

Challenges of Implementing a Top-down Curriculum Innovation in English Language Teaching: Perspectives of Form III English Language Teachers in Kenya

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Abstract

This study investigated the challenges Form III English language teachers face when implementing the revised integrated English language curriculum. A mixed-method descriptive design was used in Eldoret East Sub-County in Kenya. Data was collected through questionnaires, interviews and reflective conversations. Cluster, purposive and random sampling were used to identify 50 study participants. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics while qualitative analysis involved transcriptions of interviews and filed notes which were coded, categorized and patterns and themes identified. The study established that lack of appropriate Teacher Professional Development (TPD), content overload and complexity, non-suitable learner characteristics, inadequate directions in course books on integration and inappropriate pre-service training affected curriculum implementation efforts. The study recommends involvement of teachers in the development of curriculum innovations, organized Continuous TPD, development of materials that support teachers in their implementation and review of assessment procedures.

Key words: Curriculum, Integrated curriculum, Curriculum implementation,

Introduction and Background

One of the recurring themes in English language teaching in secondary schools in Kenya today is the efficacy of implementing the revised integrated English language curriculum. Curriculum is seen as "... the officially selected body of knowledge which government, through the Ministry of Education or anybody offering education wants students to learn" Urevbu, (1985: 3). The revised integrated English language curriculum was introduced in 2002 by the then Kenya Institute of Education (K.I.E) now referred to as Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (K.I.C.D). Curriculum integration refers to a curriculum approach that purposefully draws together knowledge, skills, attitudes and values from within or across subject areas to develop a more powerful understanding of key ideas (Alberta Education, 2007). According to Leung (2010) roles of teachers are important in curriculum integration. These roles are affected by how teachers understand and interpret curriculum integration, the challenges and obstacles to be overcome by teachers and their need for support in the implementation process. This study focused on the challenges of implementing a top down curriculum innovation developed by K.I.E and handed down to English language teachers to implement. As Morris (1995) asserts, the degree to which schools (and teachers) can adopt and implement a top down curriculum change depends upon the extent to which those responsible for managing the change acquire informed understanding about the educational theory and knowledge underpinning the change.

The revised integrated English language curriculum requires that language items and literature be integrated during planning, presentation and assessment. These three form the core areas of pedagogic implementation. Consequently, oral literature genres like oral narratives, oral poetry, songs, proverbs, tongue twisters and riddles are recommended for use in the teaching of listening and speaking skills "to give the learner a wider field within which to express themselves" (K.I.E, 2002:4). With regard to grammar teaching, a story or short dialogue which appears in written form in the text book or in a literary text could be used as exemplifiers in handling various grammar areas. For example, a teacher who plans to teach adverbs of manner (quickly, loudly and harshly) would be required to pick an excerpt from literary book where such words appear and use them as point of reference. The learners would therefore learn what adverbs of manner are as well as learn the literary aspects found in the excerpt. As K.I.E (2002) aptly puts it, language is not learned in a vacuum. This kind of integration would enable learners to see connections between language and literature. In making these connections between language and literature, teachers are expected to be creative and innovative as they think of best ways to utilize literary and non-literary material to enable the learners acquire grammatical competence (K.I.E, 2002).

Previously, text book stories or unseen texts were used and not literary books. In the previous curriculum, English language and literature were taught separately during separate time blocks.

Trends on research on challenges of Curriculum Implementation

Much of the discussion in the research on curriculum implementation is that fidelity of implementation of a curriculum innovation occurs when the implementers understand the curriculum requirements. This means that when the implementing agent does not understand the curriculum requirements, they are likely to modify it to fit their understandings. Several reasons are given for such disconnect.

Fullan (2007) lists difficult classroom conditions, the absence of training, an inappropriate school environment, insufficient resources and mismatched high stakes assessment as inhibiting curriculum reform at classroom level. Carless (1999) and O'Donnell (2005) mention lack of resources and insufficient curriculum time, expenses for training and lack of appropriate materials as other factors that make curriculum seldom implemented as intended. In addition, contextual factors like large class sizes and resistance from administration and students also inhibit curriculum implementation (Fullan, 2007). A number of specific studies show factors affecting curriculum implementation.

