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Iranian EFL Teachers' Sense-Making of Policy Reforms: The Case of the New Communicative-Based Curriculum

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Abstract

By the end of the 2020s, a change involving the substitution of the Communicative Approach to English teaching for the Structural one has been fully operative in the Iranian secondary education system. This study set out to explore the views of Iranian teachers vis-a-vis the changes introduced into the education policy of the nation since teachers as end-point policy workers play a pivotal role in the ultimate success or failure of any curricular activity. Using data from semi-structured interviews and follow-up procedures, the investigation sought to delve into how eighteen EFL teachers at the upper secondary education level made sense of changes effected at the intersection of policy and practice. Common patterns and themes were identified and presented at the level of data analysis. Despite embracing the changes, the results showed that the teachers sensed that they had been left to their own devices in translating policy into practice and that the proposed reforms were not all-inclusive in the sense that significant stakeholders including parents, school counselors, and educational leaders had been left out. They were further keenly aware of a number of obstacles in the way of policy enactment and found especially the prevalence of a regime of cramming for tests leading to the dominance of a negative teach-to-the-test culture, limited support available and infrastructural challenges, as well as resistance to change among structurally-minded practitioners as highly detrimental to implementation of change. Implications for policy, practice, and research are finally given.

Keywords: EFL, language education policy, Iran; curricular innovation

Policy in general and education policy, in particular, is a term for which there is no agreed-upon definition among the education research

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community and it is a notion whose meaning is often rendered as a given. The policy has been variously construed either as a product (i.e., texts and documents) or process, or both. In the case of its conceptualization both as process and product, "policy involves the production of the text, the text itself, ongoing modifications to the text and processes of implementation into practice" (Henry, Lingard, Rizvi, & Taylor, 2013, p. 25). Moreover, it is a ubiquitous phenomenon which is "found everywhere in education, and not just at the level of central government" (Ozga, 1999, p.2).

The trend in education policy studies currently seem to be more toward a view of it as policy processes negotiated, contested, and struggled over by policy workers at every stage of development or consumption than as an end-product whose implementation or consumption is rendered as unproblematic (Ball, 1994; Olssen, Codd, & O'Neill, 2004; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). This is closely related to another "new trend in policy-making" seeing "an increasing interest in education and a growing political will to invest in it" (Bosker, Creemers, & Stringfield, 2012, p. 2). Hegemonic voices and discourses compete to the foreground and legitimize their versions of policy conception, interpretation, and enactment. Teachers as front-line policy actors may not necessarily buy into a policy package delivered unproblematically from 'on high.'

The policy is no longer seen as a natural linear phenomenon consisting of a series of stages in the delivery of a state-generated package. Instead, it is seen as being comprised of many steps each undergoing examination, negotiation, and compromise at every level. Rizvi and Lingard (2009) frame recent shifts in conceptions of policy in the following terms:

- The policy is more than the policy document or the legislation.
- The policy is multidimensional and multilayered and occurs at multiple sites.
- Policies exist in context.
- The policy is value-laden.

- Public policy remains a state activity.
- Education policies interact with policies in other fields.
- Policy implementation is never straightforward.
- Policies result in unintended as well as intended consequences.

It appears that education reforms and policies are often closely intertwined and conceptually inseparable. Reforms and large-scale innovations generally occur with the initiation and implementation of a given policy. This is because both are intended to steer public behavior toward specific orientations and courses of action in given areas. Education policy implementation is one of the significant stages in policy processes whose successful handling lies especially with teachers as end-point policy workers so that teachers' agentic and resistive actions tend to interfere with the smooth enactment of curricular mandates (Pease-Alvarez, & Samway, 2012).

