally to take turns (in their pairs) to tell the story shown by the pictures.

Episode 2

T: [In Arabic] What can you describe in the first picture?
T: [In Arabic] How can we describe it?
SS: [Calling out and raising their hands]. Yes teacher yes teacher.
T: Yes you. [selecting one of the students]
S: [The student stands up and starts to talk about the picture]. They are was very happy.
T: [Interrupting the student] They are was, no, no this is wrong.
T: [In Arabic] We cannot say this in English.
T: [Talking to the student who is still standing] What is wrong here? Can you tell what is wrong here? (Eman, Lesson 4)

Once again, there was no pair work during this activity and the process described here was followed for each of the pictures provided in the course book: the teacher discussed the picture with the whole class, asked individual students to describe it, and provided or tried to elicit corrective feedback when they made grammatical errors. Once all the pictures had been dealt with in this way, the teacher moved on to the next activity (i.e. there was no story telling and no writing).

In total, Unit 2 of the course book used by the teachers here contained 15 activities that were intended as pair work. None of them were taught as suggested by the curriculum; they were either omitted completely or

else, as we have seen here, led by the teacher in the form of whole class question-and-answer sessions. The interactive intentions of the pair work activities in the curriculum were thus generally unfulfilled.

5.1.2. Use of English

The second key curricular principle we analyze here is maximizing the communicative use of English in the classroom. The activities in the course book provided constant opportunities for English to be spoken and here we analyze classroom evidence of the extent to which these opportunities were exploited. Episode 3 below, from the work of Fathi, introduces this theme:

Episode 3

T: [Reading a newspaper headline from the textbook] Flash floods kill seven.
T: Flash flood. What is flash flood?
Teacher says 'flash flood' in Arabic.
T: Kill seven.
Teacher translates 'kill seven' into Arabic.
The students listen to the teacher and write the teacher's translations in their textbooks.
The teacher continues reading from the textbook.
T: Man injured by lightning.
Teacher translates 'Man injured by lightning ' into Arabic. (Fathi, Lesson 5)

As designed, this activity required students to discuss newspaper headlines which describe the weather in different parts of the world. The discussion was meant to focus on what events were described in the headlines, why they occurred, where in the world, and what students know about the climate in those places. There was, however, no discussion of this kind. Rather, the teacher typically read out each headline and translated it into Arabic. Students wrote down the Arabic translations in their course book (thus writing rather than speaking, as intended in the activity). The lack of interaction in English and the regular use of translation are clearly at odds with the curricular principle of maximizing the use of English in the classroom. The pattern of interaction illustrated in Episode 3 was typical of activities which required the discussion and analysis of reading texts in the work of all three teachers in this study. Here is an example from the work of Munir:

Episode 4

T: What is the meaning of weather?
A student says the Arabic equivalent of 'weather'.
T: Can you give me in English what is the meaning? What is the meaning of weather? What is the weather like now? What is the weather like now?
In Arabic, a student says the equivalent of cloudy.
T: What is the weather like? What is the weather like?
In Arabic, students say the equivalent of cloudy.
T: English, English, English. in English please.
In Arabic, the teacher asks what cloudy is in English.
In Arabic, the students say the equivalent of cloudy. (Munir, Lesson, 2)

There was some attempt here by the teacher to encourage the students to speak English, but the only English spoken was by the teacher (and even he eventually asked the question in Arabic). Eman's lessons were similarly characterized by the teacher's use of Arabic and minimal contributions in English by the students.

Overall, then, there was limited evidence in the work of these teachers that the use of English was being maximized in the classroom as intended by the curriculum. Given the lack of pair work noted earlier, the observational data from this study collectively indicate that the uptake of the communicative practices in the new English curriculum was very limited. There were thus clear tensions between the practices recommended by the English curriculum and what teachers were doing (we have focused on two central curricular principles but others such as promoting process writing, communicative listening and a tolerance for errors by teachers were equally absent).

5.2. Teachers' rationales

Here we draw on interviews with the teachers and through which we aim to understand the very apparent differences between the enacted curriculum (i.e. their teaching) and the intended curriculum. Five themes emerged from the interview data which are relevant to such understanding and we consider these in turn below.

