The Emergence of Various Contradictions in Iranian High School English Education under the New CLT-Based Curriculum

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Abstract

Recent research has indicated that the adoption of CLT in an EFL contexts will create certain challenges. Using Engeström's (1999) human activity system model, the present study investigated the implementation of CLT-based curriculum which was initiated in 2013 in Iranian public schools. Four groups of participants including 23 language teachers, 17 teacher directors, 23 students, and 20 parents took part in the study. Semi-structured interviews, observation of participating teachers' classes, and analysis of relevant documents were used as data collection tools. Grounded theory analysis of the data revealed three main categories explaining the difficulty of CLT implementation in an EFL context like Iran. From an activity theory perspective, these categories indicated that the four layers of contradictions emerged in Iranian English Education as the activity system. The results suggest that not only language teachers as the subjects of the current activity system, but also other components of the activity system, and even other activity systems like teachers' colleges and in-service programs need to work in tandem in order to overcome the challenges of implementation.

Keywords: activity system, CLT-based curriculum, grounded theory

In 2013, the Iranian Ministry of Education announced national curricular reform whose overriding purpose is to promote learners' communicative competence in English. The use of CLT in various EFL

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contexts has been widely explored and studied by many researchers (Hiramatsu, 2005; Incecay & Incecay, 2009). However, there are few, if any, studies that specifically deal with CLT and its implementation in Iran. Given that, teachers are the ultimate implementers of any curricular innovation; their role is perceived as the most important factor that can bring about the success or failure of curricular innovation (Fullan, 1998; Kim, 2004). In the current study, Engeström's (1987, 1999) human activity system is used as a theoretical framework to understand and examine teacher perceptions and practices within the particular social and institutional context of English Education in Iran. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no study has examined the implementation of the new curriculum in Iran in order to identify various contradictions that might emerge while language teachers try to enact the new curriculum. The study can be informative by providing guidance as how to apply CLT method more effectively in our EFL context.

Objectives and Research Questions. The discrepancy between the intentions and the goals of policy makers and the practitioners' understanding and conceptualization of policies can lead to ineffective implementation of a new curriculum at the local context (Ahn, 2009; Fullan, 1998; Hu, 2002). Therefore, the process of implementation from the very outset should be examined meticulously in order to figure out such discrepancies that might cause a substantial loss of time, energy, and money at the national level. That said, the current study aims at answering the following questions:

1. How do Iranian language teachers understand the new English curriculum and how do they implement it?
2. How are teachers' conceptualization and enactment of the new curriculum understood from an activity theory perspective? In other words, what are the four layers of contradictions in current activity system (English education in secondary schools)?

Implementation of CLT-based Curriculum in an EFL Context

Previous research has indicated that the adoption of curricular innovations and reforms which had been originally developed for ESL

setting would bring its own problems in the EFL context (Berns, 1990; Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996). For example, the results of a study conducted by Wang (2006) indicated that teachers did not live up to policy makers' expectations. The teachers specifically focused their attention on classroom realities instead of policy makers' ambitious agenda. More specifically, the main factors affecting teachers' instructional practices included resource support as provided by second level administrators, teaching methods as formulated by the curricular innovation and as perceived by teachers, teaching experiences, teachers' language proficiency, and their professional development needs. Of these factors, teachers' professional development was the most important predictor of teachers' ability to implement the new curriculum. Using human activity theory as envisioned by Engeström (1987, 1999), Kim (2008) investigated the implementation of curricular innovation in the context of Korean secondary schools. Based on the findings of the study, Kim (2008) came to this conclusion that existence of some contradictions between different components of human activity system led to the failure of these two teachers. Overall, the use of activity theory and various data collection procedures enabled the researchers to take into account both teachers and students' voice into account, and hence to recognize the need for localizing the imported CLT if it is about to be applied in the Korean local context.