Some scholars have pointed to the significance of teachers as agents of change and their pivotal role in successful enactment of change (Dantnow, Borman, Stringfield, Overman, & Castellano, 2003; Kelly, 2009). This involves, above all, taking into account the implementing agents' "sense-making" (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002) of the nature of education policy in hand. Sense-making "is not simple decoding of the policy message" (p. 391). Teachers make a set of (un)conscious attempts to interpret and unpack policy message(s) in order to revise hoped-for objectives and intended practices to fit their here-and-now context.

In 2012, the Iranian Ministry of Education introduced the National Curriculum document heralding massive changes and reforms in all aspects of the conventional k-12 education system. The text consisted, among other things, of a specification of the purposes and content of twelve subject areas. The eleventh section dealt with changes in foreign language teaching approaches. It pointed to the need for the substitution of the older structural approach to language teaching with the most recent communicative approach. Following the stated changes, old materials, deemed to be inappropriate to be taught in the light of the new methodology, were supplanted by a new package consisting of materials

claimed to be prepared based on the policy text recommendations. In line with this, the three Vision series for high school students (Vision 1, 2, & 3) and the three Prospect series for secondary school students (Prospect 1, 2, & 3) were developed by the Ministry of Education. One difference between the new series and the previous structural-based ones is that current series come in packages, including student books, workbooks, teacher guides, and other supplementary materials such as sound files of dialogs and listening and speaking sections.

Unless curricular changes and innovations are embraced, even on a partial basis, by the front-line practitioners, they will be doomed to failure. The present research intends to create a profile of how Iranian teachers perceive or react to the changes in the pipeline. This is of paramount significance as it aids decision-makers to assess to what extent what they originally had in mind has been grasped and put to practice by teachers in their specific teaching contexts.

Literature Review

Any attempt at implementing educational reform is doomed to failure unless a host of factors associated with the end-point policy workers (i.e., teachers) are taken into consideration. Besides, literature attests to the problematic nature of translatability of policy into practice at the micro-level of policy perception and implementation (Bell & Stevenson, 2006; Jones, 2013; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). Practitioners' perceptions of policy and policy reform could play an essential role in the success or failure of enactment of policies (Tuytens & Devos, 2009).

Most current critical readings of education policy, especially post-structural perspectives, see a given policy as consisting of signs in which there is no one-on-one correspondence between its signifiers (any sign such as a word) and signifieds (the meaning(s) to which a sign refers). At the level of practice, one can witness inconsistencies between what a policy initially intended and its construal by implementing agents, i.e. teachers. This view further conceives of policy as policy discourses which, as in the case of all discourse types, are both socially constituted

as well as constitutive. It follows then that “analysis of the policy text is not a simple and straightforward activity. There is considerable scope for interpretation, even in the most explicit of policies” (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 29). It is thus inevitable that “[D]istortions and gaps appear in the implementation process, resulting in what is best described as ‘policy refraction’” (Bell & Stevenson, 2006).

Although the policy intention-response divide has been sufficiently tackled in the global literature on the issue (Carless, 2004, 2002; Fenwick & Edwards, 2010), the studies carried out on that matter in Iran are few and far between and despite the fact that especially ELT policy implementation literature has come of age at a global level (Humphries & Burns, 2015; Kennedy, 1988; Kirkgöz, 2007; Waters & Vilches, 2001), it is still an under-researched area in the local context. The identification and subsequent analysis of the areas of (mis)match between policy-makers' intentions and end-point policy-implementers' responses, however, has been a significant concern of the research community in other contexts in the world since feeling the gap is the first step in attempting to fill it.

In the Chinese educational context, Yan (2012) reported on a study of teachers' perceptions of the new English curriculum reform introduced in the country's secondary education system. Employing triangulated sources of data, the author identified an implementation gap between the requirements of the new policy and teachers' pedagogic practices in the classroom. In a similar vein, Molina (2017) surveyed 72 teachers representing all the levels of Chinese educational system to see how they negotiated the tensions arising due to the gap between policy and practice about the teaching of language skills. She found different levels of agency exercise in response to the policy intention-perception gulf. Since policies are not always enacted as intended by various political and educational decision-makers, Molina points to the need for the inclusion of "teachers as valuable resources in understanding the goals of the new curricular innovations and supporting them in implementing these in their

practice within their respective context and in a way that makes sense to them” (p. 23).

