Prescribed pedagogy: An autoethnographic analysis of coursebook constraints, teacher identity, and power dynamics in Iran through Foucault's lens

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Abstract

This study uses Critical Autoethnographic Narrative (CAN) to explore the influence of standardized coursebooks on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in Iran. Drawing on over ten years of experience as an English teacher and supervisor, the research highlights how these coursebooks act as tools of control, constraining teacher autonomy and creativity. While existing literature focuses on technical aspects of coursebooks, this study fills a gap by examining their impact on pedagogical flexibility and teacher identity. Through a reflexive analysis guided by Foucault's theories of power and discipline, key themes such as "pedagogical constraints," "reduced autonomy," and "professional satisfaction" are identified. The findings reveal significant limitations imposed by standardized materials, suggesting a need for more flexible and culturally responsive teaching approaches. This study contributes to understanding the socio-political dimensions of EFL education in Iran and offers insights for enhancing teacher autonomy and curriculum development.

Keywords: critical autoethnographic narrative; standardized coursebooks; teacher autonomy; EFL education; Foucault, pedagogical constraints

Introduction

In the Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, standardized English coursebooks—largely designed by foreign publishers—have become a defining feature of language education. These coursebooks are widely adopted by nearly all language institutes and schools across the country, leading to a standardized curriculum that emphasizes uniformity over pedagogical diversity. While this standardization might aim to ensure consistency in language instruction, it comes at the cost of significantly reducing teachers' pedagogical flexibility. This dominance of coursebooks creates a rigid educational framework that constrains opportunities for innovation

and creativity in teaching practices, thus raising critical questions about the broader implications for educators and students.

Teachers operating within this framework often face institutional expectations that mandate strict adherence to the prescribed coursebook content. Such stringent adherence limits their ability to integrate authentic materials and culturally relevant content, potentially impeding the effectiveness of language learning. The problem is further exacerbated by the educational policies prevalent in Iranian private language institutes, where a coursebook-based approach to syllabus design frequently leaves minimal room for teacher autonomy. This environment not only curtails the flexibility needed for adapting teaching methods to students' needs but also affects the overall quality of education by minimizing opportunities for engaging and contextually appropriate learning experiences.

Against this backdrop, this study employs an autoethnographic approach to critically examine how the dominance of coursebooks has shaped my professional identity and teaching practices within the Iranian EFL context. Grounded in Michel Foucault's theories of power and discipline, I explore how standardized coursebooks act as tools of control, not only influencing the private English language education system but also molding my identity as a teacher and educator. Foucault's concepts provide a lens to understand how these materials enforce specific norms and practices, impacting my autonomy and creativity, while also shaping the learning experiences of my students. This exploration aims to uncover the mechanisms through which coursebooks constrain pedagogical practices and identity formation, highlighting the broader implications for educational quality and teacher autonomy in my own professional journey.

Theoretical Framework

Michel Foucault's theories provide a valuable lens for understanding the dynamics of power in educational settings. His concept of power/knowledge examines how knowledge is produced and controlled, particularly within institutions. In the context of EFL education in Iran, coursebooks can be seen as instruments that regulate the transmission of knowledge, limiting the scope of what is taught and how it is taught. Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, which focuses on how institutions enforce norms and practices, is also highly relevant. Coursebooks, through their prescriptive content, act as mechanisms of discipline that standardize teaching practices and minimize deviations from established norms.

This article applies Foucault's theoretical concepts to explore how coursebooks function as tools of control, shaping not only the content of education but also the behavior of teachers and students. By critically examining these dynamics, the study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the need for greater flexibility and creativity in language education.

Review of Literature

Coursebooks in the Iranian EFL Education

Horning and Brown (1981) emphasized the numerous benefits of textbooks, such as their role in providing language input, learning support, motivation, stimulation, and reference. This framework is particularly valuable in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where standardized coursebooks offer a structured approach to language instruction (Harwood, 2010; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). However, in countries like Iran, the reliance on these standardized materials has sparked concerns about their potential limitations in addressing the diverse needs of learners. While coursebooks ensure consistency and a clear progression, they often lead to a "one-size-fits-all" approach that may not accommodate individual learner differences (Littlejohn, 2011).

In the Iranian context, Azizifar, Koosha, and Lotfi (2010) underscore the crucial role of textbooks as the primary source of English exposure. Despite their importance, global coursebooks used in Iranian schools have been found to have several shortcomings. Research by Mohammadkhani et al. (2021) highlights that these textbooks frequently lack critical analysis and engaging activities necessary for effective learning. Additionally, students' preferences for up-to-date content, appealing visuals, and interactive websites (Alavinia & Siyadat, 2013) reveal a disconnect between the provided materials and learner expectations. High school English textbooks in Iran are further criticized for their ineffectiveness in improving language skills, motivation, and cultural awareness (Aghazadeh, 2015). Comparative analyses of series such as New Interchange and New Headway show that these textbooks reflect the ideological and cultural biases of their countries of origin, which may not align with Iranian learners' needs (Roshan, 2014). These issues suggest that future textbook editions should better incorporate feedback from both teachers and students to address the specific requirements of Iranian EFL learners.

