

# Iranian EFL Teachers' Conceptions and Practices of Communicative Language Teaching Curriculum

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## Abstract

Enabling learners to communicate both in an inter-personal level and with people of other nations is greatly emphasized in language learning programs. The present study seeks to analyze the conceptions of Iranian teachers after they implemented the new communicative language teaching (CLT) curriculum. To do so, two teachers were asked to record one session of their classes and subsequently participate in semi-structured interviews to elaborate on their rationale of what they did in the classroom. One of the teachers was a male with over 20 years of teaching experience, and the other was a female with almost the same years of teaching experience as the male. The analysis of the data showed wide discrepancies between teachers' actual activities and the curriculum recommendations. The teachers highlighted their previous schooling as a student as well as contextual realities as factors influencing their teaching. The study highlighted the point that if teachers' beliefs and the contextual realities are not in tune, teachers filter the curriculum in their own preferred ways leading to divergences from the proposed curriculum. Therefore, the study has clear implications for curriculum developers to consider contextual realities when proposing any innovations. It can also be of use for teachers to be aware of the need to be more cautious when implementing a new curriculum.

**Keywords:** Communicative language teaching, National curriculum, Teachers' conceptions, Teachers' practices

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## INTRODUCTION

After three decades of stasis in teaching English in Iran as an English as a foreign language (EFL) context, in 2009 the National Curriculum was approved by the Ministry of Education. As the ministry is the administrative agency in making all top-down decisions with regard to education, this document emphasized computer literacy as well as knowing a foreign language as fundamental requirements (Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015). According to this document, language learning programs in the Iranian context should emphasize gaining proficiency in a foreign language besides mother tongue to enable learners to communicate in an inter-personal level as well as with other nations in regional and global scales to achieve efficacy in economic and scientific developments like tourism, business, and the like (National Curriculum, 2009). According to these goals, the only supported language teaching method was envisaged as the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach whose importance has been underscored in Ng (2020). This approach was characterized by the curriculum planners as “an active communicative self-actualized approach” (National Curriculum, 2009). The curriculum further claimed

Teaching foreign language emphasizes the communicative ability and problem solving in a way that after teaching, the learner is able to communicate using all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) to send and receive meanings. The curriculum on teaching languages should familiarize students with linguistic corpus, vocabulary and required structures to communicate effectively in a global scale.  
(p. 37)

The offshoot of these efforts was the introduction of a six-level course book for secondary and high schools in 2013 and 2014 called respectively as prospect for secondary schools and vision for high schools. With this introduction, there seemed to be a complete overhaul for the old teaching curriculum which was at work for nearly thirty years. The old curriculum

with its heavy emphasis on the traditional language teaching approaches seemed to be an amalgamation of grammar translation methods and some forms of cognitive approaches (Riazi, 2005). In this curriculum, the emphasis was on discrete language elements like grammar, reading, writing, and vocabulary with heavy reliance on repetition and memorization. As was reminiscent of most pre-CLT curricula around the world, there was little attention to the skills of listening and speaking unlike the proposed emphases in the new curriculum on these skills (Baker, 2017; Rahman & Ahmed, 2019; Rahmatuzzman, 2018).

To prepare teachers for this new curriculum some in-service training sessions were held for teachers with the aim of familiarizing them with the requirements of teaching the new series. Some experienced teachers from all provinces were sent to Tehran to be trained for the new curricula by the writers and in a cascade system train other teacher. A ten-day retraining program was designed for teachers to get familiar with the new curriculum, and they were equipped with a CD-ROM about the different parts of the curriculum and teacher's books to accompany them in their way of implementing the new curriculum. It was hoped that this would guarantee their thorough implementation of this curriculum leading to the fulfilment of the envisaged goals. Not surprisingly, this was just one side of the coin.

The other side would definitely depend on how language teachers at the forefront of the curriculum innovation interpret the curriculum and implement it. As it has been witnessed in different parts of the globe mere introduction of a curriculum has not led to its implementation as curriculum developers wish. It means the intended curriculum is something different from the enacted curriculum. One reason for this mismatch might be the different conceptions of the curriculum held by innovators and teachers. As Levitt (2001) argued, for innovation in teaching science, if there are discrepancies between teachers' beliefs and intended innovations, a gap emerges between the intended changes and implemented curriculum which inhibits innovation.

Similar claims have been made about English language teaching

(ELT). As Breen, Hird, Milton and Thwaite (2001) argued, any innovative reform in an ELT classroom should be aligned with the teachers' philosophy of teaching. Therefore, it becomes clear that if there are to be changes in a curriculum, and if the curriculum is to be successful, teachers' conceptions of the curriculum as well as the contextual factors that are thought to affect teachers' implementation of curriculum should be taken into consideration. In line with these arguments and due to the recency of the introduction of the new curriculum in the Iranian context, it merits due attention to analyze the Iranian English language teachers' understanding of the new curriculum and the practices they employ to enact it. Thus, the gap mentioned by research on curriculum innovation can be bridged.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Curriculum innovations around the world and in different disciplines have demonstrated that what has been realized in the classrooms by teachers as the frontiers of curriculum enactment is different from what has been envisaged by curriculum planners and developers. Introduction of new curricula in different parts of the world and subsequent analyses of classroom realities corroborate this. Different research studies have been conducted in the ELT domain to analyze what teachers understand from different curricula and how they implement them. In a qualitative study in Libyan context by Orafi and Borg (2009), English teachers' implementation of new curriculum was analyzed. Using classroom observations and semi-structured interviews they reached to the conclusion that the uptake of the curriculum innovation by English teachers was very little, and there was a gulf of difference between what teachers conducted in their classes and what the developers had in their minds. They believed that the incongruence between teachers' cognitive beliefs and contextual realities of the new curriculum accounted for the limited uptake of this curriculum. Analyzing some episodes of their teaching practices revealed that curriculum-irrelevant factors dominated Libyan teachers' implementation of the new curriculum

leading them to focus on translation to Arabic and focus on vast grammatical explanations instead of communicative activities. The same was also concluded by Rahman, Johan, Selim, Singh, and Shahed (2019) in the context of Bangladesh.