Prapaisit de Segovia and Hardison (2008) studied the implementation of the reform in English teaching in Thailand from the perspectives of teachers and supervisors. They found a gap between the planned curriculum and the curriculum-in-use so that their observation of Grade 5-6 teachers' classes yielded no proof of communicative language use. Similarly, Orafi and Borg (2009) reported on a study involving three Libyan teachers implementing a communicative pedagogy in their classes. Using observation of those teachers' classes and interviews, their analysis yielded huge differences between the planned and enacted curricula types. They concluded that unless some cognitive and contextual factors of teachers' lives are not taken into account, the uptake of any educational innovation will be limited.

Sergeant (2001) carried out a case study of CALL innovation in a Singaporean educational setting and its potential contribution to ELT curricular changes. His study pointed to the crucial role played by the change agent in a CALL context in minimizing the implementation challenges and tackling the pitfalls arising. Additionally, Caravas-Doukas (1995) interviewed fourteen teachers in a post-implementation phase of ELT-based innovations introduced into the Greek context in order to identify factors contributing to the ‘non-implementation’ of the ELT mentioned above curricular change. The investigation argued that knowledge of such factors as the quality and quantity of teacher development, their views and understanding of the innovation, and teachers' overall evaluation of the feasibility of the innovation could help with the improvement of ELT changes both at a local, i.e., Greek, as well as at a global level.

As already mentioned, as far as the local Iranian context is concerned, a few scholars have sought to examine the issue of policy reform implementation, especially in the light of current communicative-based changes introduced into the country's secondary education English language teaching curriculum. Such scholars have used different lenses

in tapping into the issue and have asked different questions. In an attempt “to understand and examine teacher perceptions and practices within the particular social and institutional context of English Education in Iran”, Barabadi and Razmjoo (2016, p. 42) employed Engeström’s (1987, 1999) human activity system to help shed new light on how the implementing teachers conceived of and enacted the communicative-based curricular changes operative in that specific teaching situation. The results suggested that a host of factors, including English teachers themselves, other components of the same system they operated in, and other systems such as teachers' colleges and in-service programs needed to join hands to be able to overcome the obstacles on the new policy enactment. A major limitation of this investigation, however, is that it explored only the perceptions of seventh- and 8th-grade English teachers teaching at the secondary school level. Even at this level, 9th-grade teachers' views have not been taken into account in the research for reasons which are unknown to the reader.

Another investigation dealing with the policy development/implementation in Iran’s secondary education was carried out by Ataei and Mazlum (2012). The authors aimed at examining the twin processes of ELT policy planning and practice. Having employed multiple data sources and instrumentation types, they identified a divide between the two stages already mentioned and found that this results from lack of involvement of local policy-makers, i.e. teachers, in the policy processes in the highly centralist state education system.

Teachers are not quiescent consumers of policy content and (re)interpret it based on a host of factors such as their pedagogic assumptions and orthodoxies (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). In so doing, they exert some degree of agency and initiative. Based on this impetus, the present study set out to tap into the ways they ‘recontextualize’ (to borrow a concept from Basil Bernstein, 2004) their understanding of a policy mandate. In keeping with this, the study was guided by the following overarching research question:

What are Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of the new curricular reforms at both policy and practice levels?

The primary objective of the research was to identify tensions and inconsistencies, if any, between the new Iranian English planned curriculum and enacted curriculum based on the self-report observations of the secondary education practicing teachers.