5.2.1. Perceptions of teachers' role

When the teachers talked about the rationales behind their instruction, they revealed conceptions of the roles of teachers which are not in line with those implied in the curriculum. Munir was aware of this tension – "My role as it is suggested by this curriculum should be as a guide or as a facilitator for the student, but in reality I am the one who does everything in the class" – while Eman was explicit in referring to traditional expectations of teachers in Libya: "We are used to the idea that the focus should be on the teacher... Here in Libya the focus is always on the teacher". As Fathi explained, this view of the teacher's role was strongly embedded in all curricular areas: "The teacher does everything in the classroom. This is not only in the English subject, but it is in all of school subjects. How do we expect the students to change their behaviour in the English subject?."

5.2.2. Beliefs about pair work

During the interviews a range of beliefs related to pair work emerged. Eman's views, for example, were negative:

> even if I have a small number of students, I will not use pair work because there will be no advantage of using pair work or group work ... if the purpose of pair work is to encourage students to use English, students will not use English. Students will use Arabic and therefore pair work is only a waste of time.

Unlike Eman, Munir and Fathi expressed positive attitudes towards pair work and felt that it can enhance students' English language learning; Munir, for example, explained that "pair work is a good thing. In pair work students get used to conversation; they get used to speaking". These positive attitudes, however, were not reflected in the use of pair work in the classroom; the interviews did in fact reveal more powerful influences on Munir's work – his beliefs about students: "we do not have students who can do pair work activities. Students do not have the willingness to participate in pair work". Here he raises questions about the students' ability and motivation in relation to pair work. Fathi's comments reflected similar concerns: "Pair work is good, but the English background of the majority of the students is poor. If I use pair work, perhaps one pair or two pairs will work in the class. Therefore pair work will waste my time without any outcome". Clearly, even where the teachers were positively disposed towards pair work, they felt that student characteristics such as motivation and ability did not make it a feasible instructional technique.

5.2.3. Students' proficiency in English

Teachers' beliefs about their students' proficiency in English were a significant influence on their practices. Eman explained that "I know the curriculum encourages the use of English inside the classroom, but this idea will waste my time. I know the level of the students. Students are very weak in English". Munir also referred to the students' low level of English as an obstacle to their participation in classroom activities: "I think the main problem of the students is their lack of English vocabulary. The students cannot speak in English. This is the main reason why the students cannot do the activities required by this curriculum". Fathi echoed these views: "How can these students do the speaking activities when they do not have vocabulary in English? I have to do these activities by myself. I think many of these curriculum activities are difficult for the students". It is clear, then, that all teachers in this study believed that what the curriculum required students to do was beyond students' actual abilities and that this belief had a strong influence on their instructional practices.

5.2.4. Teachers' understanding and ability

Teachers also expressed concerns regarding both their own understanding of the curriculum and of their ability to implement it. Eman addressed both these concerns in noting that "I do not think the teacher is famil-

iar with this curriculum particularly with the speaking activities. Frankly teachers still have weakness in the speaking skills". Fathi felt that the curriculum was not sufficiently understood by teachers and inquired: "if teachers do not understand the curriculum they are asked to teach, then how can these teachers teach it?". Munir attributed this lack of understanding to the absence of training: "there are no workshops which improve the skills of the teachers and help them understand the principles of this curriculum. How can teachers work in these circumstances?". While a curriculum which is not well-aligned with students' linguistic abilities is clearly a serious problem, if the implementation of this curriculum is entrusted to teachers who lack appropriate understandings and skills the prospects of the curriculum fulfilling its intentions are clearly remote.

5.2.5. Examinations

Examinations are the last major theme we discuss here in aiming to make sense of the way the teachers in this study implemented the curriculum. The teachers commonly pointed to a mismatch between the focus of the secondary English exams and the aims of the curriculum. Thus, although the curriculum aims to extend students' speaking skills (Macfarlane, 2000), Munir explained that

> the exams only focus on grammar and reading. They are reading passages with some questions, and perhaps filling some missing words. There is no focus on speaking and writing activities. Students consider these activities as not essential, because we do not test them in the exam.