In another similar qualitative study in China, Zheng, and Borg (2014), using the same method as Orafi and Borg (2009), analyzed Chinese teachers' implementation of new task-based teaching curriculum introduced in China in 2003. The three teachers had divergent views on the curriculum even though they had all taken part in retraining course and had either Master of Art (MA) or vast experience in teaching English. Analyzing the real implementation of the curriculum in their classrooms and using observational schemes to check their behaviors with regard to the new curriculum, they found wide discrepancies between what had been proposed in their teacher's book and what actually surfaced in their teachings. One interesting phenomenon was that all three teachers in this study had reported using the teacher's book but their actual practices were so remote from the spirit of CLT and more in line with communicatively-inspired and formal grammar activities. They concluded that large class sizes, classroom management problems in implementing some activities like pair and group-work, mixed ability classes and time pressure as well as imprecise definition of the task accounted for teachers' divergence from the stated goals of the curriculum.

Other similar studies have addressed different aspects of curriculum innovation and discrepancy between stated goals and implemented curriculum in language classrooms. Yan and He (2012) highlighted policy/pedagogy mismatches asserting that obstacles like formal examination imperatives and teachers' and learners' reluctance to adopt the new curriculum as obstacles in implementing the new curriculum introduced in China in 2009. Consulting the literature highlights different reasons for teachers' not implementing the curricula despite their advocacy of the reforms. The reasons can be reducing the curriculum to some rudimentary core to level the playing field for all and ensure their success especially as a

backwash effect of traditional formal examinations, considerable professional and psychological challenges implementing new curricula pose on teachers (Yan, 2012), heterogeneous class compositions, different ability levels, class size, and low proficiency of teachers among others (Li, 1998). He asserted that CLT implementation has faced with failure and proved to be difficult.

Using interviews and focus groups with some teachers as well as supervisors and managers in different parts, Waters and Vilches (2008) attested to the failure of the new ELT reform in the Philippines owing to the incongruence between the teaching context and curriculum design and lack of professional support and instructional materials. They attributed part of the failure to the lack of understanding the curriculum by teachers as a result of transmission rather than the reinterpretation cascade system of retraining programs for teacher (Hayes, 2000). They also believed that lack of resources and funds and not taking into account the contextual realities contributed to teachers' limited understanding of the curriculum and not implementing it in the proposed way. Not taking into account these realities, in their words, leads to innovations which are beyond the "zone of innovation" (Stoller, 1994) leading to controversies between the interests of different stakeholders in the curriculum design and innovation.

It may be reminiscent of our context in Iran, whereas Atai and Mazlum (2013) studied the whole process of curriculum planning, design, and implementation in the Iranian context. In a wide-ranging study of different stakeholders in the process of reform implementation in Iran, they found that somehow the "grand documents" (Ministry of education, 2009) signifies what should be included in the curriculum and how it should be taught. As they believe, mostly teachers' and students' needs and the realities of the context are not taken into account due to the lack of communication between different parties and the unidirectional nature of the communication between them. Their findings also asserted that "politico-ideological" beliefs of materials developers are more important than their expertise (Atai & Mazlum, 2013). Furthermore, the top-down nature of

communication leads to a lack of interaction between different parties, and this unidirectional communication combined with centralized process in setting and enacting policies contributes to a gap between planning and practice leading to marginalization of local teachers and neglecting students' needs.

The matter of interaction between different stakeholders as acknowledged by Atai and Mazlum (2013) has been studied in other research studies pointing to its capability in helping teachers to appropriate new curricula in their teaching. Yuan (2017), taking an activity-theory perspective, studied the curriculum-appropriation process of a group of novice Chinese teachers of the national English curriculum introduced in China in 2009. Using reflective journals written by a group of these teachers, he categorized teachers into three groups of full implementers of the curriculum, partial implementers and non-implementers. Full implementers asserted that receiving help and support and having interaction through public lessons with colleagues and mentors helped them fully appropriate the curriculum and their tendency to help students learn the language rather than getting high scores on the exams. Partial implementers' lack of this type of interaction led to surface mimic of some technical terms from the teachers' guide for the sake of show off and a focus on the vocabulary and grammar instead of language for communication. The third group, non-implementers of the curriculum, used traditional approach. Due to their lack of communication with other colleagues and parties, they saw themselves unable to implement the curriculum and conceived of themselves as "knowledge transmitters and exam machines" (p. 61).