Method

Participants

This study reported on the views of eighteen high school teachers of English whose participation therein was based on self-selection. The researcher, himself a former MOE (Ministry of Education) teacher and colleague to the participants, sent a request message to an online mobile app group asking for the participation of the teachers teaching English in a southern Iranian town. Some of the teachers were quick enough to express their consent to be part of the research project due to the researcher's previous familiarity with them as well as with the local teaching context. It, therefore, shortcut the researcher's entry and familiarization phases of data collection.

The sampling procedure employed was purposive sampling. This type of sampling procedure is in everyday use in qualitative investigations. Here, the "qualitative study must have a sampling plan describing the sampling parameters (participants, settings, events, processes), and this plan should line up with the purposes of the study" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 126). Therefore, only those teachers who volunteered to participate in the study and who were bound to meet specific requirements were contacted. Individuals of both sexes who had taught both the old structural-based textbooks and had gone through the new approach and textbooks were chosen. Only in this way could the participants be expected to assess the large-scale system-based changes and reforms. The participants included 11 female teachers (with the mean age of 39) and seven male teachers (with the mean age of 44). About two-thirds of them (11 participants) held an MA degree, mostly in

language-related fields, including TEFL and linguistics, and the remaining ones were BA holders.

Data Collection/Analysis

In a qualitative piece of research, data collection and analysis processes are not done linearly with the former preceding the latter. Preferably, it is carried out almost simultaneously (Ezzy, 2013). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The researcher then followed up with more questions in cases there were ambiguities in the replies, or there was a need for more explanation of the observations made by the teachers. Since the teachers lived in different geographical areas (they taught in the same district, though) and it was the summer break, the researcher proposed to send them the interview questions via a mobile application which they found quite convenient. All the informants agreed to be interviewed online via chatting. Before conducting the study, they were briefed on the topic of the study as well as how they had to respond to the questions. They were told they would also be free to answer the questions either in Persian (their mother tongue/official language) or English. The replies were then subjected to qualitative content analysis to the universal themes emerging were categorized and discussed. In line with the expert guidelines on how to analyze qualitative data (e. g, Creswell, 2011), the data were read and reread by the researcher in an attempt to arrive at a general sense of the interview responses. Almost simultaneously, some verbatim text segments were selected as initial codes. Once finished, this stage of data analysis was taken up by putting related codes into the form of categories and the related categories were further labeled with general themes.

Finally, to ensure the credibility as well as dependability of the findings of the study, the technique of respondent validation (also known as member check) was employed. Here, the investigator and the individual participating in the study convened (in the cyberspace via the same mobile app) to discuss whether the themes developed reflected their true beliefs about the issues raised in the course of the online interviews.

The interview questions were formulated based on a careful perusal of the relevant rich conceptual literature on educational change. The questions fell into three general categories: attitudinal, behavioral, and factual. As already referred to, whenever a need arose, they would be taken up by follow-up questions demanding for the clarification and refinement of specific observations. Once the first interview had been carried out, the twin processes of data reduction and synthesis were undertaken by the investigator.

Results

Evaluation of education policy implementation has gained momentum in the contemporary political climate across the world. This is because "education has become a high-stakes, high-budget policy arena" and it "commands the lion's share of ... budgets" (Honig, 2006, p. 1). One primary source of input for a better reconsideration of how events play out concerning policy reforms is the front-line practitioner's views about whether a given policy has worked or not, and in the case of the former, to what extent it has proved useful as decision-makers intended it for use.

However, teachers seem to be the missing-link in policy conception-implementation loop. They have not entered the equation correctly yet. Notably, in centralist education systems with top-down policies and mandates, they are often considered as a cog in the machine, and their voices in the process of decision-making are not heard, or the authorities only give their role and status in this affair lip-service.