A study by Buchanan and Engebretson (2009) ascertained that clear information and theoretical understandings about a curriculum change in religious education is just as important as it is in any other field of study. In the absence of information on the curriculum change and understanding, the leaders (teachers) responsible for implementing the curriculum change made certain curriculum accommodations that were not in keeping with theoretical underpinnings of the change. Teacher's knowledge is therefore important to enable correct conceptualization of a new reform requirement.

Wette (2009) conducted a study among seven well-qualified teachers of adult English as a Second Language (ESL). Data was collected through weekly interviews and analysis of documents and materials produced over the duration of a whole course for each teacher. It was established that teacher's knowledge and experience was apparent in their ability to conceptualize and plan globally in the pre-course phase and to establish rapport and diagnose learner's developmental priorities as soon as teaching began. The ability to understand and implement with fidelity the curriculum depended upon right conceptualization.

Sakui, (2004) gives different reasons for lack of fidelity of implementation. The study investigated, from a situated evaluation perspective, the practices and beliefs of Japanese teachers of English implementing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The results established that CLT was not implemented as the "course of study" prescribes. The reasons for these were demands to prepare students for exams thus focus on the textbook. Another reason was the teachers' interpretation of the CLT. Depending on the various interpretations given, their practices were varied.

Further, Athavale, Myring, Davis and Truell, (2010) examined the status of curriculum integration in business schools, factors influencing deans' perceptions of an integrated curriculum and the implementation of such a curriculum. A survey of business school deans showed that they considered integration critical to the future success of students. Those who had understood the integration (60%) implemented it with fidelity. The deans who had not understood the integration did not.

In yet another study, Datnow and Castellano (2000) report on a Success for All (SFA) school reform model. SFA is a whole-school reform model that organizes resources on prevention and early intervention to ensure that students succeed in reading through elementary grades. Using qualitative data gathered through observation and extensive interviews in 2 SFA schools, the study tries to examine how to respond to SFA and how the teachers' beliefs, experiences and programme adaptations influence implementation. The study established that the teachers' fell into four distinct categories on implementation ranging from strong support for SFA to resistance. Support for the reform did not directly correlate with teachers' personal characteristics such as experience level, gender or ethnic background. The study indicated that teachers' level of support did not necessarily predict the degree of fidelity with which they implemented it. Almost all the teachers made adaptations to the programme despite the developers' demands to closely follow the model. Teachers however supported the SFA model as they believed still felt that it was beneficial for students yet still felt that it constrained their autonomy and creativity.

This study provides an interesting twist in implementation literature showing that failing to implement does not necessarily depend on understanding. Factors like autonomy and creativity can also influence implementation.

There are other reasons identified in literature that may also lead to problems in implementation. In a research reporting on the implementation of the Philippines Basic Education Curriculum, Waters and Vilches (2008) report that classroom level implementation has been difficult to achieve due to among others, lack of professional support and instructional materials.

In the Kenyan set up, studies (Ongong'a, Okwara & Nyangara 2010; Okwara, et al, 2009) have researched and reported on the integrated syllabus and how teachers are grappling with implementation. Okwara, Shiundu & Indoshi, (2009) conducted a study in Busia district in Kenya to evaluate the implementation of the integrated approach to the teaching of English in secondary schools in Kenya. It also aimed to provide a proposal for a revised programme that takes into account teacher input which they claim is often ignored in centralized curriculum development systems such as the one in Kenya. The findings revealed that stakeholders perceived the integrated approach in conflicting terms and teachers were not well prepared to implement the integrated approach. While curriculum developers advocated for a continuation of the integrated practice, teachers called for separation of English and literature. The researchers thus suggested a model for effective integration where teachers' involvement is paramount. The current study goes a step further to investigate challenges as a possible variable to lack of effective implementation.