Theoretical Framework

Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978, p. 40) idea of mediation, Engeström (1999) developed a model of a collective activity system (see Figure 1, below).
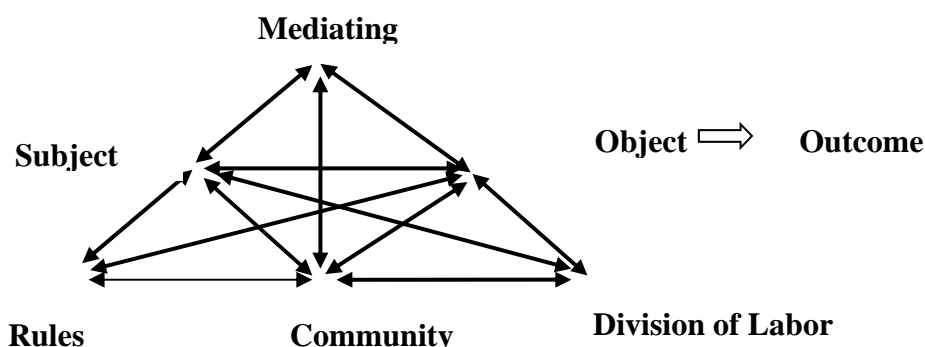
Figure 1. An activity system model (Engeström, 1999, p. 31)

In an activity system, the subject refers to the individual or sub-group whose agency is the focus of the analysis. In the context of the current study, language teachers comprise the subjects since the main purpose of the study is to understand their perceptions as well as their instructional practices in light of the new curriculum. The object indicates the orientation of the activity at which the activity is directed. It is worth noting that the object does not have a stable character since it is continuously molded and transformed into an outcome under the influence of a set of mediating artifacts. For example, if development of students' communicative proficiency is the object of instruction, but students are concerned with a grammar-based exam, they will not attend to the object of instruction (that is, communicative proficiency) due to the mediating effect of the grammar-based exam as an artifact. Thus, the object is transformed into an outcome.

The three components of the activity system at the bottom of the diagram including community, rule and division of labor integrate the local human activity and the larger social, cultural and historical structures. Community refers to people who are directly or indirectly focused on the same object. For example, Iranian English teachers, teacher directors, school staff, and parents comprise the community. Division of labor is concerned with both horizontal and vertical division of tasks and authority. According to Johnson (2009), rules refer to "both explicit and implicit norms and conventions that place certain limits as well as possibilities on

the nature of interaction within the activity system" (p.79). The concept of internal contradictions as the most fundamental force of change and development within the activity system is of considerable importance in this model. Engeström (1987) defined "inner contradictions" as the clash between individual actions and the total activity system (p. 39). Engeström (1987) maintained that primary contradictions exist within each component of the activity system. Secondary contradictions which occur between one component of the activity system and other components are fundamental to understanding a specific activity system since they are responsible for the change and development of the system. This type of contradictions usually occurs when "a strong novel factor" is introduced into any component of the activity system. Tertiary contradictions can occur when a "culturally more advanced" activity system such as government or the Ministry of Education announces curricular innovation by setting a new goal for the current activity system. Finally, quaternary contradictions arise when there is conflict between a central activity system and its neighbor activities.

Method

The present study employs qualitative research methods; namely, grounded theory for data analysis. According to Charmaz (2005), one of the outstanding benefits of grounded theory research is its capacity to interpret and understand complex social phenomena and issues.

Participants

The present study benefitted from four groups of participants. The major group included 23 language teachers who were teaching grade seven and grade eight students. There were 13 female and 10 male teachers; most of them had graduated from teacher colleges. Besides, all of them received their primary and secondary schooling in Iranian public schools; that is, they had similar experiences of learning English which was mainly based on traditional methods like grammar translation and audio-lingual. To select participating teachers, the researchers used maximum variation sampling (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh & Sorensen, 2010), in order to increase

the differences on certain characteristics such as gender, teaching experience, graduation from different universities, and different workplaces (i.e. urban, rural and inner-city schools). The other major group consisted of 11 male and 6 female teacher directors who had participated in Tehran in-service programs in 2013 and 2014. In addition to maximum variation sampling, intensity sampling was used to select those teacher directors who exhibited different attitudes towards CLT-based curriculum with some teacher directors having a positive attitude towards the CLT-based curriculum and its implementation while others being pessimistic. In addition to these two groups, 23 students as well as 20 volunteer parents took part in the study. Concerning the former group, attempt was made to interview one top student from each participating teacher's classes.