In this study, teachers were chosen as the participants of the study as they are both a rich source of information and insight on how policies unfold in a given educational setting and are responsible for the ultimate success or failure of any curriculum reform action. To quote Kelly (2009), they have "the 'make or break' role ... in all curricular activities, even about those which originate outside their schools" (p. 8). It would, therefore, be helpful, and even imperative, to dig deep into how they conceive of developments in the offing as well as their role in translating policies into practice. To this end, the viewpoints of eighteen Iranian EFL

practicing teachers with a range of teaching experiences were culled and analyzed. This was in an effort to see how the intended policies designed, i.e. the new Iranian (English) curriculum, were being put to practice and whether or to what extent they approved of and complied with the curricular innovations in place in the educational arena of the state.

As previously alluded to, the twin processes of data collection and analysis in a qualitative interpretive investigation go hand in hand, meaning that they "are circular and often overlap" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 124). As soon as the first set of data was collected, the researcher began to immerse himself in it and search it for patterns and themes which could help illuminate significant aspects of the study and answer the core research question. The common threads emerging during this process, as far as the data is concerned, is as follows:

Teachers' support for innovations and reforms

In keeping with the results of other studies in the local context (Barabadi & Razmjoo, 2015; 2016), all the teachers expressed their positive views of the changes being enacted. They generally mentioned two reasons for this endorsement: For one thing, the changes were for the better in the sense that they aimed at replacing an outdated teaching method with the more contemporary recent communicative-based approach. Also, and intimately related with the first justification was the observation that the new approach emphasized the development of oral-aural skills in learners – a feature which was almost nonexistent in the previous approach to foreign language pedagogy at Iranian schools. This is echoed by one of the informants when she says,

I love it. I enjoy teaching communicatively. This way, I can teach my students speaking and listening skills. It is fun. My classes in the past were annoying, but now they are fascinating and entertaining. My students do not become tired, and we have much free time. I wish the Ministry had changed the method sooner!

Teachers' frustration with the official management of change

The informants interviewed expressed their concern over how the authorities were managing the changes and innovations. Implicit in their remarks was the feeling that the governmental bodies responsible for making sure that the changes were in place had let go of them. This 'let-the-change-take-care-of-itself' sentiment is illustrated in the remarks of two of the teachers:

The Ministry of Education has only changed the books and teaching methods and techniques, and it does not care about the result of the job. We, teachers, need more in-service training sessions. We need computers and sound devices. Some of us even do not know how to evaluate students based on the CLT method.

They (the Ministry of Education) have changed the method and the books just for the sake of having done something, to advertise their actions, to say we support up-to-date teaching methods. They (mistakenly) think that it is enough to change books and teaching methods. Teachers do not have any needs!

Teachers' infrastructural challenges

All the teachers interviewed contended that, although they held positive views of the reforms, they believed there still existed requirements for the rather smooth enactment of change. Some of those requirements had to do with the insufficiency of 'infrastructures' at their specific work such as computers, and other multi-media equipment, in particular in socio-economically deprived places. One participant stated,

In the villages I have been teaching one cannot find even the minimum requirements such as a PC and speakers. How do they (the Ministry of Education authorities) expect us to teach our students with empty hands? I am forced, therefore, to model the dialogues and reading passages. Of course sometimes, I use my smartphone, but generally, we lack instruments needed to teach listening and speaking skills.

Lack of preparedness of society to embrace the reforms

Most teachers believed that society at large was not adequately prepared to embrace curricular changes and innovations. The evidence they provided for this was the presumed lack of familiarity with other major stakeholders such as school leaders, counselors, students, and parents with the changes. They believed that those local actors had deep-seated beliefs about how English is to be taught and learned. This could be reportedly traced to the fact that the policy-makers' proposed changes had not been properly publicized and explained. This is how one of the respondents put it:

We are facing many problems at the school level. They (i.e., principals, assistants, and counselors) even do not know that the evaluation scheme has completely changed. They still have their old views of how we should give tests and sometimes, I have seen this, they do not cooperate with teachers in giving an oral/aural test. They say giving a written exam suffices! Why bother administering a second exam? Its' because they are not justified about the new system of teaching and testing.