Ongong'a, Okwara and Nyangara (2010) investigated the use of the integrated approach in the teaching of English in secondary schools in Kenya. Questionnaire was used to collect data during classroom practice using Maseno University Teaching Practice Assessment Criteria. The Maseno University Assessment Criteria is an assessment tool developed by the university to evaluate students on teaching practice. Areas of assessment include introduction of the lesson, knowledge of subject content knowledge, teaching methodology, use of teaching aid, participation in extracurricular activities among others. The data revealed that there were minimal levels of integration in English lessons. The study concludes that there is a discrepancy between the official English language curriculum and the implemented English language curriculum in schools and recommends that other studies on impediments to implementation be conducted on the integrated approach in Kenya. This study fills this gap.

To ensure efficacy in implementation of future curricular, Halbert and MacPhail (2010) examined how a recently developed physical education curriculum in Ireland could inform how Ireland embraces future curriculum developments and the extent to which a gap existed between the idea of a centrally-produced curriculum and the realities of its implementation. Principals and physical education teachers were interviewed on issues related to their engagement with implementation. Findings indicated evidence of deficit between what principals' say and what they propose to do. A number of teachers reported not receiving any syllabus documentation thus were unfamiliar with the syllabus. The study concludes that the positive disposition of principals' and teachers' towards the introduction of a new and revised syllabus is undermined by an apparent uncertainty and lack of knowledge. The study suggests that it is imperative that teachers and principals have opportunities to learn about the syllabuses and engage with the implications of implementation before the syllabus first appears in schools.

To engender understanding of a policy, Spillane, Reiser and Reimer, (2002) argue that what a policy means for implementing agents is constituted in the interaction of their existing cognitive structures (including knowledge, beliefs and attitudes), their situation, and the policy signals. They further argue that "how the implementing agents understand the policy message(s) about local behavior is defined as the interaction of these three dimensions" (p388). It is also argued that implementation failures are often a result of inability of principals to formulate clear policy outcomes or to adequately supervise the implementation.

Using a cognitive lens, Spillane (2000) explores school districts' response to recent mathematics reforms. The article is based on data from the second phase of a 5-year research study, undertaken between 1992 and 1996 which examined relations between state and local government instructional policymaking and mathematics and science teaching in Michigan. Whereas district leaders in the study understood the mathematics reforms as representing change for their mathematics policies and programs, their understandings tended to miss the full import of the reforms. Focusing on the forms of the mathematics reforms rather than their epistemological and pedagogical functions, district leaders' understandings tended to focus on piecemeal changes that often missed

the disciplinary particulars of the reforms. Based on this analysis, Spillane argues for the inclusion of implementers' interpretation of the reform message.

University of Zimbabwe (1995) in their curriculum module identifies other factors that may influence curriculum implementation: the teacher, the learner and assessment. The teachers' role is considered indisputable as it is he/she who decides what to teach from the prescribed syllabus or curriculum. The teacher's role is important because as Firestone (1989) mentions if implementing agents (teachers) fail to notice, intentionally ignore or selectively attend to policies that are inconsistent with their own (and/or their agencies) interests and agendas, such implementation may be affected. Policies that fit their agendas are more likely to be implemented and those that do not are more likely to be either opposed or modified so that they do fit. Spillane et al (2002) sum this up by claiming that what a policy means for implementing agents depends to a great extent on the repertoire of existing knowledge and experience.

The learners hold the key to what is actually transmitted in the classroom (University of Zimbabwe, 1995 curriculum module). The learners also influence the teacher in the selection of the learning experiences. As such, the teacher needs to consider diverse learner characteristics in curriculum implementation.

Assessment in the form of examinations influences curriculum implementation tremendously. Due to the great value of examinations in Kenya, teachers may tend to concentrate on curriculum areas most tested in examination. This, according to the Fullan, (2007) and University of Zimbabwe (1995) can affect the broad goals and objectives of the curriculum. All these factors work in one way or another to affect how a curriculum is implemented.