Moreover, the uniform adoption of foreign-published coursebooks in Iran often results in a rigid curriculum that limits teachers' flexibility in adapting lessons to their students' needs (Garton & Graves, 2014). Rahimpour and Hashemi (2011) highlight that this dependency on standardized materials constrains teachers' ability to exercise professional judgment and creativity, thereby diminishing their role in actively shaping the educational process. This situation further emphasizes the need for textbook designs that consider local contexts and learner preferences, aiming to enhance both the relevance and effectiveness of EFL instruction in Iran.

Teacher Autonomy and Pedagogical Flexibility in the Iranian EFL Context

Recent studies have explored teacher autonomy and pedagogical flexibility within Iranian EFL contexts, revealing that educators employ various strategies to foster learner autonomy. These strategies include promoting independence, offering choices, encouraging peer learning, and facilitating self-evaluation (Nasri et al., 2015). Despite these efforts, teachers face significant constraints, such as predetermined materials, inadequate facilities, and varying student proficiency levels, which can limit their ability to fully implement these strategies (Nasri et al., 2015). The positive impact of teaching autonomy on students' speaking skills, through activities like journal writing and the use of online resources, has been documented (Arfae, 2020). Furthermore, research indicates a significant positive correlation between reflective teaching practices and teacher autonomy among Iranian EFL teachers (Fani, 2018). Additionally, gender differences in promoting learner autonomy have been observed, with female teachers demonstrating superior performance in applying specific strategies compared to their male counterparts (Nasri et al., 2017). Factors influencing teachers' practices include the availability of resources, teacher training, curriculum flexibility, and stakeholder expectations.

However, the relationship between teacher autonomy and effective teaching becomes complex in contexts where coursebooks dominate. Teacher autonomy is essential for tailoring instruction to meet the specific needs of students (Benson, 2011). Nevertheless, strict adherence to standardized coursebook content often constrains this autonomy, making it challenging for teachers to address the dynamic needs of their classrooms (McGrath, 2013). Critics argue that the dominance of textbooks can undermine both teacher and student autonomy, enforcing rigid control and limiting flexibility within the classroom (Mukundan et al., 2012).

In the Iranian EFL context, this issue is particularly pronounced. Studies reveal that many teachers feel restricted by the prescriptive nature of coursebooks, which frequently leaves

little room for creativity or the integration of supplementary materials (Tavakoli, 2021). These constraints can lead to professional dissatisfaction, as teachers struggle to adapt their teaching methods to the specific needs of their students, thereby limiting their ability to fully leverage their expertise (Rashidi & Safari, 2011).

Foucault's Theories in Educational Contexts

Foucault's theories offer profound insights into educational research and practice by elucidating how institutions shape individuals through disciplinary practices. His concepts of power/ knowledge and governmentality highlight how educational settings transform individuals into docile, productive subjects by regulating their behavior and learning (Marshall, 1989). Foucault's critical perspectives challenge conventional views on education by examining the intricate power relations, discourses, and processes of subjectification within schools (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1997). Scholars have extended Foucauldian analysis to various educational contexts, including online learning environments, to explore how power dynamics and knowledge construction operate within these settings (Lee, 2020). By adopting a Foucauldian lens, researchers can uncover hidden power structures and their impacts on both students and educators, leading to more nuanced and equitable understandings of educational policies and practices (Ball, 2012).

Michel Foucault's theories of power/knowledge and disciplinary power are particularly relevant for analyzing control mechanisms in education. According to Foucault (1977), power and knowledge are intertwined, with institutions using knowledge to exert control over individuals. This is evident in educational settings through the imposition of standardized curricula and assessment methods that dictate both the content and the pedagogy (Ball, 2013).

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, Foucault's concept of disciplinary power is crucial for understanding coursebook dominance. Disciplinary power operates by enforcing norms and practices, which in EFL settings, is reflected in how coursebooks standardize teaching methods and content (Caldwell & Spinks, 2003). Teachers, within this framework, often become enforcers of these prescribed norms, frequently at the expense of their professional autonomy (Popkewitz, 1992). This perspective is essential for recognizing how coursebooks function not merely as educational tools but as instruments of control that regulate classroom dynamics and teaching practices.