There is no shortage of studies in the literature on the curriculum innovation and enactment. In fact, the lack of congruence between curriculum rhetoric and context realities has been studied from different perspectives in different contexts in the literature (Wang, 2010 in China; Nunan, 2003 in seven Asian pacific countries; to name just a few). In addition, different factors have been mentioned as contributing to this gap (e.g., Jiang, Zhang, May, & Qin, 2020; Van de Oudeweetering & Voogt,

2018; Wang, 2010). As mentioned in the above section, Atai and Mazlum (2013) also studied the whole process of curriculum planning in the Iranian context through a qualitative study but as the inner thoughts of practicing teachers have not been included in their study and teachers' views were limited to some open-ended questions in a questionnaire and even the actual lessons taught by these teachers have not been included, the present study seeks to bridge this gap. Furthermore, the present study is inspired by the newer version of the curriculum, which claims to be more communicatively oriented rather than the previous curricula that were mainly based on older theories and conceptualization of curriculum.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

By the introduction of the new curriculum for the Iranian schools in 2012, a major shift in conceptualization of language teaching happened. By the emphasis of the new curriculum on using language for self-confident, active communicative use of language (Ministry of Education, 2012) in classes, the teachers were no longer expected to focus on the old ways of teaching; rather, they were obliged to change their teaching based on new program. This meant empowering students to use language to express themselves actively and independently both inside and outside classroom, but achieving these goals is not as straightforward as it is claimed in the documents of the new curriculum. As the review of the literature reveals, teachers diverge in their teaching from the proposed guidelines despite the in-service training they receive and the teacher's guide recommendations. Due to the recency of this innovation in the Iranian context and dearth of research with regard to the real implementation of this innovation, this study seeks to analyze the new curriculum as it is practiced by Iranian English language teachers in their everyday classes. This qualitative study would examine the following research questions:

- (1) What discrepancies can be discerned between Iranian English language teachers' practices in classroom and those recommended

by the curriculum?

(2) What factors account for these inconsistencies where there are incongruences between teachers' practices and proposed ones?

(3) What conceptualizations of CLT do Iranian EFL teachers hold?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Classroom recordings and semi-structured interviews with two Iranian secondary school teachers of English both working in state schools in a western city of Iran were used in detail in the present study. One of the teachers was a male and preferred to be addressed as Mr. Alex after he was asked to choose a pseudonym for the sake of protecting his identity. He was 45 years old and had taught English for over 20 years in the education system of Iran. The other was a female whose preference for being addressed was Ms. Mirhassani. She was in her forties and had 20 years of teaching experience as an English teacher in the education system of Iran. This was done to pinpoint their conceptions of CLT, their practices and inconsistencies in implementing the new curriculum. Both (one female and one male) have more than fifteen years of teaching experience and have taught the new series (*Prospect*) from its inception in 2012. They were selected based on convenience because they willingly decided to take part in the present study. At first, they were suggested to be video-recorded while they were teaching, but they just agreed to audio-tape their own classes and be interviewed subsequently. The official permissions were also granted from the headquarters of the Ministry of Education, and formal protocols were met.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Since the purpose of any qualitative study is to “understand the inner perspectives and meanings of actions and events of those being studied”

(Anderson & Burns, 1989, p. 67), class recordings as well as semi-structured interviews were used to discern the underlying reasons of why teachers do what they do. Teachers in the preset study were initially interviewed for nearly 15 minutes and their background information, teaching experience, their general inclinations toward the new curriculum and their experience in teaching the new curriculum were elicited. They then voluntarily agreed to record their own classes and subsequently take part in a semi-structured interview about their lessons. Because it was near the end of the academic year, they both were to teach the last lesson of grade seven book entitled *My Favorite Food*. Each lesson in the book comprises of three parts of conversation and practice, literacy activities and communicative activities. They were to teach communicative activities. In this section of the lesson, first, there are listening and writing activities in which students listen to two conversations and choose correct answers in a table. In the second part of the activity titled speaking and writing, they should interview three people and write in the table their favorite food and drink. Lastly, they should role play a situation and ask some people their favorite food and drink. The teachers recorded their own classes, and with their own help the lessons were transcribed verbatim. To clarify how each class was recommended to be held based on the curriculum, an explanation of the recommended curriculum and the recommended format of each lesson has been provided below.

### ***Curriculum Recommendations***

As recommended by the curriculum, there should be focus on active self-actualized communicative activities along with problem solving for students (National Curriculum, 2009). The teacher's guide emphasizes that the method adopted in the series is a communicative approach with considering two characteristics of the *active role of participants in the teaching/learning process* and *emphasis on the fortification of problem-solving personality and self-actualization* (Teacher's guide for the seventh grade, 2012, p. 8,

emphasis added). The teacher's guide enlists the duties of teachers in this process as follows:

- ✓ In the process of teaching, mainly there should be a focus on meaning, although it does not mean neglecting form.
- ✓ Students should be allowed to have interactions to express their opinions and beliefs.
- ✓ In doing listening and reading activities, there should be some provisions for students to understand meaning and react properly to what they have read or listened.
- ✓ One of the characteristics of communication is its unpredictability and communication gap so there should be some preparation for students to make them ready for these.
- ✓ To foster communicative competence in learners, students should experience four language skills in purposeful activities.

Teacher's intervention to correct students' errors should not distort communication process. In other words, teachers' intervention should reduce to bare minimum. (teacher's guide for the seventh grade, 2012, p. 9).

### ***The Recommended Format of the Lesson***

The format for the lesson which was to be taught is derived exactly from the teacher's guide for the seventh grade (teacher's guide for the seventh grade, 2012, pp. 91-93). As mentioned in the above sections, the topic of the lesson was my favorite food. The day's lesson was communicative activities in which students were to do communicative activities about their favorite food and drinks. At first, they had to listen to the CD and in the table choose favorite food and drinks of the people they heard. According to the teacher's guide suggestions, students should discuss these people's answers and compare them with their own answers. This activity deemed to take 15 minutes. There is a recommendation to add five more minutes as warm-up before embarking on this activity.