Much of the literature here looks at the interface between knowledge and effective implementation. There has also been literature that suggests that while knowledge is important, it is not sufficient. It should be understood that the focus of the present study was not on the interface between knowledge and implementation but rather on the challenges of implementation. Another study would need to be carried out to empirically determine the relationship between a solid understanding and effective implementation.

Participants

A total of 50 participants took part in the study. Using cluster sampling, the schools in Eldoret East were divided into National, County and District schools. Purposive sample was used to pick the national school in the Sub-County. County and District school were divided into Girls' and Boys' boarding, Mixed and Day schools respectively. Using a random sample from each stratum, a teacher from each school in the strata was picked based on informed consent. This gave rise to 7 teachers who were interviewed, identified by their pseudonyms as Teacher M1-M4 and teacher F1-F3. The table below shows the demographic representation of the interviewed participants.

Table 1.1 Demographic representation Interview Participants

Attribute	Categories	Frequency
Gender	Female	3
	Male	4
	Total	7
School Type	National	1
	County Mixed	1
	County Girls	1
	County Boys	1
	District Mixed	1
	District Girls	1
	District Day School	1
	Total	7
Teaching Experience:	1 – 5 Years	3
	6-10 Years	2
	11-15 Years	1
	16 Years and above	1
	Total	7

More than 50% of the teachers had a teaching experience of more than 10 years and can therefore be considered well experienced.

Instrumentation

A teacher questionnaire was used to establish challenges the teachers face in implementing the revised English language curriculum. Follow up interviews and reflective conversations provided more in depth accounts on the challenges of implementing the integrated approach to teaching revised English language curriculum.

Results

Inadequacy of support materials

One challenge that reverberated throughout the data collection exercise was to do with inadequacy in the sense of how the support materials especially the course books enables teachers understand the curriculum rather than quantity. The participants reported that structure of the books themselves does not show integration leaving the task of planning for integration in the hands of (an often ill-prepared) teacher. This place too much demand on him/her leading to the fall-back and perceivably simpler position of teaching the two subjects separately. Teacher M1, M3 and F2 believe that the course books should embrace integration. Teacher M1 said “the teaching resources, course books in particular hardly embrace integration...they actually give room for separation of the two. Teacher F2 agrees and adds that “teachers’ work is doubled when it’s up to them to pick aspects to integrate”. She suggests that the resources should also be provided to schools. Teacher F1 is more succinct suggesting that “curriculum developers should give guidelines on how publishers should observe integration” M2 says “integrate course books by including excerpts from set books in course books to save on teachers’ preparation time.” While this would supposedly ease the work of teachers, it should be remembered that set books are changed every few years while course books less so. Including these excerpts may lead to a scenario where new set books are in place but course books have examples of old set books. Further, a teacher observed that many literary texts are allowed for use in teaching language and literature even when they do not conform strictly to the rules of the English language which complicates the task of using them in teaching correct grammar.

Inadequate Teacher Professional Development

Most teachers interviewed voiced the lack of appropriate professional development as frustrating implementation of the integrated English language curriculum. The participants argued that the curriculum was introduced rather haphazardly with teachers ‘scantly knowledgeable about integration and its objectives and hardly equipped to handle it’. This has led the teachers to resort to the familiar teaching of the subjects as separate entities. Teacher F1 says “information on the curriculum is scanty especially on the whole concept of integration ... curriculum

developers should give guidelines on how publishers should observe integration.” Teacher M3 recommends that those responsible “organize workshop for teachers to empower us on integration”. Teacher F2 further lamented that there is “lack of proper guidelines by curriculum developers about the whole concept of integration... teachers are scantily informed about what integration essentially entails and the objectives to be achieved with the integration strategy. Training would bridge this gap.” In addition, teacher F1 voiced the opinion to “in service teachers on integration as the curriculum only gives guidelines, not actual procedures of integration.” These respondents seemed to converge around the issue of professional development for teachers to bridge the gap between the prescribed and the enacted curriculum. As they suggest, such professional development would not only involve the teachers, but also those concerned with development of course books so they can understand how integration should be observed in the course books. This implies that course books do not evidence integration as envisaged by the revised English language curriculum. They suggested that ‘curriculum developers set proper guidelines to integration so that teachers have a standard set of guidelines when integrating the curriculum components. It is clear that the teachers felt that they were not adequately prepared nor are they sufficiently supported to carry out integration effectively.