Critical Autoethnographic Narrative (CAN)

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that combines personal narrative with cultural analysis, allowing researchers to reflect on their own experiences within broader social and cultural contexts. Adams et al. (2014) describe it as a means to explore the self in relation to larger social structures, offering valuable insights into how personal experiences intersect with institutional and cultural forces. This approach is rooted in the idea that personal stories can reveal deeper insights into broader cultural and systemic issues affecting individuals and groups (Bochner & Ellis, 2016)

In the field of educational research, autoethnography becomes a powerful tool for examining the lived experiences of teachers and students within standardized educational frameworks. It provides rich, contextualized insights into how educational policies and practices impact individuals on a personal level. For instance, in the context of the Iranian EFL environment, autoethnography enables a detailed exploration of how the prevalence of standardized coursebooks influences teaching practices, teacher autonomy, and the integration of culturally relevant materials (Lapan et al., 2011)

Building on this, Critical Autoethnographic Narrative (CAN) emerges as a valuable extension within teacher education, focusing on identity-oriented preparation and emotional

awareness in language teaching (Yazan, 2018, 2023). CAN encourages teacher candidates to reflect on their experiences with language learning and teaching, examining identity construction and emotional responses (Yazan, 2023). This method helps deconstruct dominant discourses and positions teachers as active knowledge creators, thus promoting critical pedagogy and supporting significant personal and professional growth (Rozich, 2016). By integrating CAN into teacher education, educators can better understand language ideologies, identity positions, and challenge ideological binaries as they develop their teaching identities (Yazan, 2019).

In the context of this study, autoethnography and CAN are particularly relevant for examining the impact of standardized coursebooks on teaching practices. The autoethnographic approach, grounded in personal experiences, facilitates a clear understanding of the constraints imposed by these coursebooks and their implications for pedagogical flexibility and innovation. This narrative method aligns with Foucault's theories of power and discipline, offering a first-person perspective on how coursebooks function as instruments of control, shaping teaching practices and institutional expectations (Foucault, 1977).

By employing CAN, the study aims to illuminate the complex interplay between personal experiences and broader institutional forces. This approach not only highlights the limitations and challenges educators face due to coursebook constraints but also suggests potential pathways for developing more flexible and culturally responsive educational practices (Hatch, 2023). Reflexivity is a crucial component of this process, requiring researchers to critically engage with their own biases and experiences. This reflexive approach ensures that personal narratives are analyzed in a way that contributes to both theoretical and practical insights, examining how the researcher's experiences with coursebooks both reflect and challenge prevailing educational norms (Brookfield, 2017).

Gaps and Contributions

This study draws on my experiences as an English teacher, educational supervisor, and teacher trainer in Iran, where I have worked for over 10 years. Through this lens, I seek to explore the complex interplay between standardized coursebooks, teacher autonomy, and socio-political dynamics in the Iranian EFL context. Despite the extensive research on coursebook use in EFL education, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these materials function not just as pedagogical tools but also as instruments of power and control that shape educational practices and teacher identities.

Existing studies often focus on the technical and pedagogical aspects of coursebooks, highlighting their effectiveness or limitations in language teaching (e.g., Harwood, 2010; Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). However, they frequently overlook the deeper implications of coursebook dominance, particularly how it constrains teachers' autonomy and creativity (Apple, 1986; McGrath, 2013). In the Iranian context, this issue is further complicated by cultural and socio-political factors that influence the educational system and the roles teachers are expected to play within it. While recent literature acknowledges the restrictive nature of standardized coursebooks (Shahivand, 2017; Rashidi & Safari, 2011), there is limited exploration of how these constraints impact teachers' personal experiences, professional identities, and daily practices.

To address this gap, I employ Critical Autoethnographic Narrative (CAN) as the primary methodological framework for this study. CAN allows for a rich, first-person exploration of how standardized coursebooks influence my teaching practices and professional identity. By combining personal narrative with cultural and institutional analysis, CAN provides deep insights into the broader forces that shape educational practices in Iran. This approach is

particularly well-suited for examining how coursebooks function as instruments of control, aligning with Foucault's theories of power and discipline (Foucault, 1977; 1980).

Through reflexive analysis, this study examines the constraints imposed by coursebooks on pedagogical flexibility and innovation, revealing how they impact my professional identity and autonomy as an educator. By situating my personal experiences within the broader socio-political context, I aim to uncover the hidden dynamics that govern educational practices in Iran. This research not only highlights the challenges faced by EFL teachers in navigating these constraints but also suggests potential pathways for developing more flexible and culturally responsive teaching practices.