Instruments

Different types of data were collected in order to answer the research questions including curriculum documents, classroom observation, and most importantly interview with four groups of participants. According to Ary, Jacobs Razavieh and Sorensen (2010), interview is the principle data collection method in grounded theory. To prepare interview questions for different participants, the researchers had to examine various documents. In order to maximize the trustworthiness and credibility of findings gathered through interview (Lincoln & Guba 1985), observation of participating teachers' classes was conducted, too. Three types of documents were used in this study: First, various components of the newly developed package including students' book, workbook, teacher's guide, CD and the flash cards were utilized. The second type of documents included the CLT manual, some official documents related to language testing and also some TV interviews and lectures of the authors of the new textbooks. These documents are available from the following URL: http://eng-dept.talif.sch.ir/index.php. The third type of documents was related to language teachers themselves. Particularly, their teaching portfolios including the mid-term and final exams, teaching aids, multimedia materials and the type of assignment they gave to their

students. According to Ary, Jacobs and Sorensen (2010), the use of various types of documents can lead to the better understanding of the phenomenon under study in qualitative research.

Interview. To examine different participants' viewpoints and practices in light of the new English curriculum, the researchers developed four semi-structured interviews. The purpose of teacher directors' interview was to understand to what extent teacher directors' conceptualizations of the new curriculum and its enactment match those of curriculum developers. Then, the researchers designed another interview in order to examine language teachers' viewpoints regarding CLT and its implementation as well as their instructional practices. Moreover, a number of students were interviewed in order to examine their learning experiences and to understand their perceptions of their teachers' instructional practices. The last semi-structured interview aimed at understanding the parents' views towards the new textbooks and their expectations from their children in light of the new curriculum.

Observation. The researchers observed one lesson taught by each participating teacher. Since teaching each lesson took at least four sessions, overall there were four class observations for each participating teacher. The site of the observation consisted of English classes in which the participating teachers were teaching in various schools in different cities of Iran. With regard to gaining entry (Maxwell, 1996), it should be noted that researchers were in touch with them via email, telephone and also in person in order to establish rapport by clarifying the purpose of observation. The focus of the observation was on teachers' instructional practices, students' behavior, and their involvement in different class activities.

Data Collection

The researchers began data collection by conducting interviews with teacher directors. There were two focus group interviews with 10 teacher

directors. The other teacher directors were interviewed individually. Except two interviews, the rest were conducted in Persian since the participants felt more comfortable to express their points of view. In the next step, the researchers conducted two focus group interviews with eight language teachers while the rest of them were interviewed individually. The interviews with language teachers were initiated with a brief introduction to CLT-based curriculum. The interviewees then were asked to concentrate on different components of the new package, their own instructional practices, and the relationships of these two to other components of the human activity system. Having conducted interviews with language teachers, the researchers carried out interviews with 23 students and 20 parents. Interview with the students aimed at more in-depth understanding of their teachers' instructional practices whereas the purpose of the parents' interview was to examine their understanding of English education, their expectations from their children and language teachers. Finally, it should be noted that the analysis of various documents helped the researchers prepare the questions for different interviews.

Data Analysis

Having transcribed, organized and got familiarized with the obtained data, the researchers codified the raw data using open coding. At this stage, a wide range of concepts and categories regarding the implementation of the new English curriculum was detected. These initial categories were further reduced to a number of core categories during the second phase which is called axial coding. In the third step, called selective coding, some of these core categories were integrated into three major factors affecting Iranian language teachers' conceptualization and implementation of the new English curriculum (Ary et al., 2010).