Also, the media outlets had reportedly not done their part in publicizing and justifying the hoped-for plans and innovations in the country's school education systems. Almost all the teachers interviewed contended that the media had been almost entirely silent on the issue of the late curricular activities.

The teachers also believed that the Administration had not done enough in the way of setting the scene for the grasp of the changes by different levels of society. One teacher related this to the 'government's rushed action' in 'getting something done.' It then stepped aside, she said, for whatever reason and let the change take care of itself. The media also in their views, as mention was made of it, failed to turn attention to the changes being implemented.

Prevalence of a regime of cramming

A significant point made by almost all the teachers was that they believed there were massive obstacles in the way of putting new policies into practice. One of the most detrimental ones which counteracted the effects of the intended positive changes was the dominance of a teach-to-the-test culture due to most stakeholders' obsessions with the nationwide university entrance exam (known as 'Konkur' from the French Concours). The participants thought there was a gross mismatch between the demands of 'usage'- and structure-based standardized tests and those of a communicative approach to language teaching emphasizing the active production and comprehension of language in a wide variety of contexts. This is evident from the remarks of one of the interviewees:

They (i.e., teachers) are reverting to their old habit of teaching only grammar and vocabulary because they want their students to be successful in the university entrance exam. Sometimes they are forced to do so because students and parents want them to help students achieve success with that exam. Such teachers, mostly teachers on the verge of retirement, do not care about the new teaching method and continue their old way of teaching. They resist the changes.

Other study participants also echoed the point made by the above teacher that some of their 'behind-the-times' old colleagues were resistive to the curricular reforms.

In general, the teachers participating in the study harbored mixed feelings regarding the changes in place. (((While they held favorable views of some changes, for instance, in the design of the new locally developed textbooks content-wise with less emphasis on teaching the tedious aspects such as grammar, they had their reservations about the changes and were cautious not to jump into any conclusion about the outcome of the curricular innovations introduced and the objectives set by decision-makers.))) Too Long.

Teachers' orthodox view of 'the-book-as-curriculum.'

A point worth further discussion is that the teachers, mostly seasoned ones with a wealth of experience with teaching at both schools and institutes, had not seen the 'big picture' of the reforms. When asked about what the main change in the country's language education arena was, most of them pointed to the changes in the textbooks, and not to the approach behind the book with its accompanying assumptions. Besides, most stated they were not familiar with or had not studied the relevant policy documents. This indicates the dominant role textbooks play in the mindsets of the teachers and their overreliance on them – a reminiscence of the older approaches to language pedagogies.

Such observations could be possibly attributed to the inefficient promotion of the changes by the administration and its bodies and the immediate rushed top-down enactment of the new curricular innovations (unlike the trickle-down implementation of policies). It might also be said that some teachers buy into the idea that they are, and should be, at the receiving end of the policy. Only one of the respondents maintained that teachers should be involved in the process of policy development and implementation.

In summary, the teachers interviewed, while generally endorsing the communicative-based language curricular reforms, showed their awareness of multiple obstacles in the way of change enactment, including infrastructural challenges, the ubiquity of a regime of cramming, and major social and governmental actors' indifference to it.

Discussion

In the global ELT context, Hyland and Wong (2013) warn that unless practitioners embrace the concept of change in its totality, despite all the other concerted efforts, including specification of unambiguous policies, allocation of funding, and provision of professional development for teachers, etc. "the innovation will die" (p. 2). Therefore, decision-makers would be liable to benefit from a thorough probe into

teachers' value and belief systems as far as the implementation of a specific large-scale policy is concerned.

