

ISSN 1798-4769

Journal of Language Teaching and Research, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 17-22, January 2020

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1101.03>

Implementing Recent Curricular Changes to English Language Instruction in Israel: Opinions and Concerns of Teachers in Israeli Arab Schools

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Abstract—In 2013, the English curriculum of the Israeli educational system underwent a significant reform, aimed to improve students' achievements in English and close the gaps between students' achievements in Israel, and students' achievements in other OCED countries in the subject matter. However, all indicators show that after the implementation of the new program, achievements of most Israeli students' in English, especially those of Israeli Arab students, do not meet expectations. Therefore, we interviewed 10 English teachers working in the Israeli Arabic school system, with at least 13 years seniority, in hope to find out why the new curriculum does not accomplish its goals. The findings of this study reveal that teaching English according to the new curriculum is challenged in several ways, some of which are curriculum related, others relate to the training of the teachers, and other challenges relating to the school, and the students population.

Index Terms—the Israeli educational system, the new English curriculum-NEC, implementation of the NEC, students' achievements in English, Israeli Arabic sector

I. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

"Curriculum" is a general instruction plan for preparation of textbooks, syllabi, teaching materials and lesson plans; it is also the document representing professional consensus. In Hebrew we use a term less picturesque than the word "curriculum", which is "instruction plan" (Chen, D., 2010).

The English curriculum for junior-high school was reformed in 2013, to enable the integration of the new standards and additional requirements. The new curriculum, which was implemented in all levels, from primary to high school, focused mainly on higher-order thinking (HOTS), and vocabulary expansion and mastering.

Data collected indicate that achievements level of all Israeli students has improved significantly (Blass, 2017). This is also true for each sector separately. Changes in achievements recorded, show a significant overall improvement in Math, and moderate improvement in English, which narrowed the gaps between the two sectors in these subjects. The findings regarding the effect of the new curriculum on the achievements of eighth grade students indicate that the gap in science and technology between the two sectors had narrowed while the gap in mathematics increased, and the gap in English remains unchanged (RAMA, 2016).

However, the gap between students from different sectors remained stable. The ratio of students classified as low achievers was higher among Arab pupils compared to the ratio of low achievers among Jewish pupils in approximately 5% in 5th grade and 12% in 8th grade "(Weissblei, 2014, p 3).

The educational committee in the Knesset and the state comptroller discussed the main issues explaining the low scores of Arab pupils in English tests, which are Shortage of teachers and High rate of elderly teachers (ICT). According to data received, the percentage of qualified Arab English teachers is low (RAMA, 2016), the number of weekly English hours is insufficient (only 4 hours a week) (Weissblei, 2014), and as there is a shortage of qualified teachers, the regional inspectors hire non-qualified English teachers (state comptroller's report, p. 784).

Hassanein (2014) examined the cultural content of three English textbooks for junior high grades: "Take Action" taught in seventh grade, "Explorer" taught in eighth grade, and "Horizons", taught in ninth grade, and examined the way these contents affect teaching methods and language acquisition of the subject matter.

The results revealed that although all three books reflect the three cultures required, the focus on international culture is inadequate; the cultural program of each of the three English books promotes English acquisition differently. According to Hassanein, (2014) when dealing with cultural contents, Arab English teachers must cope with many challenges; and these inadequate contents impair their ability to teach English. Thus, when English teachers teach cultural content they think is inappropriate, they use different strategies.

The most recent and up-to-date study of the English curriculum was Adin-Surkis [2016]. This study examined the perceptions of English teachers and their attitude towards the new curriculum in English, which constitutes a

fundamental educational change, since it rests on principles that suit the global status of the English language. The purpose of the study was to find out the English teachers' perception of the new curriculum, their attitude towards it and towards their role as evaluators of students' achievements.

The findings of this study show that important components that had been excluded from the new English curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2013, 2015). Teachers report that they do not have the time required to implement the numerous changes in the schoolbook and the curriculum's goals; they claim that the new teaching program is not flexible; they do not feel as partners in the curriculum change. It was also found that new teachers have difficulty to deal with the changes on their own, since their training was inadequate, and the number of courses offered in the periphery to enable Agrarian teachers to cope with the demands of new curriculum is insufficient.

II. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

It is widely recognized that success of curricular reform depends substantially on the professional ability and positive efforts of the teachers. This study was designed to answer the following research questions: What are the beliefs of Israeli Arab teachers regarding the implementation of the NEC? Does the new program in English meet their expectations?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Type

Since the research question aims to obtain better understanding of teachers' professional experience, the issue had been examined in a qualitative method that allow the researcher to shade light on the ways English teachers cope with the curricular reforms in their main teaching subject. The researcher expects and takes into consideration that each single teacher has his/her own view on the matter and his/her own personal perception of the issue at large.

The reliability of constructive qualitative research is determined by its focus on integrity and personal responsibility, indicating ethics of concern, multiple voice texts and dialog with the participants and an effort to provide maximal expression of the interviewee's perception and understanding, with awareness of the limitations of the daily reality surrounding the research conduct [Tsabar Ben-Yehoshua, 2001].

The theoretic approach anchored in the field is an inductive methodical process of theory development, growing from the investigation of a specific phenomenon [Straus & Corbin, 1990]. The researcher phrases conjectures and generalizations based on the data gathered. The data gathering process is often based upon long "field work" in which the researcher and his/her colleagues conduct observations on the subject investigated, speak with and interview associates of the target interviewee, gather all sorts of evidence and conduct an orderly log of the entire data [Byte-Marom & Ashkenazi, 2001].

B. Research Field and Participants

The participants of this study were 10 English teachers employed in Junior High schools of the Arabic sector in northern Israel. The schools belong to the State educational system and their work in the investigated area is conducted according to the new English curriculum. The choice to conduct the study in these schools was made due to researcher and her assistant's access to both the schools and the research population. After receiving the approval of the principals and the consent of the teachers to participate in the research, we conducted interviews in person and with some of the teachers by telephone. Two of the teachers were interviewed by email.

The diversity within the research population is presented by the following table showing the variables of the 10 participants:

TABLE I
PARTICIPANTS' VARIABLES

Interviewee	Age	Seniority	Education
1	44	11	BA + MA in Management
2	35	9	BA
3	39	15	BA
4	32	10	MA
5	37	15	BA+ MA in counseling
6	47	23	BA
7	46	23, 4 in the research field	BA
8	54	35	BA
9	39	12	MA in teaching English as foreign language
10	44	20	BA

C. Research Tools

The chosen tool was an in-depth semi-constructed interview. "The interview intends to reveal a multi-dimensional, rich and diverse social world of the research subjects" [Herzog & Bader Elarif, 2000] The in-depth interview is based on the will to understand other people's experience and the meaning that they attribute to the given experience [Shkedi,

2003]. The researcher is convinced that this is the right base to this study, because it aims to extract information about implementation and assimilation of the English curricular reform and the factors affecting its assimilation.

D. Data Analysis

The product of this study is a data collection relating to institutions and social activities of a society. The analysis process focuses on the world perception of the participants and the meaning they attribute to the existing reality [Shlaski & Alpert, 2007]. The analysis is based on the Grounded theory/ Field grounded theory that obliges the writer to perform strict control on the data gathering process, and to conduct a categorical analysis that would enable generalization and prediction in other studies of similar properties, combined with known and previously used theoretical knowledge.

Data analysis in qualitative research is characterized as an analytical process, aimed to provide meaning, interpretation and generalization to the investigated phenomenon. Therefore, it contains intuitive characteristics, rather than statistically based results.

Data analysis of this study will include location of common issues that appear in the recorded interviews of the participants and create a comprehensive teaching experience story that will combine the experience of all the teachers that comprised the center of this study.*

IV. RESULTS

The interviews revealed that the participants had to cope with challenges in the following categories: 1). Institutional, 2). Instructional, 3). Socio-economic, 4). Curriculum related.

The participating teachers shade light on diverse school-dependent problems, difficulties relating to school structural design and infrastructure, and schedule related issues. Teacher 1 pointed out that the physical conditions of the building itself are far from ideal, classes are too small, and overcrowded.

Teacher 2 told that in recent years, there were attempts to organize grouping in English; the planning was good and the rational was also clear, but the actual execution was highly problematic: pupils moved from one group to another without monitoring, teachers had difficulties to find an appropriate teaching space for pupil groups they were assigned to, and the schedule was too condensed.

Teacher 4 was very critical saying that: "Our schools are not ready to absorb the curricular reform in English in the spirit of innovative pedagogy. I am expected to activate the pupils by using equipment we do not have. I am expected to expand their vocabulary while I have no available means, time and teaching aids to do so.