For the next section of the class, called speaking and writing, the explicit focus is on asking other people's favorite food and drink and fill in the table in the book. The focus here is on four skills as they should read the table, ask other people's choice, listen to answers, and then write in the table the answers they have heard. Then, they had to ask and answer other peoples' favorite food and drinks and write them in the table. This part is deemed to foster pair and group work, and according to the teacher's guide, it should take about 15 minutes.

The last section in this lesson is called *Your Conversation*, in which students are presented with an incomplete conversation. According to the teacher's guide, in this part they should pair-up and practice the functions they have learnt so far. It is recommended that this be just a sample conversation in which they should just speak. They are advised not to write anything here. The teacher should walk around and check their work and preside over their pair-work. Finally, students should act out the conversation in front of the class as a group activity. What follows is the findings obtained from the analysis of each one of the teachers.

## **Data Analysis**

The analysis of these transcripts yielded some themes and topics to be covered in the subsequent interviews. Conducting interviews is important as they provide insider views of the lesson as well as helping to provide insights on what teachers do in the special situation of their class (Breen et al. 2001). The interviews lasted for an hour each and were conducted in Persian; thus, it allowed the teachers to express their ideas more eloquently and confidently. Then, they were translated and sent to the teachers for checking and corroboration so that member checking could also be done (Nassaji, 2020). During the interviews teachers provided comments on the activities they did and provided rationale for their decisions and procedures. The use of decision making and checking teachers' follow-up pedagogical reasoning has also been highly recommended by some recently published

works (e.g., Khatib & Saeedian, 2021a, 2021b). These transcripts were analyzed with the intention of finding out about their perceptions of the curriculum and the reasons of their actions in the class.

## RESULTS

In this section, each teacher's classroom conducts as well as the techniques and methods used by each are presented and discussed. First, the observed lesson is presented and then a comparison is made with curriculum recommendations. The extracts from the interviews are presented along with the teachers' comments and the rationale for what they did. The comments related to the beliefs of each one of the teachers and the influential contextual factors have been provided below.

### Mr. Alex's Class

Mr. Alex's class was composed of six stages. First, there was a separate emphasis on vocabulary through a film, again reviewing the vocabulary, a limited communicative activity, highlighting vocabulary again through a game and a poster, and finally pair-work and acting out the conversation. Table 1 shows his classroom activities and allotted time to each activity.

**Table 1:** *Overview of the lesson taught by Mr. Alex*

Stage	Activity	Time allocated (min)
1	Watching a film and highlighting vocabulary	6
2	Reviewing vocabulary	2
3	Limited communicative activities asking students favorite breakfast	2
4	Highlighting vocabulary through a game	7
5	Highlighting vocabulary through a poster	2
6	Pair-work and acting out conversation	7

As it is evident from Table 1 and the proposed lesson format, Mr. Alex's teaching is divergent from the recommendations of the curriculum in some

ways. First, there is limited focus on pair-work as the whole structure of this part evolves around pair and group work. Consulting the course book, it is evident that there is no need for extra focus on vocabulary in this part as these have been emphasized in the initial sections of this lesson. Next, there are no opportunities for students to have communicative activities as recommended by the curriculum. The questions with regard to these discrepancies will be asked and Mr. Alex's answers will be presented and then analyzed.

At first, the reason for so much focus on vocabulary was probed. He believed that he taught and emphasized the vocabulary as providing a background to the lesson. He also believed that he had focused on vocabulary as a kind of assessment to make sure what they knew and what they did not know. Another reason for his focus on vocabulary was that he wanted to make them familiar with the dictation of the words. He also believed that because they had covered the functions and conversation of the lesson, now it was time for them to focus on the form of the words. His way of teaching vocabulary is also reminiscent of the old methods as when he was asked why putting so much pressure on vocabulary he continued:

*Look they have studied the lesson in previous sessions [he means in the conversation and practice section as well as literacy teaching section] and they are now just doing communication activities. They have covered the conversation in the previous section and now I just want them to see the form of the vocabulary words in fact the dictation of the words. [He added that in his class he covered the words on the poster and asked the students by looking at the picture, repeat the words. In some cases, he makes some repetitions and asks the students to repeat after him]. First without having a look at the written form and then by looking at the written form. It is a kind of moving from known to unknown.*

After practicing the vocabulary, he went through the book to do the listening and writing activity. Although the activity is ripe with opportunities for

communicative activities, it is reduced to a mechanical activity of just listening and selecting the right answer in the book. The teacher comments on this part as follows:

*Listening and writing mmm, where they should listen to the CD and write, you know, I play the CD and ask them to listen and check individually and play it once more and ask them to listen and compare their answers with their partners and check who has been right and wrong.*

As it is evident from the above comment, the curriculum recommendations for this part are neglected. This part, which should take about 15 minutes, lasts only one or two minutes and is reduced to a mechanical activity of selecting just the right answer and check whether the selected answer is right or wrong.

The next topic of concern in the curriculum is the primacy of pair-work. The curriculum directly emphasizes that there must be pair and group work in order to foster self-actualized active communicative way of learning the language (National Curriculum, 2009). However, this philosophy is accepted with a caution by the teacher as he believes that through pair-work the students only work with their own partners and just do the job in any way possible. He added that he had to renew their partners to prevent them from working with their friends just for the sake of formality. Again, there is no appreciation of the value of pair-work in enhancing the opportunities for communication in the class.