The findings of this study will contribute to the existing body of literature by providing a thorough understanding of the socio-political dimensions of EFL education in Iran. Moreover, by employing CAN, this research offers a model for other educators and researchers to critically reflect on their own experiences and the broader institutional forces that shape their professional lives. Ultimately, this study aims to bridge the gap between technical, pedagogical, and cultural considerations in coursebook use, offering insights that may inform future educational reforms and support greater teacher autonomy in the EFL context.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts an autoethnographic approach, a qualitative research design that combines personal narrative with cultural analysis. Autoethnography is well-suited for exploring the impact of coursebook dominance and teacher constraints in the Iranian EFL context because it allows for an in-depth examination of the researcher's own experiences and reflections (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

As both the researcher and subject, I draw upon my 10 years of experience as an English teacher and 7 years as an educational supervisor and teacher trainer in Iran. My insider perspective offers a profound, reflective analysis of how standardized coursebooks have shaped my teaching practices, professional identity, and autonomy. A key aspect of Critical Autoethnography Narrative (CAN) is reflexivity, and throughout this study, I critically engage with my positionality, consistently acknowledging how my personal background, beliefs, and experiences influence the narratives I construct and present. This reflexive approach ensures that my findings are not only self-aware but also deeply rooted in my lived experiences.

Data Collection

The primary data source for this study consists of detailed personal narratives that document my experiences with standardized coursebooks within the Iranian EFL context. Specifically, these narratives, written over several months, focus on critical incidents that illuminate the intersection of coursebook use, teaching practices, and institutional constraints. Moreover, to further explore my evolving professional identity, I maintained reflective journals, which captured ongoing thoughts, emotions, and insights related to my roles as both a teacher and mentor. These journals not only facilitated continuous self-reflection but also deepened my understanding of the complexities of my work. In addition to these personal narratives, I also analyzed relevant cultural artifacts, such as the standardized coursebooks, institutional policies, and official guidelines. Thus, these artifacts provided essential context for my experiences, effectively situating my narrative within the broader educational and socio-political framework.

Data Analysis

Drawing on the work of Clandinin and Connelly (2004), I employed qualitative methods grounded in narrative inquiry. This approach, rooted in narrative thinking and understanding, treats experiences as lived and narrated stories. Consequently, it enables researchers to gain insights into issues from the participants' interpretive perspective, within their own context and using their own language. The collected narratives were then analyzed through a narrative approach, aligning with the study's foundational theoretical framework. Specifically, this analysis focused on how specific events and experiences illustrate the power dynamics and constraints imposed by standardized coursebooks. In this process, I identified recurring themes related to teacher autonomy, pedagogical flexibility, and identity formation. By employing Foucault's theories of power and discipline as a lens, I coded the narratives to uncover how coursebooks function as tools of control within the educational system. Themes such as "pedagogical constraints," "resistance," "negotiation of identity," and "institutional expectations" were explored in depth. To enhance the validity of the study, I triangulated the personal narratives with cultural artifacts and relevant literature. This multi-source approach not only ensured that my reflections were grounded in the broader educational context but also aligned them with existing research.

While the primary focus of the study is on my own experiences, any references to specific individuals, institutions, or sensitive cultural contexts were anonymized to protect the privacy of those involved.

Findings

Overview of Key Themes

The findings from this autoethnographic study reveal several key themes regarding the impact of standardized coursebooks on teaching practices and teacher autonomy within the Iranian EFL context. These themes are examined through Foucault's concepts of power/knowledge and disciplinary power and include:

- Pedagogical Constraints and Impact on Creativity
- Integration of Authentic Materials
- Reduced Teacher Autonomy
- Training Responsibilities
- Syllabus Design

Findings as a Teacher

Pedagogical Constraints and Impact on Creativity

As a teacher, standardized coursebooks imposed significant constraints on my teaching practices. The rigid structure of these materials limited my ability to adapt lessons to students' needs and interests. I reflected, "The coursebook's fixed syllabus often constrained my ability to address spontaneous student interests or integrate supplementary topics." This rigidity mirrors Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, where standardized norms restrict individual flexibility and control teaching methods. A recurrent issue I encountered was the lackluster and conservative topics presented in the coursebooks' chapters. Topics such as sports, family, and health were often perceived as uninteresting by students, highlighting a disconnect between the content and students' interests. This disconnection underscores the limitations of coursebooks in engaging learners effectively, reflecting Foucault's theory that standardization enforces a

one-size-fits-all approach, failing to resonate with diverse student backgrounds and interests. The resulting lack of engagement from students reinforces how disciplinary structures can stifle educational innovation and adaptability.

Moreover, the prescriptive nature of coursebooks affected my creativity in lesson planning. The necessity to follow the coursebook's sequence and activities closely left little room for innovative approaches. I noted, "I frequently felt my creative freedom was restricted by the need to adhere to the coursebook. The mandated structure led to a more formulaic and less engaging teaching environment." This limitation aligns with Foucault's ideas on how disciplinary power enforces conformity and stifles personal innovation. For instance, while I wanted to teach grammar and vocabulary creatively through a situational lesson framework, I often had to cover more than three pages of the coursebook in a single session, leading me to abandon my creative plans. Furthermore, despite my intention to include additional speaking activities to enhance learning, the constraints of the coursebook and the pressure to cover extensive content left me with insufficient time for such activities. This conflict between my innovative intentions and the rigid coursebook demands illustrates Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, where adherence to standardized structures limits pedagogical freedom and creativity, reinforcing conformity at the expense of educational enrichment.