Results

Grounded Theory Results

In this section, first, the results of grounded theory analysis are presented. The analysis of various types of data based on grounded theory approach revealed a number of categories describing English education in

our Iranian junior high schools. In the second step, these emerging categories were subjected to further analysis based on activity theory particularly based on the notion of inner contradiction.

Contextual constraints hindering the full implementation of CLT

Time pressure and content coverage. One absolute certainty regarding English education in Iranian secondary schools' that was unanimously expressed almost by all groups of participants' was related to the limited amount of time available on the school schedule. One of the participating parents who was an elementary teacher said:

> What do you expect the children to learn with one single session a week?! It's very likely to forget what they have learned during last week. Now our students in grade six attend Persian class (which is their mother tongue) five hours a week. It [Persian] is constantly practiced and used at home, at school ... yet we have five hours for Persian in a week. One single session for English is too little for the students.

Being in agreement with the parent's contention regarding the optimal use of English and creation of opportunities for the students to practice English, one language teacher believed that it is very good and desirable to achieve such goals but the time pressure does not allow language teachers to achieve what they want. According to this teacher:

> Honestly, I don't want to use group work and pair works in my classrooms because of time pressure. On the other hand, given the limited time and shortage of equipment, hardly can I finish teaching each lesson on its scheduled time let alone if I use group work activities since in that case there would be a mess in the class.

As can be seen in the above interview excerpt, the teacher could not use group work and other similar communicative activities in his classrooms in fear of not covering the textbook in due time.

Students' very limited exposure to aural English. No matter how successfully language teachers implement CLT in their classrooms, it

seems unlikely that language learners could develop communicative competence with a limited exposure to language, especially spoken English. Individual interviews with many participating students indicated that they spent only a very limited amount of time listening to the CD of the new English textbook. The following are two interview excerpts from two participating students:

> I like to learn English by speaking and listening. We have a computer and I try to listen half an hour each week.
>
> I do not listen much to the CD because I cannot find the right track but I read and write (the conversations and the practices section) several times.

Interview with teachers and parents further indicated that except a few students who were taking English classes in private institutes, other participating students did not take much time to get involved with listening or speaking activities outside the classroom. One good reason why the students did not have adequate exposure to spoken English at home was related to their parents' concern about their children's scores on written exams. As one parent said:

> I myself gave several dictations and grammar tests and there was a supplementary test booklet (Khate Sefid). I tried to help my son on activities of this book during the year in addition to his main book but there was no speaking or listening practice.

Finally, students' limited exposure to English is exacerbated by the long summer holiday during which the majority of Iranian students do not have any contact with English including both written and spoken English.

The unavailability of some components of the package for the teachers and the students, or their reluctance to use them. Another problem was related to the unavailability of some components of the package, such as Teachers Guide and flashcards. Despite the great emphasis given to Teachers Guide as a set of guidelines to be strictly

followed by English teachers, many teachers did not have it. According to one language teacher:

> I was so curious to know how teacher's guide wants us to teach each lesson. We were given a copy of its first lesson during in-service classes but I did not get this book at school. That copy was helpful for us. I asked some of my colleagues as well. They did not have it as well.

Similarly, it was the unavailability of some components of the package that did not allow the students to enjoy the maximum exposure to English. The interviews with many participating teachers and students indicated that many students did not get the CD at the beginning of the academic year when they received the textbooks.

Loyalty to some aspects of traditional teaching methods

Excessive use of grammar explanation and translation. One recurring theme in data collected through interview and observation (Field notes, 8 & 15 Apr; 7 & 10 may, 2014) is that grammar is considered essential for learning English in general and learning to speak English in particular. One participating teacher for example contended:

> In my opinion, the students who learn English in institutes are good (at using spoken English) since they had already learnt grammar well (during their schooling years). The new generation will certainly face serious problems in terms of grammar and meaning.