Content overload and Complexity

The participants mentioned the expansive nature of the integrated syllabus and the need to cover the syllabus substantially for examination purposes as a major challenge. For example, teacher F3 appropriately noted that “content is expansive especially literature one which deals with characterization, styles, themes among others.” Teacher M3 agreed noting that “the syllabus is too wide and needs to be narrowed (sic) to facilitate integration.” A few participants however pointed out this irony because, theoretically speaking, integration should have been a time-saving measure yet in their opinion did the exact opposite.

On complexity of the content, M1 noted: “There is a border dispute over territory between language and literature ... the divergence that emerges results in the teaching of the two subjects as disconnected pedagogic practices... the complexity of integrating grammar in literature may make teachers treat the two separately.” He explained that grammar was especially a wide area of study and covered all rules governing words, word formation, sentences and sentence formations. Due to the complexity, it requires a systematic form of learning and study. This therefore necessitated the ‘need to handle it alone’. This, he argued would further enable learners correct errors in language since they will have been equipped with the rules of grammar. A number of participants also mentioned that the complex (at times abstract) nature of some of the language/literature concepts called for each to be explained as a stand-alone for ease of grasp.

Non-suitable learner characteristics

This issue was mainly voiced by teachers in district schools who felt that their learners were admitted with low to average English language capabilities. The teacher claimed that “weak learners do not understand easily” (Teacher M4). Accordingly, this makes it difficult for them to understand concepts. Considering that in this teacher’s opinion ‘integration is complicated’ therefore, ‘more difficult to understand, ‘makes it difficult to realize integration effectively. This coupled with the large class sizes makes it extremely difficult to impose on them the new curriculum structure which presumes some basic language fluency and learner-centered methodology. The learner characteristics equally affected the teachers’ attitude to work with teachers at national and county schools reporting enjoying their work due to ‘good’ language competences of the learners while those at district schools generally found their work very challenging due to the learners’ incompetence in English language and large class sizes.

Inappropriate Pre-Service Training

This researcher established that the pre-service teacher training did not address the issue of integration. Most teachers are prepared as language and literature teachers separately. Indeed some train as teachers of English language and another subject for example German or History and get no in-depth exposure to Literature. Furthering these views, teacher F1 opined that “integration should be adopted right from resources to teaching... and the education that teachers who are studying in universities receive.” On the same theme, teacher M3 said, “...the new curriculum was introduced without considering such factors as knowledge of implementation about it. “Some teachers to date actually fumble with the skill of integration... teacher training would bridge this gap.” M4 was more succinct advising to “introduce integration at university level”. To further these views, at a meeting for language practitioners and scholars from universities that supply English language teachers in Kenya held in Nairobi in February 2014 noted that universities do not actually train on integration. As a matter of fact, it

was said that most, if not all the universities have different lecturers for language and literature respectively. The scholars noted that this could be part of the reasons for problematic implementation on the teacher's part.

Over Emphasis on Examination

The study established that there was over emphasis on examinations. By analyzing examination trends every year, teachers resort to teaching for examination. This has led to a scenario where teachers emphasize integration of aspects most tested in examinations rather than focus on the whole aspect of integration that is intended to allow students see the study of literature as language in operation; of literature as an example and a context for language use. M1 said, "Over emphasis on exams is the current trend due to competition. Teachers and learners tend to prefer particular aspects of either language or literature since they believe those are the areas where typical exam questions are bound to come from." Teacher M3 similarly noted that that "over emphasis on exams is a bottle neck to integration and has to be checked".