The teachers taking part in this investigation, for the most part, expressed their discontent with the government's and media's lack of or insufficient attempt at supporting and publicizing the nature and significance of changes that were being affected in the country's secondary education system. It was as if, they felt, the government had allowed changes to unfold in an unproblematic linear fashion merely. This is a problem of some sort referred to in the literature on innovation as 'diffusion' (Rogers, 2010). By *diffusion*, Rogers meant "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" (p. 5). According to Rogers, there are four major elements at work in the diffusion of innovations: innovation, channels of communication, time, and social systems. As far as the participants in this study are concerned, they saw the second element, i.e. *channels of communication* as malfunctioning or not functioning at all. Rogers also lists several characteristics of every innovation as follows: relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, and observability. He hypothesizes that those innovations "that are perceived by individuals as having a greater relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, observability, and less complexity will be adopted more rapidly than other innovations" (p. 16).

That said, the respondents were unanimous in pointing to the relative advantage of the new approach to foreign language teaching. However, they mentioned obstacles in the way of teachers enacting the required changes and innovations. Some of them stated that teachers approximating retirement did not welcome changes because their belief systems were not compatible with the new pedagogic *modus operandi*. By this, they seemed to be implying that the top decision-makers had been rash in the introduction of innovations. Accordingly, the teachers voicing their opinions regarding the introduction of large-scale curricular innovations in the Iranian EFL context advocated a rational-empirical approach (Chin & Benne, 1970; Kennedy, 1987) to English language

education policy implementation. They subscribed to the idea that bringing about desired educational changes should be enforced from above while being accompanied by justificatory and rational remarks and actions to make the final curriculum workers, i.e. educators at the grass-roots level, put the new policies into practice.

The study reportedly pointed out the vital role played by another primary (system and non-system, i.e., those entities and individuals not directly involved in education) actors, e.g. parents, learners, schools counselors, local educational leaders, media, etc. in the successful implementation of new language education policies. This was a matter of great concern to them as they thought they could not single-handedly bear the burden of translating policy into practice. The literature on educational change attests to the significant part played by policy actors such as local educational leaders, among others (Carless, 1998; Jabbar, 2015; Sipple, Killeen, & Monk, 2004). The teachers' legitimate call for the more active involvement of other local policy workers as well as top decision-makers is reflected in Kennedy & Kennedy's (1996) remark when they say,

In any change process, it is essential to involve respected/powerful groups that may influence teacher behavior. This implies two things. Firstly, institution-based change is at least a large-scale change which takes place outside the classroom – the two should complement each other. Secondly, any bottom-up initiatives for change by classroom teachers will need top-down support and encouragement if they are to succeed in the long-term. (p. 360)

Similar contextual constraints such as those mentioned by the participants were found to be a matter of concern to Chinese secondary teachers in Yan's (2012) study of the teachers' perceptions of the new English curriculum introduced to the country's education system. The participants in Yan's investigation saw themselves as handicapped especially by "the teachers' inadequate professional expertise, student resistance, the lack of school support, and most importantly, the

examination culture that preyed on the whole education system and society" (p. 436-437). Moreover, the teachers in Prapaisit de Segovia and Hardison's investigation (2008) voiced more or less the same concerns as the participants in the current study. They had their reservations about insufficient infrastructural and professional support. The same uncertainty on the part of the implementing agents in the Japanese educational context has been reported ever since (Humphries & Burns, 2015), pointing to the difficulty of translating communicative-based reforms into practice.

Finally, it should be stated that, although Barabadi and Razmjoo's (2016) participating teachers were selected from 7th- and 8th-grade secondary English teachers, they too favored the language-in-education policy changes in the same way as the high school teachers of the present study did, and they saw more or less the same roadblocks in the way of curricular implementation.

Conclusion

This investigation, being of a qualitative nature, employed a small number of research participants. The results, therefore, are suggestive rather than definitive. As far as the sample size of the study is concerned, one could see that Iranian teachers face some psychological severe, professional, institutional, and infrastructural challenges in trying to learn to live with and implement the new English curriculum reforms and innovations. This draws attention, above all, to the fact that the process of policy enactment is far from being straightforward and that it is highly contingent (Honig, 2009) demanding the full attention of the state and significant administrative and educational bodies and the commitment of policy workers at every possible level.