Translation of various sections of each lesson including the conversation and the practices sections was another noticeable feature of traditional methods which was present in language teachers' instructional practices. Indeed, teaching the practices section which constitutes the main part of each lesson (that is the functions of each lesson) was inevitably accompanied by translation (Field note, Apr. 9, 2014).

Valuing accuracy in activities. It is worth noting that during the limited oral activities conducted in the classroom, language teachers were keen to

emphasize accuracy when their students got involved in oral communication (Field Note, May. 13, 2014). Rather than encouraging the students to speak English and get their messages across, one participating teacher whose class observation was mentioned in the above filed note hastily and frequently interrupted the students who made some pronunciation mistakes in mid-sentence. Moreover, the teacher did not encourage the students to talk about their own favorite food and drink freely. Rather, they had to choose only the words provided in the practice section.

Heavy Emphasis on Linguistic component of communicative competence during classroom activities. Despite the great emphasis given to the functions and notions of language by the new curriculum, grammatical competence received the same level of attention as functions and notions and in some cases much more (Field notes, Apr. 12; May. 10, 2014). Moreover, the strategic component of the communicative competence which has been dealt with in the second conversation of each lesson was ignored by many teachers (Field notes, Field notes, May. 10, 13, 2014).

Teachers' professional development and morale vs. the new curriculum
The inadequacy of in-service programs. Dissatisfaction with the in-service programs was another recurring theme in the study. According to one teacher:

> The teacher director worked only theoretically last year. He had not taught any lesson and the teachers were already familiar with the theories and heard about them. However, I admit that we need to have a sound understanding of theory. Unfortunately, he worked theoretically all sessions and there was no practice at all.

As can be observed, one of the major objections raised against in-service programs was that they were mainly theory-oriented. Many teachers expressed their concern about this fact, and believed that such theoretical explanations could only introduce the new English curriculum.

According to them, this introduction is necessary but not sufficient. Besides, some of the teachers who had attended in-service programs did not pursue their professional development. According to one teacher:

> Look, I think if in service programs are to be held for teachers, it is important that teachers are interested and have motivation in the first place but now, it happens that many teachers attend in-service program not because learning and professional development but because of getting a certificate at the end.

So, the real motivation for teachers is to get a certificate at the end. The more a teacher has attended such programs, the higher the chances of getting promoted. Interestingly, all those teachers who attend in-service programs get this certificate; there is no pass or fail or other criteria to distinguish between those teachers who were active and did their best in the classrooms and those teachers who played a passive role.

Lack of effective teacher observation and supervision. Despite the fact that cooperation among teachers has been emphasized as an important factor for teachers' professional development, Iranian teachers indicated that they were reluctant to observe other teachers' classrooms or to allow other teachers to observe their classrooms. In this regard, one teacher said:

> We (Iranian English teachers) are not used to observing each other classrooms. Our colleague thinks that we want to be inquisitive and pass judgment about him. Thus, there is not such cooperation. Our colleague is afraid that we are going to catch him red-handed; otherwise we do like to learn something new from other teachers.

From both teachers and teacher directors' perspectives, the supervision practiced in our schools aims only to comply with the legal requirements. One teacher, for example, observed:

> Well I think we teachers need continual support, sort of professional support. We need an expert to tell us what and how to do some stuff for our professional development, and to guide us how to take some steps for our development. I think there should be an expert in

educational department who can provide us with such support, who can observe our classes regularly not to pass judgment but to provide us with real and professional help. I think attending a one week in-service program cannot do a lot to help us develop professionally.

The futile nature of language teachers' meeting. Many teachers believed that the main purpose of holding these meetings is to maintain a façade that there are academic and useful discussions among language teachers; few of these sessions have brought about major effects on instructional practices. In this regard, one language teacher noted:

> I have participated in teachers meeting since I got employed as a teacher. I got nothing from these meetings. We are just coming together and laboring over the same useless points like students' lack of motivation, our salaries and its comparison with those of other employees in other departments, midterm and final exams, and other similar things.