The constraints imposed by standardized coursebooks reveal a profound impact on teaching practices and creativity, aligned with Foucault's theories of disciplinary power. According to Foucault, disciplinary mechanisms control and normalize behavior through strict adherence to established norms and practices (Foucault, 1977). In this context, the coursebooks' rigid framework exemplifies how disciplinary power limits pedagogical flexibility and personal creativity. By enforcing a standardized curriculum, coursebooks restrict teachers' ability to adapt lessons to students' interests or to incorporate innovative approaches, reinforcing a controlled and uniform teaching environment. This control not only suppresses creative freedom but also fails to address the diverse needs of students, resulting in disengagement and a reduction in educational effectiveness. The analysis of this dynamic highlights how disciplinary power through standardized educational materials can stifle both teacher autonomy and student engagement, reinforcing conformity and limiting opportunities for enriched learning experiences.

Integration of Authentic Materials

The coursebooks' dominance restricted my ability to use authentic materials. Despite my desire to integrate real-world texts and culturally relevant resources, the coursebooks' rigid framework often left me constrained. I observed, "The absence of authentic materials in the coursebook made it challenging to engage students with content that was culturally and contextually relevant." This restriction highlights the disconnect between standardized content and the diverse needs of students, reflecting Foucault's concept of power exerted through standardization. Although I recognized that YouTube and movies were excellent sources for exposing students to real-life English and diverse linguistic contexts, I found myself limiting students to the coursebook's pedagogical materials. This limitation was driven by the students' tight schedules; with insufficient time to study English outside of class, they needed to focus their efforts on the coursebook to keep up with the prescribed curriculum.

Foucault's concept of disciplinary power provides a lens through which to understand the constraints imposed by standardized coursebooks on the use of authentic materials. Disciplinary power operates through mechanisms that enforce compliance with prescribed norms and limit deviations from standardized practices (Foucault, 1977). The coursebooks' dominance exemplifies such mechanisms by creating a rigid educational framework that constrains teachers' ability to incorporate diverse and contextually relevant materials. This standardization not only

restricts pedagogical flexibility but also perpetuates a disconnect between educational content and students' real-world needs. By prioritizing coursebook content, the educational system reinforces conformity and limits opportunities for enriching and culturally relevant learning experiences. This scenario reflects Foucault's notion of how institutional norms can stifle innovation and maintain control over educational practices, ultimately affecting both teaching effectiveness and student engagement.

Reduced Autonomy and Professional Satisfaction

Standardized coursebooks significantly reduced my teaching autonomy, which in turn impacted my professional satisfaction. I felt constrained by the curriculum, which limited my ability to adapt lessons based on student interests. I reflected, "The need to follow the coursebook's prescribed content often left me feeling that my professional judgment was undermined." I felt as though I was kind of enslaved to the coursebook and the syllabus they gave me, experiencing a profound lack of autonomy. This reduction in autonomy contributed to decreased job satisfaction, a phenomenon that aligns with Foucault's theories on the impact of disciplinary structures on individual motivation. For example, I remember during my third year of teaching, I had to cover six units of the Touchstone sourcebook within just 22 sessions. As a result, I had to teach continuously without sufficient time to help my students consolidate and effectively use the language they had learned. I didn't even have adequate time to assess my students during the term. This rigid adherence to the prescribed materials and schedule left me feeling trapped and demoralized, further illustrating how standardized coursebooks can limit a teacher's professional freedom and engagement.

Foucault's concept of disciplinary power helps to explain the profound effects of standardized coursebooks on teaching autonomy and job satisfaction. According to Foucault, disciplinary power operates through mechanisms that impose strict norms and control, shaping individuals' behaviors and practices within institutional frameworks (Foucault, 1977). The coursebooks' rigid structure exemplifies such mechanisms, as they enforce a standardized approach to teaching that limits flexibility and personal agency. My experience of feeling "enslaved" to the coursebook reflects Foucault's notion of how disciplinary power can constrain autonomy and suppress individual creativity. The intense pressure to adhere to a predefined curriculum without room for adaptation or assessment resonates with Foucault's idea that such disciplinary structures can lead to feelings of entrapment and demoralization. The inability to address students' needs or engage in meaningful professional practices due to the constraints of standardized materials highlights the broader implications of power dynamics in education. This lack of professional freedom and satisfaction illustrates how institutional norms and expectations can undermine teachers' motivation and effectiveness, reinforcing the disciplinary control exerted by standardized educational materials.