Way Forward Regarding Integration of Language and Literature

The research participants had some suggestions on how the challenges to integration could be overcome.

On the inadequacy of support materials, participants proposed that course book writers should embrace integration in their works to save teacher's time to ensure effective utilization of other time to 'cover' the syllabus.

One proposal to address the non-readiness of teachers to embrace integration was to organize workshops to make teachers familiar with the curriculum they are supposed to implement. After training, curriculum implementation ought to be gradual to allow proper assimilation. Teachers M1, M4 and F3 all mentioned that workshops for teachers should be organized so that they can be made familiar with the curriculum they are required to implement. Teacher F1 mentioned that "(there should be) in service (training of) teachers on integration as the curriculum only gives guidelines, not actual procedures of integration". Teacher F2 called for the training of teachers on integration and that curriculum developers should set proper guidelines to integration so that teachers have a standard set of guidelines to follow while Teacher F3 stated that: "...integrate course books" adding that a consideration of "staffing needs for schools should also be considered for integration to be effectively carried out".

The use of co-curricular activities such as debates, symposia, drama simulation, role play among others were mentioned as possible useful additions to the integration efforts. A participant was of the view that integration is too complex for learners to handle bearing in mind learner differences as well as diversity of school characteristics. There is need to restructure the curriculum to suit all learners. A suggestion to trim down the content requirement to what is manageable was also floated. Lastly, some participants advocated for review of university pre-service training programmes to embrace integration. Teacher M4 clearly called for introduction of integration at university level.

Discussion

A number of challenges were mentioned in this study as the possible impediments to English language teachers' implementation of the revised integrated English language curriculum. These include inadequacy of curriculum materials or resources (Carless, 1999; O'Donnell, 2005; Waters and Vilches, 2008), lack of appropriate Teacher Professional Development, content overload and complexity, non-suitable learner characteristics and inappropriate pre-service training (Fullan, 2007); and focus on assessment (Fullan, 2007; Sakui, 2004; Zhang and Liu, 2014). These factors have been found to exert similar negative influence on the implementation of curriculum innovations in other contexts (Melketo, 2012; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Underwood, 2012).

Specifically, Waters and Vilches (2008) report that classroom level implementation has been difficult to achieve due to among others, lack of professional support and instructional materials. The need to tackle these obstacles to curriculum implementation efforts does not need over-emphasis. The participants in this study pointed to the need to have curriculum materials structured so as to make integration evident, the need for appropriate in-service and pre-service training programmes, reduction of teaching-for-examination practices and reduction of content overload. What may seem difficult to alter are the learner characteristics as the schools receive these learners as they are. Instead, flexibility in the curriculum requirements would allow the teachers to distinguish different learners and plan the lessons to suit the different learner characteristics. As Mellati and Khademi (2014)

have aptly observed, “Every learning context has unique learners; [the] teacher is the only one that is able to determine learners’ styles and differentiate them from each other. Not policy makers, course designers, nor curriculum developers have the ability to determine learners’ style” (p. 270).

The structure of the current support materials for the revised integrated English language curriculum does not seem to support this flexibility. The teachers need to be supported through appropriate training to adapt and to supplement external materials to suit their relevant context. It should be noted, however, that even if the challenges mentioned in this section were overcome, and the implementation of curricular innovations would not be a taken because it is a complex phenomenon mediated by a mix of several factors, among these the teacher’s own cognition of the innovation.

In Kenya, where the present study is located, Okwara, Shiundu & Indoshi, (2009) study in Busia on integration of the English language curriculum revealed that stakeholders perceived the integrated approach in conflicting terms and that teachers were not well prepared to implement the integrated approach due to a variety of factors the central being lack of effective understanding of the curriculum requirements as has been seen in the present study.

Conclusion

This study has shown how a novel policy like the adoption of the revised integrated English language curriculum can face a number of unforeseen obstacles at implementation and end up steering off-course. These results speak to the policy and as such, curriculum developers need to pay attention to such challenges to enable a new innovation move from an intention to practice.

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