In the next section of the lesson, called speaking and writing, he simply asks the students to ask three people their favorite food and drink and fill in the table. In fact, in this part the precious opportunity of focusing on communicative activities is lost because this activity is simply reduced to a mechanical activity of filling out a table. During this activity, he walks through students and checks their work. This part inadvertently creates an opportunity for analyzing the teacher's reaction to the students' errors. In a part of the transcript, it is clear that he stops one of the students during a pair-work and correct some mistakes. When inquired about the reason for

interrupting, he asserted that “*Look because I didn’t want to bold students’ mistakes and humiliate them because of their errors I was just stopping them and telling to students themselves their errors and among that noise nobody notices others mistakes.*”

The last section in the lesson is an incomplete conversation in which students have to reconstruct the conversation in pairs. The general recommendation by the teacher’s guide is that teachers skip the difficult vocabulary here and just highlight the functions. Students have to do this part in pairs or groups and act it out in the class. The teacher’s guide recommends teachers not to write anything here; instead, they should just practice it in an oral format. From the lesson observed, it was clear that no student volunteered to do this part. The teacher was asked what happens when there are no volunteers. He believes that

*I lower my expectations. If I ask a question and there are no volunteers maybe the level of my question is high. Maybe instruction has not been successful because the purpose of our initial assessment is assessing the capabilities and that may be a high estimation. If there are no volunteers it may be my fault or my students’ so I lower my expectations in order for the class to take a shape and then I transfer the volunteers who are more advanced to the next session to have more time for their out of class activities and do their job.*

This way the teacher simply skips a troublesome part of the lesson without actually engaging with it and makes benefits for the sake of promoting communication in the class.

As a general question about the overall structure of the curriculum as a whole and probing his ideas of what he conceives of the method advocated by the book, his comments are worth mentioning here. He insists that the method followed (i.e., promoting meaning over form) is not efficient as this direction of movements in the book from meaning to form is not a sound strategy. The following excerpt from this teacher’s comments best captures this idea:

*I have edited some manuscripts [about this book] and called them the lost rings of the book. There are some necessary topics that have not even been discussed in the teachers' book something very clear like the imperatives. We even do not talk about the imperatives in the secondary junior schools despite the fact that the language functions in our classes most of the times are "stand up, sit down". Where should we teach them in our books? Look the natural learning is most of the time learning the imperatives. But they aren't. The books say little about "there is, there are" or I don't know a and an, it explains little. "This is, that is, these are, those are" are not in our books at all. I think there must be form because learning is easier. Well, look, I say the form must be in the service of meaning not the meaning in the service of form i.e., we reach meaning using form. That is our movement should be from form to meaning.*

Based on the points extracted from the lesson taught, some reasons and possible implications can be considered. The first is the vast use of the mother tongue as used by the teacher. On the contrary to the recommendations, to enable the students to communicate as efficiently as possible, the use of the students' mother tongue all the time deprives them of this opportunity. The reason for this use may be the lack of proficiency on the part of teacher to use the language fluently. This phenomenon was observed in many instances in the lesson observed as the teacher was unable to speak fluently, and his speaking was full of hesitations and pronunciation errors. The other reason may be that the teacher hesitates if he uses English in the class, the students will not understand him. This fact was even observed when the teacher gave some directions in English and then translated them into the students' mother tongue. When asked why, he replied because he simply did not want to leave anything vague in his lesson.

### **Ms. Mirhassani's Class**

Ms. Mirhassani's class composed of seven stages. First, there was a review of the vocabulary of the lesson through a matching activity where the students matched the words written on a restaurant menu with pictures. They then listened to a short song in which the same words related to food were practiced. The teacher stopped them in some points because they were to translate some sentences of the song. In the third stage, they went through the listening and writing part of the lesson in which the students were to read the items aloud and translate them before listening to the audio. Then, there was a vocabulary review activity in which the teacher asked them some words, and they were to translate the words into Persian. The following part of the lesson was a speaking and writing activity in which the students were to ask each other's favorite food and drink. The teacher here did not encourage any communicative activity. On the contrary, she herself told them what to write in the blanks. From the three items in this part, just the last one was done by the students themselves. During this activity, she directly corrected students' errors. The last activity, *Your Conversation Part*, was conducted as a role play in which she first reviewed the vocabulary and functions and then asked them to do a role play.

As it is clear, again there are many curriculum-irrelevant activities in her lesson like asking the students to translate or discouraging the students' active roles in class. In the following section, the rationale behind what she did in her class is elaborated on to shed light on what conceptions of the curriculum drove her teaching.

The first element discerned in her teaching was an undue emphasis on vocabulary as it was evident in different phases of her teaching. Most of the time this vocabulary teaching was accompanied by translating the same words to students' mother tongue. When asked why putting so much pressure on vocabulary, she commented that so much emphasis was because she thought this emphasis would foster comprehension on the part of the students and make them ready for the final tests. When asked whether she

puts the same amount of emphasis on other elements like grammar because there is grammar in the final tests as well, she asserted that not the same amount of emphasis is put on grammar in her classes because in her words using meaning, students can master grammar. The following excerpt from the interview best captures the teachers' reason for this:

*I think the main thing for the tests is the vocabulary. The main factor in student's learning is vocabulary. This way I get better results in the final examinations. Whenever I teach, I teach the words time and again. I teach part of a lesson and again refer to the words. I think if they learn the vocabulary, using meaning they can get along well with grammar. Grammar is something innate which is in the language of the man. From the first days of my learning of the language I was so. If I would understand the meaning I could unscramble the sentences.*

As it is clear from this comment, the teacher's decision to include emphasis on vocabulary is more concerned with her preoccupation with final tests and her schooling as a student.