Like manner, other teachers voiced their concerns with regard to the uselessness of these meetings particularly with reference to lack of an authority or an expert who can chair a meeting so that the teachers could come to a satisfying conclusion at the end.

Inner Contradictions

In this section, the salient examples of four layers of contradictions that emerged in the current activity system are examined. The notable primary contradiction emerged between language teachers' positive attitude towards developing autonomous learners by playing a facilitator role in the classroom and their actual efforts to transfer a body of knowledge to their students. Most language teachers embraced the latter since they did not have any prior experience in learner-centered instruction. Besides, adopting a teacher-fronted instruction focusing on tight control of the students and classroom activities could help language teachers save time on covering the syllabus on time.

The first secondary contradiction occurred between Iranian language teachers as the subjects of the activity system and the new teaching package which is based on communicative language teaching. The new English textbooks highlight the development of communicative competence mainly through communicative activities such as *role play, your conversation, interview, and group work*. However, instead of adopting these communicative activities in their instruction and following the steps recommended by teacher's guide, the subjects of this activity system fell back on traditional methods and techniques to which they had been accustomed during their prior teaching as well as learning experiences. Another remarkable secondary contradiction emerged between language teachers (subjects) and optimal use of English and Persian (tool). Despite their awareness of the importance of the use of English (tool) in the classroom, and despite the emphasis given to English as the medium of instruction by teacher directors (community and rule), language teachers made extensive and liberal use of the native language. Besides, management issues prevented some teachers from conducting some communicative activities resulting in two more secondary contradictions. The first occurred between the students who got noisy when engaged in communicative activities (community) on the one hand, and careful and centralized management of the classroom by the teacher (rule) on the other hand. This contradiction simultaneously reveals another secondary contradiction between the students (community) and division of labor of this instructional activity system in that the students did not try to build their own knowledge when they got involved in some role play and interview activities.

As mentioned before, tertiary contradictions arise when there are conflicts between the current activity system and another activity system which according to Engestrom (1987) is "culturally more advanced" (p. 43). In the Iranian context, the Iranian Ministry of Education (culturally more advanced) prescribes a new objective for the current activity system. More specifically, the new objective or goal was to develop the students' communicative competence based on the principles of communicative language teaching. Therefore, all secondary contradictions can be viewed

as tertiary contradictions because the new English curriculum was imposed by the Iranian Ministry of Education which is culturally more advanced than the instructional activity system in which language teacher's work.

Ultimately, quaternary contradictions emerged between teacher training in-service programs which had been planned by the Ministry of Education, and the current instructional activity system. The contradiction appeared since the subjects of the latter activity system did not see the content of the neighbor activity as helpful for their instructional program. That is, the courses offered during in-service programs were too theoretical to provide them with some hands-on experiences. Most language teachers complained that teacher directors usually delivered some lectures about CLT, assessment and classroom management.

Discussion

Despite their general approval of the new curriculum aiming to develop communicative competence, the set of contradictions that language teachers experienced did not allow them to fully implement the new curriculum. Given the findings of the current study, the effect of such a top-down curriculum imposed by the Ministry of Education at the local level need to be further discussed. According to Wang (2006), language teachers as the ultimate implementers focus their attention on classroom realities instead of policy makers' ambitious agenda. Similar to findings of other studies (Careless, 2001; Hu, 2002; Wang, 2006), the results of this study indicated that Iranian language teachers confronted a number of big challenges in implementing CLT which was a drastic change compared to the previous traditional methods.

The result of this study in line with the claim made by some scholars (Carless, 2003; Sakui, 2004) who believe that the adoption of a CLT-based curriculum in EFL context will cause serious problems. The new textbooks might have oriented English teaching at schools towards communicative goals, but it is crucial at the same time that English teachers create meaningful experiences based on the content of the new textbooks so that those communicative goals can be achieved. In order to create such

meaningful experiences, English teachers ought to take on new challenges such as:

1. Teachers' inadequate language proficiency, which led them to use students' mother tongue excessively.
2. Teachers' inability to make optimal use of pair-work or group work in order to structure classroom interaction in an effective way.
3. Parents' and students' resistance to some aspects of the new approach such as preference for speaking and listening to reading and writing, and new evaluation methods which were not welcomed by families.
4. The emergence of brand new roles for teachers and students.