Eman added that

> In the exams, students expect the teacher to ask them about things they have already memorized. We cannot test the students in the speaking and writing skills. The concentration of the exams is on grammar. In the exam, I cannot ask the students to talk or write about anything. If I do this, the whole class will fail.

And with reference to the absence of listening activities in his work, Fathi explained that "the problem is that the exams do not concentrate on the listening activities, and therefore the teachers and the students do not care about these activities". There was thus clearly a tension between the English curriculum and its assessment.

6. Discussion

The evidence from this study points to limited uptake by three teachers of a new communicative English curriculum in secondary schools in Libya. The analysis of actual lessons over a two week period for each teacher showed that key curricular principles relating to pair work and the use of English were not reflected in the teachers' practices (which were characterized, in contrast, by teacher-fronted whole class work and the widespread use of Arabic). Interviews with these teachers highlighted a range of interacting factors which the teachers referred to in accounting for the divergence between the intended curriculum and that which they enacted. In articulating their views, teachers' accounts referred predominantly to factors external to themselves; that is, they rarely accounted for their practices with reference to beliefs they held about aspects of language teaching and learning. The predominant reference to external factors in teachers' accounts may reflect their perceptions that, irrespective of their own personal beliefs, the new curriculum may not be viable given that it conflicts with so many features of the educational context in Libya. In essence, the teachers in this study were filtering the content and pedagogy of the new curriculum according to what they felt was feasible and desirable in their context, and in the process transforming it so that in many ways it did not represent the intended major departure from the curriculum it had replaced.

Before discussing these issues further there are two points we would like to make. First, there is the potential criticism of research of this kind that what it elicits are not teachers' principled rationales but rather post hoc rationalizations for their work (i.e. explanations constructed retrospectively). We are, however, confident that is not the case here: the three teachers, from different schools, articulated very similar accounts of the forces shaping their work; rationales constructed retrospectively and independently by different individuals

would be unlikely to display such a level of congruence. The second issue relates to the typicality of these teachers. Although it is customary in qualitative research using small purposive samples to acknowledge that the findings only apply to the individuals studied, the experience of the first author of this study suggests that the teachers studied here were fairly typical of state secondary schools of English in Libya (e.g. in terms of qualifications, training received when the curriculum was introduced, resources available, types of learners, parental attitudes, pedagogy in other curricular areas and broader socio-cultural background). On this basis, then, we would suggest that the findings of this study are relevant to an understanding of the implementation of the secondary English curriculum in Libya more generally (though of course, further research to test this assertion and further explore issues raised here is certainly required).

Moving on now to discuss the key issues to emerge here, we will focus briefly on four particular points: (a) curriculum innovation and teacher training; (b) curriculum innovation and established practices; (c) curriculum innovation and assessment; and (d) curriculum innovation and teachers' perceptions of students' ability.

6.1. Curriculum innovation and teacher training

Carless (1999, p. 355) has noted that "if teachers are to implement an innovation, it is essential that they have a thorough understanding of the principles and practices of the proposed change". The teachers in this study did not feel that they understood the curriculum in this way. This is not surprising given the limited training teachers received when the curriculum was introduced (see Section 3.1 above).

The new curriculum made demands not only on teachers' pedagogical expertise but it also challenged their own communicative ability in English. English language teachers in Libya typically graduate from university with undeveloped spoken communication skills in English. The new curriculum, though, aims to develop students' oral communication skills and teachers' own limitations in this respect are therefore problematic. Similar mismatches between the curriculum and teachers' abilities have been reported by a number of researchers (e.g. Al-Hazmi, 2003; Li, 2001). Nunan (2003, p. 606) also noted that "poor English skills on the part of teachers as well as inadequate teacher preparation make it very difficult, if not impossible for many teachers to implement CLT in their classrooms". This would seem to apply to Libya too.

6.2. Curriculum innovation and established practices

Secondary school students in Libya will have followed for many years conventions which promote the authority of the teacher and view them as the source of the knowledge students need to acquire. In this context, classroom control is also considered one mark of a good teacher. The new English curriculum, though, challenges this tradition by asking teachers of English to adopt roles and behaviours which require them to loosen their control over the classroom. Kennedy et al. (1999, p. 34) illustrate the same contrast between pedagogical goals and cultural expectations in their account of a teacher trainee who

> is willing to use pair work in class and has a positive attitude with the belief that it will improve the communicative level of her students...but unfortunately she does not use pair work as she is worried about losing control of her large class, especially in a culture which has high regard for student discipline.