Findings as a Trainer and Syllabus Designer

Training Responsibilities

In my role as a trainer, I encountered challenges in preparing educators to work within the constraints of standardized coursebooks. My training focused heavily on how to use these materials effectively, limiting opportunities to explore diverse teaching approaches. I reflected, "Training sessions were predominantly centered on the coursebook, leaving little room to introduce alternative methods or foster creativity among teachers." This focus constrained professional development and mirrored the broader impact of disciplinary power on teaching practices. For instance, some effective teaching frameworks, such as the situational presentation of language or the process approach to teaching writing, are time-consuming but highly

effective. Despite their potential benefits, I found it necessary to abandon these methods in my training sessions. Instead, I could only briefly present these approaches without integrating them into the practical training because the standardized coursebooks left no room for such innovative frameworks. The necessity to align training with the constraints of the coursebooks underscored how the rigidity of standardized materials not only limits teachers' instructional practices but also impacts the development of diverse teaching skills.

The constraints faced in training educators reflect Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, which regulates and controls behavior through standardized norms and practices (Foucault, 1977). In this context, the emphasis on coursebook-centered training illustrates how disciplinary mechanisms enforce conformity and restrict opportunities for professional growth and pedagogical innovation. The decision to exclude effective, yet time-consuming teaching frameworks highlights the conflict between the demands of standardized curricula and the potential benefits of alternative approaches. By prioritizing coursebook adherence over diverse teaching methods, the training process reinforces a uniform approach to education, limiting the development of teachers' creative and pedagogical skills. This scenario exemplifies how disciplinary power can constrain professional development and perpetuate a controlled educational environment, ultimately impacting the quality and diversity of teaching practices.

Syllabus Design

As a syllabus designer, I was required to align syllabuses strictly with coursebook content. This requirement restricted my ability to create innovative assessments and curricula. I observed, "The need to design syllabuses based on coursebook content limited my creative freedom and reinforced a narrow approach to education." Schools' and institute principals consistently requested that I design language curriculums based on the coursebooks, as these materials were seen as reliable guides for structuring the beginning and end of a curriculum. Once the curriculum was designed, I was often tasked with training teachers to use the coursebooks effectively. This process aimed to create a standardized route map for their institutes, leaving little room for teacher autonomy, creativity, or the incorporation of authentic materials. The
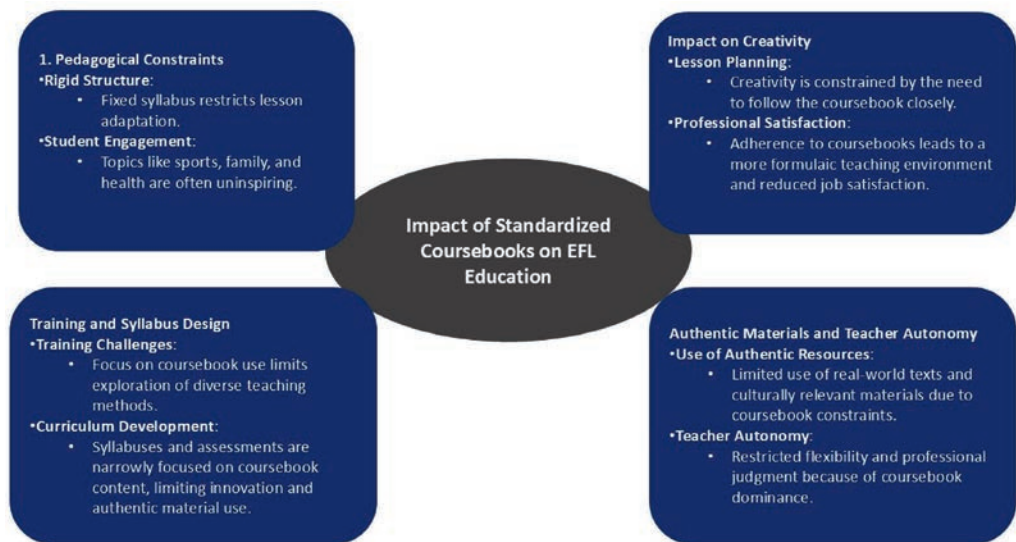

Figure 1 *Impact of standardized coursebooks on EFL education.*

focus on coursebook adherence in syllabus design highlights the constraints imposed by standardized materials, reinforcing Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, where adherence to prescribed norms limits flexibility and innovation.

The requirement to align syllabuses strictly with coursebook content exemplifies Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, which emphasizes how standardized norms control and constrain educational practices (Foucault, 1977). By mandating that syllabuses and teacher training be closely tied to coursebook content, institutions reinforce a narrow and controlled approach to curriculum development. This standardization creates a rigid framework that prioritizes conformity and uniformity over creativity and teacher autonomy. The insistence on coursebook-based curricula and training illustrates how institutional norms limit opportunities for innovative assessments and authentic material integration. As a result, the curriculum becomes a tool of control rather than a flexible framework that can adapt to diverse educational needs and contexts. This alignment with Foucault's notions of power and control demonstrates how disciplinary structures in education can suppress pedagogical innovation and reinforce a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and curriculum design.