The results of the current study, however, indicated that teachers did not risk losing their control over the classroom activities by using group work and pair work. Classroom interaction in Iranian language classrooms suffered from what Littlewood (2013) referred as "superficial nature of communication".

Loyalty to some aspects of traditional teaching methods such as translation, mechanical drills and reading aloud can be understood in terms of teachers' previous beliefs and teaching and learning experiences. According to Borg (2011), L2 language teachers draw heavily on their own experiences of language learning when they were L2 students. For many Iranian language teachers, learning and teaching experiences were limited to traditional teaching methods (Dahmardeh, 2009). From a socio-cultural perspective, developmental history of teachers' learning and teaching lifespan, or what is referred to as ontogenesis (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) explains the role of prior beliefs and experiences. Put it another way, language teachers' instructional practices cannot be understood without taking into account their prior experiences.

As the results of a study by Kim (2008) indicated, although it is language teachers who would ultimately play the pivotal role in overcoming the challenges of implementing CLT, without the encouragement and support of other activity systems and other

components within the current activity system, the challenges will linger. In contrast to other researchers (Careless, 2001; Hu, 2002; Markee, 1994) who attributed unsuccessful implementation of CLT- based reforms to language teachers' negative attitudes, the results of this study indicated that Iranian teachers held positive attitudes towards the new curriculum. Yet, from an activity theory perspective (Engeström, 1999), Iranian L2 teachers were not successful in the implementation of the new curriculum because of the existence of some contradictions whose resolutions did not rely solely on teachers alone. For example, no matter how hard language teachers try to adapt their instructional practices to CLT, the desired communicative goals cannot be achieved when the learners have few, if any opportunities to use English outside the classroom when the class hour is insufficient, and more importantly when the evaluation of students' learning is not based on the new curriculum.

Another case in point is teachers' professional development. Wang (2006) observed that teachers' professional development was the most important predictor of teachers' ability to enact the new curriculum. As indicated earlier, Iranian teachers believed that they were in need of opportunities for continued professional development with the help of an expert during the academic year. Taking intensive and short in-service courses during one or two weeks was far from enough for teachers. As Bartels (2005) put it "…it is not enough to simply provide a short apprenticeship in applied linguistics and hope for the best because the knowledge that teachers use in their practice is more complicated than knowing facts and general conceptions of language and language learning" (P. 419). As suggested by many socio-cultural oriented studies on teachers' learning (Burns, 1990; Wardoff, 2011), teachers should be encouraged and supported to acknowledge their situated and social nature of learning. They need what Wardoff (2011) called "zone of proximal teacher development" model in which teachers can collaborate with teacher directors, mentors, critical peers and colleagues in order to exchange ideas and experiences so that they can obtain context-sensitive responses to the issues that arise in the classrooms. However, the results of the study indicated that neither in-service courses nor teachers meeting

and teacher supervision encouraged this view of teacher learning. Other studies conducted by Ahn (2009) and Lee (2007) lend support to this finding that without creating adequate opportunities for teachers' professional development, the new curriculum cannot successfully be implemented.