Another important element in her class was her extensive use of read-aloud and translation techniques. She used these in different phases of her lesson. In fact, she changed some communicative activities to these activities. For example, in the listening and writing section, where students were to listen to the audio, discuss the people's favorite food and drink, check the right item, and at last compare their answers with each other to reach a final decision, she changed this to a read-aloud and translation activity instead. In addition, she herself told them what to choose as the right answer. In fact, in this phase, a precious opportunity to provide the students with a communicative activity was superseded by a mechanical drill. The teacher uses the read-aloud technique as a technique to make them ready for the activity and to eradicate their pronunciation errors. The following excerpt illuminates her rationale for using this activity:

*I want them become familiar with the items and when they listen to the audio for the second time, they could hear it. The only*

*thing I can do here is to ask them to read the items aloud so it becomes familiar for them and when I play the CD, they could hear it. [I use read-aloud] to eradicate their pronunciation errors.*

Equally important is her rationale in using translation. She believes that using translation, she could contribute to understanding the meaning. She used this technique in different phases of her lesson. In her opinion, this way she could help students master the meanings. One tenable reason for this activity may be that she does not believe that through communicative activities meanings can be conveyed without using direct translation. Her comments with regard to this activity are worth attention:

*I am not sure whether what I do is correct or not but I emphasize meaning too much. I emphasize on translation i.e., for [emphasizing] both comprehension and understanding. They should learn the meaning. I believe that there is no language learning without meaning.*

In teaching the next part of the lesson, *Speaking and Writing*, where the students are to do a communicative activity of asking other people's favorite food and drink, the teacher decided to change the activity to a game with a limited communicative focus in which the other students should ask the student's favorite food. In doing this activity, one of the students has a problem with grammar. This provides an opportunity to focus on her method of correcting students' errors. When asked how she corrects students' errors, her comments aligned with the proposed curriculum recommendations of not inferring in the communication process. In practice, she stopped one of the students to correct her error. In probing the reason for doing this, she encapsulates her method as:

*If they [errors] are not in a way that they change the meaning or be a minor pronunciation one and I know that when they learn next lessons they will be eradicated I have nothing to do with them but when I see that they change the meaning or fossilization happens I try to correct them or ask one of the*

*students what the correct form of the word she used is and that one tells the correct form but if it [the error] is so blatant I say them you should have told this and then ask them to repeat it.*

In the transcript of the lesson, the error as mentioned was a problem with using possessive. Instead of saying *Leila's food*, the student said *Leila food*. Then the teacher stopped the student and corrected her. Even she continued to focus on other ways of saying possession like possessive adjectives and asked the students to repeat after her.

Another activity which grabbed attention in the lesson was the teacher's excessive emphasis on the writing skill. Although the curriculum recommends focusing on skills, in the book for the seventh grade, writing is limited to copying as it is clear from the activities provided in the book. In the listening and writing section, they have to just check the correct items. In the speaking and writing section, which follows the listening and writing sections, the students should ask others' favorite food and drink and just copy the words they hear from the photo dictionary (Prospect 1, 2012). Through reviewing the lesson, it becomes clear that the students spend some time on writing in different phases of the lesson in which they are asked to write some words. Furthermore, the teacher adds dictation to her class. In the initial phase of her class as she was reviewing the vocabulary, she asked the students to write some words on the board and asked others whether the dictation of the words were correct or not. Observing this led to the question of what is the place of writing in her class. She believed that

*I am not sure whether I am right or not but writing is important for me although it is not suggested by the teacher's guide. I want them to learn the spelling. It is wonderful that the new books do not emphasize dictation anymore but in my classes I use it. Even I have separate tests of dictation in my classes.*

In a general question of how they conceive of the curriculum's focus on meaning rather than form, this comment best captured her opinion. In fact, most of the activities highlighted in this lesson can be attributed to this comment by the teacher.

*At first there should be little emphasis [on form] for example limited to it is. In places where there are usages for, he is, she is and the like even in seventh grade, the teacher could emphasize [them] in the ends of the academic year not in the beginnings where the students are familiar somehow [with these forms] he can emphasize that with she we use is or with you we use are, with they we use are. I emphasize these things at the end of the academic year. In the eighth grade this [focus] is essential. The teacher must explain them because they are both puzzled and cannot work to their best in examinations. For example, we give them blanks to be filled with proper possessive pronoun. If we haven't explained these, they won't be able to do it. They can't even understand am, is, are, just in functions. You have to explain them the form. I don't know whether it is good or bad but I feel that these books are similar to the books taught at language institutes i.e., they do not teach the form so quickly, they first begin with vocabulary or make the students familiar with English and then go through the forms.*

As the last question of what is her conception of the CLT as a whole, her comments show much about her understanding of the curriculum and how she translates this understanding to her daily classroom. In fact, in her understanding, she considers many things impossible, so she decides not to include them in her lesson or somehow, she gives shallow interpretations to these principles and tries to replace them with activities in which she could exert more control.