Similar concerns impacted on the instructional practices of the teachers in this study. Additionally, the new practices teachers of English were encouraged to adopt (e.g. pair work) were not customary among their colleagues teaching other subjects. The established practices of peers can be a powerful influence on what teachers do, and, as Adey and Hewitt (2004:24) note, "an individual teacher finds it virtually impossible to maintain a radically new form of teaching while colleagues around them in the same school remain untouched by the innovation".

6.3. Curriculum innovation and assessment

The influence of assessment on teaching is well-established (e.g. Andrews, 2004; Cheng, 1997; Cheng and Watanabe, 2004; Choi, 2008) and it is clear that changes in examinations can promote parallel

changes in pedagogic practices. This study highlights a converse point, namely that policy changes in pedagogy not supported by changes in assessment may have little practical impact in the classroom. Thus in this study, despite a new communicative curriculum, classroom practices continued to be shaped by discrete item examinations based on the memorization of grammar and vocabulary. This would seem to support the claim by Wedell (1992, p. 338) 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".

6.4. Curriculum innovation and teachers' perceptions of students' abilities

The teachers in this study felt there was a clear mismatch between what their students can do and what the curriculum asks them to do. This reflects findings by Li (2001), who found that because of students' limited command of English structures, teachers in South Korea found it difficult to do any oral communicative activities. Of course, caution is required in accepting at face value teachers' claims that they cannot teach communicatively because the students are weak; in this study, observations did provide support for such claims but, as highlighted above, the limited uptake of the curriculum in the teachers studied here was the result of several interacting factors of which students' ability in English was but one.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

As noted earlier, we do believe that in many ways the teachers studied here were typical of experienced teachers of English in Libyan secondary schools. However we acknowledge that we cannot make claims about the extent to which the practices highlighted here recur more generally in secondary ELT classrooms in Libya. Nonetheless, this study extends our understandings of the challenges involved in implementing communicative ELT curricular innovations in contexts whose broad socio-cultural and specific educational traditions reflect principles which communicative language teaching may conflict with. Such challenges will exist even where innovations are introduced gradually, sensitively and with appropriate support for teachers and students. Without such measures, as this study demonstrates, the likelihood that curricular intentions and pedagogical realities will align are minimal. The experiences of the teachers studied here reflect their reactions to a curriculum which promotes novel practices they feel ill-equipped to implement, which challenge their beliefs and experiences, which threaten their authority, which are at odds with the instructional practices of teachers of other subjects, which students resist and cannot cope adequately with, and which are not supported by the assessment system. The combined weight of these factors enables us to make sense of the gap, as demonstrated by the classroom observations in this study, between what the teachers here did and what the curriculum asks them to do.

Acknowledging this gap and the reasons for it is an important initial step in considering how it might be addressed. To end on a positive note we offer three broad suggestions for doing so. Firstly, curriculum reform should from its inception focus both on the pedagogical practices it wants to promote as well as the extent to which these are aligned with teachers' current practices and beliefs. This is not to suggest that new curricula should be designed to match teachers' beliefs (this would of course make reform impossible); what is important, though, is that curriculum designers assess the gap (both in practices and beliefs) between what is intended and the current situation, and use this analysis to inform the support systems which will be necessary to facilitate curriculum implementation. This leads to our second suggestion, which relates (as Wedell, 2003 argues) to the need for on-going systems through which teachers are supported in making sense of the new curriculum. Again, such support would need to promote changes in both instructional practices and teachers' beliefs. It would also need to support teachers in making the curriculum work within the contextual constraints they face. Our final recommendation is that curriculum innovation needs to be the focus of on-going evaluation and periodic review. This can involve, among other strategies, classroom observations and conversations with teachers (along the lines illustrated in this study) and would allow gaps between curricular plans and instructional realities to be monitored, responsive forms of support to be provided, and any necessary adjustments to the curriculum to be made.

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