Discussion

The findings from this study reveal that standardized coursebooks in the Iranian EFL context function as potent instruments of control, echoing Michel Foucault's theories of power/knowledge and disciplinary power. Foucault (1977) posits that power and knowledge are interlinked, with institutions utilizing knowledge as a means of exerting control. This dynamic is evident in the pervasive influence of standardized coursebooks, which dictate not only the content and methods of teaching but also implicitly regulate educational practices and teacher behavior. Through this lens, coursebooks act as tools of institutional control, shaping the educational experience by reinforcing specific norms and expectations.

The restrictive impact of standardized materials on pedagogical flexibility and creativity aligns with Harwood's (2010) observation that uniform textbooks often constrain instructional approaches in EFL settings. This rigidity resonates with Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, which emphasizes how institutions enforce conformity by normalizing certain practices and restricting deviations from established norms (Popkewitz, 1992). In this context, coursebooks serve as mechanisms of discipline, limiting teachers' autonomy and ability to innovate. Foucault's theory further suggests that such institutional mechanisms produce "docile bodies"— in this case, teachers who are compelled to adhere to prescribed norms, thereby diminishing their professional agency and creative potential.

The study also corroborates the critiques by Azizifar, Koosha, and Lotfi (2009), who argue that global coursebooks often fail to meet the specific educational needs of local contexts. Mohammadkhani et al. (2021) similarly highlight that these textbooks frequently lack critical engagement and interactive elements, which are essential for effective learning. This disconnect between coursebook content and students' evolving preferences, as noted by Alavinia and Siyadat (2013), illustrates a broader issue of epistemic control. By prioritizing standardized knowledge over locally relevant content, coursebooks limit the scope of what is taught, reinforcing Foucault's notion that knowledge is used as a tool for maintaining power within institutional structures.

Further, the constraints on teacher autonomy observed in this study reflect the broader concerns raised by McGrath (2013) regarding the rigid nature of standardized coursebooks. The enforcement of a uniform curriculum not only stifles teachers' ability to adapt instruction to meet the diverse needs of their students but also undermines their professional autonomy and creativity. This phenomenon is a direct manifestation of Foucault's concept of disciplinary

power, where institutions, through regulatory practices, shape individuals into compliant subjects. In the educational context, this translates into teachers whose professional identities are molded by the limitations imposed by standardized materials, often leading to dissatisfaction and reduced engagement in the creative aspects of teaching.

Moreover, incorporating Foucault's concept of governmentality provides a deeper understanding of how institutions exert control not just through overt regulation but through the internalization of norms and practices (Foucault, 1980). The standardization enforced by coursebooks can be seen as a form of governmentality that governs both educators' and learners' behaviors by embedding specific norms and expectations into the educational system. This subtle form of control underscores Foucault's assertion that power operates through the normalization of practices, where individuals regulate themselves in accordance with institutional expectations. In this way, coursebooks do not merely prescribe content; they shape the very practices and identities of those within the educational system.

The findings underscore the pressing need for educational reforms that promote greater flexibility and responsiveness in curriculum design, as advocated by Alavinia and Siyadat (2013) and Littlejohn (2011). By incorporating authentic materials and culturally relevant content, educators can challenge the restrictive norms imposed by standardized coursebooks and better address the diverse needs of learners. This approach would represent a shift towards a more Foucauldian perspective of education, one that resists the disciplinary normalization of teaching practices and embraces diversity, creativity, and contextual relevance.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that standardized coursebooks in the Iranian EFL context act as instruments of control, reflecting Foucault's theories of power/knowledge and disciplinary power. The research highlights the detrimental effects of these materials on teacher autonomy and instructional creativity, emphasizing the need for reforms that support a more flexible and culturally responsive educational framework. By engaging with Foucault's philosophical insights, this study offers a nuanced understanding of the impact of standardized educational practices and proposes pathways for fostering a more dynamic and equitable approach to language education.

Conclusion

Implications of Findings

The findings highlight the pressing need for a more flexible and culturally responsive approach to language teaching. By exposing the constraints imposed by standardized coursebooks, this study advocates for a thorough reevaluation of how educational materials are selected and utilized. Institutes should not restrict teachers to using only the content provided in coursebooks. Instead, they should play a proactive role in empowering educators by offering comprehensive training on selecting the most suitable authentic materials that resonate with students' cultural and educational contexts. Moreover, institutes must take responsibility for providing these diverse and relevant resources, enabling teachers to create a more engaging and effective learning environment that better meets the needs of their students.