*CLT as far as I know, its conversations should be in a way that they [students] feel that they are in a real second language context, English context. In teaching based on CLT, I would put the chairs in a circle or U-shaped position. Then I would teach the structures and ask them to have conversations in dyads. I then would stand up one of the students and I tell her to ask this question from another student over there to prevent these two of*

*having a conspiracy to do just this special part. I asked them you ask this question, you answer this part, now you ask, you answer i.e., by CLT it is meant the connection between the learners.*

In a follow-up question of whether she thought this curriculum, which is aligned with CLT perspectives, would work in our context, she was hesitant that this system was efficient in our context. The following comment by the teacher makes this clear.

*Yeah, it may be possible. Look from the beginning we have grown up with this thinking that, when we were students and then after we became teachers, that we just want to pass a lesson and it wouldn't be useful and applicable anywhere. Never have we emphasized this [transferring the leaning to the outside world]. Our thinking is always that English will have no use in our country and won't be necessary. Take it and pass it. Just this. We ourselves wanted it to just pass the lessons and the students want the same thing. We just ask them to pass it and go. We don't make them ready for the reality.*

Finally, a list of reasons behind the teachers' improper implementation of CLT has been brought here.

**Table 2:** *Reasons for the teachers' improper implementations of CLT*

Themes	
1	Misunderstanding CLT
2	Preoccupation with final tests
3	Teachers' schooling experience
4	Disbelief in CLT
5	Misunderstanding the curriculum objectives
6	Preoccupation with accuracy instead of fluency
7	Prevent control problems in the class
8	Avoiding time consuming and difficult-to-implement activities
9	Misjudgment of learners' abilities
10	Teacher's low language proficiency

Based on Table 2, the most common reason why the teachers failed to implement CLT was the fact that they misunderstood the concept of CLT while the least frequent one was the teachers' low linguistic proficiency in English.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of the current study are not unlike what has been reported in the literature as mentioned in the above section. The first research question in the present study sought to find what discrepancies can be discerned between these two teachers' classroom practices and the recommended practices of the curriculum. The findings showed that the curriculum recommendations are not reflected in the teachers' teaching; instead, the class is replete with teacher-led activities. Instead of problem-solving and communicative activities, the teachers' classes were mainly characterized by the lack of pair-work and widespread use of mother-tongue, focus on activities so-called alien to most CLT classes like dictation, translation, read-aloud, undue focus on language forms, skipping taxing activities and replacing communicative activities with less demanding ones and papering students for final tests. In fact, the teachers altered the curriculum in their own preferred ways. This finding is in agreement with that of Rahman and Ahmed (2019), who stated that training teachers did not significantly affect the way the teachers in their study used the CLT techniques. Like the two participants in this study, Rahman and Ahmed (2019) highlighted the point that the teachers valued the importance of CLT techniques. However, they failed to apply them in their actual classes.

The interviews show that the teachers' own understanding of the curriculum, whether right or wrong, predominates those of the curriculum recommendations. This may be attributable to teachers' mistrust to the curriculum or any innovations proposed by the Ministry of Education. This may stem from their limited uptake of the curriculum as well. In the same vein, Levitt (2001) and Jiang et al. (2020) believed 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. Otherwise, as Orafi and Borg (2009) noted, teachers filter the new curricula according to what they consider feasible and sound in their own context of teaching. In line with Van de Oudeweetering and Voogt (2018) and Wang (2010), the result is a radical departure from the intended policies of the curriculum as it was witnessed in the current study.

The teachers in this study did not have a complete understanding of CLT in general and the curriculum in particular. This is evident in their answers to the questions asked about their conceptions of CLT and their opinions towards the new curriculum. It seems that as their understanding of CLT remains naïve, they render the curriculum to a bare minimum to tackle this difficulty. It was evident in the parts of the lesson. As an example, the *listening and writing* activity which demands teachers to lead a discussion in English was reduced to a read-aloud activity or the *Your Conversation* part is either skipped or altered to a role play for the simple reason that it is demanding on the part of teacher. This finding resembles that of Rahman and Ahmed (2019), where the teachers started scolding the CLT approach for its mismatches with the assessment criteria. They, in fact, did not know how to implement the approach correctly.

Some reasons can be stated for not implementing the proposed curriculum. One reason may be attributable to teachers' poor language skills. During the lesson observed, the problems with the teachers' own language proficiency was clear as their speaking was full of grammatical and pronunciation problems and even, they could not join sentences together to give directions in English. Nunan (2003) in a study of some ELT programs in some Asian countries added that teachers' poor English skills and their inadequate preparation make CLT implementation cumbersome if not totally impossible.

Matters of control may be mentioned as another factor. As both teachers in this study used to teach in ordinary classes with large student populations, the problem of classroom control in some classes also surfaces.

New curriculum demands teachers to exert less direct control on their classrooms, so this threatens teachers' authority as they are accustomed to it during their years of teaching. Therefore, they avoid activities which makes problems for their control of the class like role plays or pair-work activities. It is an asset for teachers in the Iranian context to have silent in-control classes rather than the noise produced by having students doing communicative activities with so much noise and losing control. In the classes analyzed, it was evident that all the interactions were top-down mostly initiated by the teacher. This way the teachers had full control in the class and introduced the activities as they wished.