Conclusions

Using socio-cultural theory and more specifically activity theory as the theoretical lens, this study examined English education in Iranian secondary schools as the activity system with a central focus placed on language teachers as the ultimate implementers of the new curriculum. The adoption of CLT in foreign contexts has been a matter of controversy in a sense that some scholars believe that such top-down curricular reforms cannot be implemented successfully because of some constraining factors related to individual teachers, institutions and the local context. Keeping this caveat in mind, the current study used various types of data gathered through interview, observation, and documents of various types to identify these factors which are as follow:

1. *Contextual constraints hindering the full implementation of CLT*
2. *Loyalty to some aspects of traditional teaching methods*
3. *Teachers' professional development and morale vs. the new curriculum*

Analyzing these themes within an activity theory framework revealed various types of contradictions. From an activity theory perspective, it is the existence of these contradictions that makes an activity system susceptible to transformation provided that different stakeholders including language teachers, students, parents, school staff, and more importantly some institutes like Ministry of education play a constructive role in solving these contradictions.

As indicated in the results section, time pressure was considered as one of the major contextual constraints that did not allow language teachers to adapt their instructional procedures and practices to the new English curriculum. In fact, language teachers considered traditional teaching methods such as translation, mechanical drills, and reading aloud

as more efficient and time-saving than CLT-based activities. Thus, language teachers heavily drew on the former activities in order not to lag behind the prescribed syllabus. That said, policy makers and curriculum developers can offer an enormous and immediate help by allowing more time on the school schedule for English.

Another important implication of this study is for teacher training programs and teacher directors. Some of the quaternary contradictions that emerged in the current activity system were the result of inefficient instruction offered to language teachers. More specifically, in-service programs were mainly held in a very intense period of time (about one week) during which language teachers were mainly provided with theoretical courses about CLT-based language teaching and learning. It is clear that if the problems associated with such programs are overcome, many quaternary contradictions and hence, some secondary contradictions will be resolved. Therefore, the Iranian Ministry of Education can play a critical role in resolving the quaternary contradictions in the current activity system by improving the quality of in-service programs. For example, attempts can be made to make such programs more practical and participation for all language teachers become mandatory. Moreover, in order to ensure the full cooperation of language teachers during these programs, it is suggested that some standards and criteria for pass and fail be set so that language teachers might take the in-service classes more seriously not merely as a chance to get a certificate for career promotion not professional development.

The most important implications of this study are suggested for language teachers themselves since the activity theory acknowledges the active role that the subjects of an activity system (language teachers) can play in order to successfully resolve the main types of contradictions; that is, secondary contradictions. In other words, language teachers as active not passive forces within the activity system can compensate for the weaknesses of other activity systems and also those components within the central activity system. For example, if the content of the textbook is less than ideal, language teachers can make use of ready-made materials taken from internet or develop their own desired materials in order to create more

lively situations for language learning in a communicative way. Another relevant example can be suggested regarding the in-service programs. If these programs cannot satisfy language teachers because of their theoretical nature and intensive attendance period, they themselves can enrich their teaching experiences via different teacher development techniques such as team teaching, peer observation and action research.

Although this study used qualitative instruments such as interviews and observation, a case study of a small number of English teachers would provide other researchers with some valuable insights about the activity system under study that are not obtainable via the present study. A case study would enable the researcher to shadow few language teachers in order to obtain a thorough understanding of various components of the current activity system. Another possibility for other researchers is to use mixed-method approach. The current study only made use of qualitative type of research in order to examine the implementation of the new English curriculum. However, a more comprehensive investigation of such a complex and dynamic phenomenon requires the use of mixed-method approach since it enjoys the advantages of both qualitative and quantitative research. The former type of research lets the researcher study a few cases in depth while the latter type of research allows the researcher to study the subject in a larger scale. For example, the use of some instruments used in quantitative research such as questionnaire would allow the researcher to examine the subjects of the current activity system (language teachers) at a larger scale across the country.

In sum, Socio-cultural-oriented and activity theory-based findings of this study suggest that both micro and macro changes be brought about for the new curriculum to be implemented successfully. Changes at the micro level might be related to individual components within the current activity system. For example, language teachers are expected to increase their knowledge about CLT and its basic principles or to improve their oral proficiency if they want to enact the curricular reforms successfully. Yet, unless certain broader macro-structures that affect the nature of the activity (language teaching and learning) in real contexts of the classroom, the new English curriculum may not be implemented successfully.

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