Recommendations

For Educators

Educators need to be encouraged to:

- **Integrate Supplementary Materials:** To mitigate the constraints of coursebooks, educators should integrate supplementary materials that reflect

students' interests and cultural backgrounds. While coursebooks are often designed around structured pedagogical materials, this approach can hinder students' exposure to authentic, real-life language experiences. In an EFL context, where opportunities for natural language immersion are limited, it is essential that students engage with authentic materials both inside and outside the classroom. By incorporating these resources, educators can bridge the gap between standardized content and the diverse needs of learners, ultimately enhancing their language proficiency and engagement.

- **Foster Creativity:** Developing creative teaching methods that extend beyond the boundaries of coursebooks can result in more engaging and collaborative lessons, particularly when it comes to teaching challenging subjects like grammar and vocabulary. By embracing creativity in their approach, educators can design activities and exercises that make these difficult concepts more accessible and enjoyable for learners. This flexible approach not only enhances student engagement but also allows teachers to better respond to the diverse needs of their students, ultimately leading to more dynamic and effective learning experiences.

- **Seek Professional Development:** Continuous professional development that emphasizes pedagogical flexibility and innovation is crucial for overcoming the limitations of standardized coursebooks. Engaging in such training equips educators with the tools and strategies to adapt their teaching methods to the specific needs of their students. Bottom-up professional development programs, such as peer coaching or mentoring, can be particularly effective in fostering teacher autonomy and competence. These collaborative approaches allow teachers to learn from one another, share best practices, and develop the confidence to implement more creative and student-centered instructional strategies. Such schemes can significantly enhance teachers' autonomy and effectiveness by providing continuous support and real-time feedback within a professional learning community (Kamali & Javahery, 2024).

For Policymakers

Policymakers should consider:

- **Supporting Teacher Autonomy:** Providing resources and support that enable teachers to adapt and innovate within the constraints of standardized curricula is essential. By fostering a supportive school culture, revising curriculum and assessment frameworks, encouraging teacher input in decision-making, enhancing resource availability, and promoting reflective practices, educators can be better empowered to enhance their teaching practices. Allowing teachers the freedom to assess their learners formatively throughout the terms further supports their ability to adapt instruction based on real-time student needs. These measures collectively contribute to creating a more dynamic and engaging learning environment, where teachers can innovate and respond effectively to their students' diverse needs while still meeting the overarching goals of standardized curricula.

- **Promoting Flexibility:** Educational frameworks should be designed to foster greater flexibility and responsiveness in teaching and learning. By creating syllabuses and curricula that address both pedagogical goals and real-life needs

of language learners, educational systems can alleviate the pressure on teachers to strictly adhere to coursebook content. This flexibility allows educators to tailor their methods to better suit the unique needs of their students, leading to more engaging and productive lessons. Ultimately, such an approach not only enhances the relevance of instruction but also improves educational outcomes by reducing the constraints imposed by rigid coursebooks and enabling a more responsive and effective teaching environment.

Contributions to the Field

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of how coursebooks function as instruments of power and control within educational systems. By applying Michel Foucault's concepts of power/knowledge and disciplinary power, the research offers new insights into the dynamics of standardized educational materials. It underscores how coursebooks, as tools of control, negatively impact teaching practices and teacher autonomy. The study reveals that the pervasive influence of standardized coursebooks often results in teachers feeling disempowered and constrained, effectively shaping their professional identity in ways that align with Foucault's notion of disciplinary mechanisms. This influence not only limits teachers' creativity and flexibility but also perpetuates a form of professional subjugation, reducing educators to mere enforcers of predefined curricula. Moreover, practically, the research provides actionable recommendations for both educators and policymakers. The insights gained from this study can inform strategies for improving educational practices and policies, particularly in contexts where standardized materials dominate. By addressing the limitations of coursebooks, the research aims to enhance the effectiveness and relevance of language teaching, ultimately contributing to better educational outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research

Study Limitations

This study is limited by its focus on a single educational context—the Iranian EFL setting—and the subjective nature of autoethnographic research. While the findings offer valuable insights, they may not be generalizable to other contexts. Additionally, the personal experiences and biases of the researcher may influence the interpretation of the data. To enhance the accuracy and generalizability of future research, several recommendations can be made. Researchers should consider conducting comparative studies across different educational contexts and cultural settings to identify commonalities and variations in the impact of standardized coursebooks. Employing a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative data with qualitative insights can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. Furthermore, future studies should explore the effects of specific types of coursebooks and pedagogical materials, as well as institutional support mechanisms, on teaching practices and teacher autonomy. Investigating the long-term impacts of coursebook reforms on educational outcomes and teacher development could also yield valuable insights. By addressing these areas, future research can build on the current findings and contribute to a more nuanced and widely applicable understanding of the dynamics between standardized materials and educational practices. Additionally, research could examine the role of institutional support in fostering teacher autonomy and innovation. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into how changes in coursebook policies affect teaching practices and student outcomes over time, further contributing to the development of more effective educational strategies.

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