The effect of assessment on curriculum implementation has also been highlighted. Without making alignments with assessment system, any changes in the teaching system would be rendered meaningless. Orafi and Borg (2009) believed that if changes in language teaching policies are not supported by changes in the assessment, there would be little impact on classroom teaching. The same has also been underscored by Rahman and Ahmed (2019). As it was evident in the findings of the current study, final examinations used to influence teachers' decisions and directions in the classroom. The reason for this emphasis on final examinations is related somehow to the evaluation of teachers based on quantity rather than quality in Iranian Ministry of Education (Atai & Mazlum, 2013). In fact, teachers in Iran are evaluated by the number of students who pass the final exams, so this may lead to teachers' inclination to prepare their students for final exams instead of focusing on communicative activities.

ELT teachers in Iran are presented with an assessment plan, called Barombandi (Atai & Mazlum, 2013), to use it as a blueprint for preparing their examinations. In the past, these documents recommended the proportion of different aspects to be tested like the amount of grammar, vocabulary, reading, and the like to be included in the test. By the introduction of the new curriculum, the nature of this Barombandi (Atai & Mazlum, 2013) also went through changes to more reflect the views embedded in the curriculum. Some caution should be exercised that due to

the complexities involved in this document, there is a problem of misunderstanding on the parts of teachers to interpret the organizations of their tests.

In line with the existing literature, the dangers of including unclear assessment techniques in assessing students have also been highlighted in the present study. This is primarily so because in designing this new blueprint, it seems that this caution has not been taken into consideration completely. Incidentally, instead of focusing on language forms, this new document focuses on the amount of score each skill or integration of skills should carry (Ministry of Education, 2012). Twenty scores out of 100 is dedicated to both reading/writing and listening/writing activities on a pencil and paper format. The rest is dedicated to listening and speaking and formative assessment of teachers during the year, but the only criterion for teacher evaluation is the scores on the papers which are archived at schools and Ministry evaluators and head office officials consider as the prime source of teachers' performance. The number of students who have scored high indicate the teachers' performance in the class. Therefore, in accordance with Khatib and Saeedian (2021a, 2021b), the two teachers in this study justify their decisions by providing a reason for not implementing CLT techniques.

The mentioned problems in this study are not just peculiar to the Iranian context. CLT implementation has faced difficulties in different contexts. To tackle this problem, the unique nature of that context should be taken into account. For the Iranian context, as Atai and Mazlum (2013) recommended, ELT-specific criteria can be developed to do away with the problem of teacher evaluation and its impact on curriculum innovation. The quality of in-service training should also improve. The participants in this study believed that the quality of in-service trainings they received was low and did not contribute to their understandings of CLT and the curriculum. This is true because most of the in-service training sessions are of transmissive cascade nature rather than reinterpetive one (Waters and Vilche, 2008). Furthermore, Waters and Vilche (2008) claimed that the

incongruence between the proposed curriculum and the enacted one may be related to shortcomings in teacher development and teaching materials and lack of fit between the curriculum teaching approach and teaching situation realities. Taking all considerations into account may lead to better enactment of the curriculum.

Developing supportive conditions both in schools and between teachers as inclusive implementers of any curriculum and other officials is also of paramount importance in urging teachers to appropriate a curriculum. Yuan (2017) concluded that “the teachers’ curriculum appropriation was strongly influenced by the micro-politics of their school systems with different stakeholders (e.g., their students, colleagues, and school leaders)” (p. 63). She further added that “curriculum reform is more likely to take place in a work context with rich resources and competent teachers” (p. 62). This recommendation is especially applicable in the Iranian context because as Atai and Mazlum (2013) noticed, the nature of the communication between different stakeholders is of mostly top-down unidirectional nature and therefore of low quality.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Because in this qualitative study a small convenient sample was studied, big claims could not be made about Iranian ELT teachers in general. However, the participants of the study are typical in many ways. First, most teachers in Iran work in ordinary schools with classes composed of large numbers of students as the teachers studied here. Second, both teachers, although of different schools and different districts, produced nearly the same accounts of the curriculum. In many ways, their teaching was typical of Iranian teachers as nearly all teachers in Iran receive the same amount of training and qualifications.

Despite all these problems, this study extends our knowledge of how introduction of CLT curricula with socio-cultural norms is different from the original settings and how it is interpreted and translated into practice. As it

is evident, stark differences can be discerned between what has been proposed and what is enacted in real contexts of the classroom. Studies of this kind help both teachers and policymakers to try to align teaching realities and curricula. By analyzing the teachers' reactions to novel practices introduced in the new curriculum, opportunities are provided to get a deeper understanding of the realities of the teaching and learning context and that way helps better face and eradicate the problems in the future.

As this study indicated, there are some gaps on what goes on in the minds of curriculum developers and what is realized in the real context of teaching. Further studies of this kind are needed to shed light on all aspects of this gap. Future research can utilize more sophisticated research designs to get a better picture of the situation. Longitudinal studies with larger samples with the capability of including other factors like the peculiarities of the context in which the curriculum is being enacted may also be considered as a sound follow-up for this kind of studies.

Curriculum developers and policymakers can also use the results to better align their future curricula with the contexts in which the innovation is to be introduced. Furthermore, taking this gap into consideration, they can fill it through providing more support for teachers, take the realities of the context including teachers' beliefs and cognition in which the new curriculum is going to be introduced into account when designing a new curriculum. Taking the results into account also necessitates policy-makers to develop more efficient ways of evaluating teachers as well as curricula to guarantee their implementation. Periodic evaluations and amending the observed shortcomings through incorporating new advances also add to the better enactments of curricula.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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