At this final point, some suggestions for the more effective enactment of policy are given based on the results of the literature on educational change. In order for a policy to work or be successful, all policy workers must join hands in dismantling policy processes. There is no arguing the fact that 'ivory-tower' policy-makers, who are as far

removed from the reality of teachers' value and belief systems and their pedagogic practices as possible, will get nowhere in the enactment of their intended ideal curriculum type. Those in charge of developing large-scale innovations should recognize that "schooling and teaching cannot be treated as if they could be remote-controlled from afar" (Eisner, 1996, p. 10). The instrumental role and position of the front-line practitioner, especially the teacher, should be recognized by authorities and top decision-makers. In the final analysis, they should come to know that a 'teacher-proof' curriculum (Taylor, 2013), i.e. "a curriculum that, regardless of the teacher using it, produces significant learning results" (p. 297) stands no chance of success at the level of implementation in the long term.

Teachers' beliefs and expectations of educational change should be modified in such a way that they see the relevance and usefulness of educational change to their professional development and success. If due attention is not given to this, "[p]roblematic belief systems or schema [that] exist at both the individual teacher level and collectively at school or organizational levels ... can function as obstacles to the improvement of teacher practice" (Le Fevre, 2014, p. 56).

Policy-makers must also be cognizant of the fact that change is an all-inclusive phenomenon demanding the full cooperation and commitment of a host of policy workers. They should be (made) aware that policy enactment "is about working with teachers, parents and other local stakeholders to ensure that policy goal are achieved" (Leithwood, 2005, p. 439). Also, they should consider the impact that non-system actors such as media outlets and agents could have on the (successful) implementation of policies and reforms. Educational change does not make its way smoothly. It requires the negotiation of its enactment at systemic, institutional, and individual levels. Only then can decision-makers see that their planned curriculum has been transformed into an enacted curriculum with tangible results.

Teachers, in their own right, should hone on their 'curriculum literacy' (Rudduck, 1987) skills and competencies if desired changes are

to take place in their immediate educational contexts. They should be trained to see the big picture as far as educational change and reform is concerned. They can do this by studying relevant curricular macro-documents, negotiating its content with their peers as well as other stakeholders. The institution of teacher education behooves well if it could set the scene for the betterment of teachers' curriculum literacy. The way practitioners "perceive and respond to the events playing out in their situative context should lie at the very heart of any teacher education program" (... , 2017, p. 165).

Finally, limitations of the study should be pointed out. The study, as already alluded to, made use of quite a small number of participants (18 high school English teachers), and consequently, the results cannot be generalized to other settings and participants as is the case with quantitative investigations using a sizable sample. Furthermore, the primary data collection procedure employed, i.e., online interviews via a mobile application, suffers from the shortcoming that such essential factors as paralinguistic features are absent – features which could be quite telling. However, specific implications can be drawn from it which might help policy workers at every level of the policy hierarchy with crafting and implementing better policy reforms in future or revising those already in place. Unlike quantitative research in which it is the researcher who makes an attempt at generalizing the findings to other settings and individuals, in qualitative investigations, the onus is on the consumer of the research (whoever they might be) to draw inferences as to the feasibility of finding matches in their local context, approximate as they might be, to the findings of the original study.

Future research could tap into the assessment of the implementation phase of the recent communicative English curriculum already in the pipeline in Iran from the perspective of other actors – system or non-system – in order for the decision-makers to arrive at the 'big picture' and see how far the reforms have gone in achieving their intended results. From their point of view, every policy is devised to tackle a problem felt at a social level. Policy-makers could benefit tremendously from the

findings of policy enactment evaluation studies. Finally, teachers, in their sense-making of policy change events could be sensitized to the intricacies and nuances of a specific educational change and made aware of the context(s) in which innovations take place.

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