Teacher 10 emphasizes the problematality of his/her schedule: "how am I supposed to assimilate a change in English teaching while my subject schedule contains 3 8th hours? Which means, the pupils start to learn English at 14:30, after a long school day of 7 diverse demanding lessons?" Teacher 8 was also concerned with infrastructure deficiencies and the lack of access to teaching aids; "I wanted to use an interactive approach combining games; I thought it would interest the pupils and enhance their learning experience, but when I asked for some mobile computers the answer was that there is no budget for such things. The school has computers in one room only, and it is used exclusively for computer classes".

Teacher 7 complained about school's priorities: "In my school, in the last 3 years, the emphasis is on Math; thus, for 9th grades, all efforts are channeled to prepare the pupils to take 5 units in Math. The school management had even allocated additional weekly hours, while in English, it has been 4 weekly hours for years".

Another teacher claims that in her school, there is pedagogic flexibility, but the in-school and regional training courses for teachers, are inadequate, and very limited in scope. There is a dire need to add training and completing courses that connect theory and field".

A. Instructional

Teacher 2 stated that he had read the new curricula in English and realized that the optimal sequence was vague, and no specific instructions had been provided. "...we received an official document telling us about a forthcoming curricular reform, and the subject coordinator told the English teachers present, that the new Teaching program in English was published and we should be prepared for it. There are new textbooks and we shall discuss it later. Since the materials arrived, she had given us the freedom to execute the new program the way we see fit, and it did not yield the expected results".

In her interview, the English coordinator admitted that the connection between the new English program and the teacher is unsatisfactory. In her opinion, the program itself is the product of a good planning, but the contribution required from the individual teacher is unclear. The program is not based on the teacher's expertise and most teachers were not given the opportunity to study the way it had been developed.

Teacher 7 emphasizes another aspect regarding the difficulties in the assimilation of the new program: "the teaching sequence is unclear, the overall picture of the program is unclear, and I wonder if there was any research regarding the difficulties of Arab pupils in learning the English language".

Teacher 9 observes that "The designers of the new curricula make the wrong assumption that the teachers will make the decisions regarding adjustments, but how can you expect from a teacher to reach such decisions when he/she is not sure of the program's core, and he/she had no directive training? We heard many times on thinking skills and thinking

methods. I must admit that I do not know the difference between these two concepts, nor how I am implementing it in practice”.

Another teacher, who fulfilled the role of subject coordinator some years ago, emphasized the need to train the teachers and not to assume that since they have a degree they will know how to implement a program they were not privy to its development: “...no doubt that teachers have vast important knowledge to impart to the pupils, especially due to current understanding of the pupils and their learning needs. When teachers use teaching aids, they rely upon their experiences, expertise and pedagogic skills and upon the resources they get from their schools and the regional centers, to make the required adaptations. However, when there is no practical and scientific basis for these experiences which had been randomly acquired, the resulting damage could be significant”.

The last teacher said that she had difficulties in navigating interactions with the pupils to engage them in the crucial concepts of the new English curricula, because she was unable to stir her pupils to develop their own ideas. She also said she feels that in the new program, everything is made ready for the pupils. So, we all want an independent pupil but on the other hand, we give them all on a silver platter. In her opinion, a learning program should challenge the pupils.

B. The Socio-economic Factor

The teachers who participated in this study perceive the pupils’ socio-economic context of extreme importance. All the research participants without exception reported that there is a strong connection between pupils’ socio-economic background and their achievements in English at school. A brief investigation of the schools that participated in this study, and an examination of the education map, revealed that the average scores achieved in official exams in English are below the national average. It also revealed that the pupils’ economic classification, also called ‘the nurture index’ was comparatively low.

The researcher asked the research subjects if they think that the economic situation affects the achievements in English in general, and after the implementation of the new program. All the participants answer positively. Following are some of the answers received regarding the existence and relative measure of such a connection:

Teacher 1 said – “I teach in a school where two thirds of the pupils are in some of kind risk situation, most of them are at learning risk. So, with all respect to the new learning program, how can we expect them to possess mental or emotional drive to improve their achievements in English?”

Teacher 2: “I have no doubt that the social economic background of the pupils affects all learning programs, not just the new English program. There are several reasons causing Arab pupils to find learning English difficult. But in my opinion, their background is a dominant factor, since their parents do not speak English and most of them are blue collar workers who make no effort to provide learning experience to their children. The priority of most of these parents is to pass through the month, so how they are expected to help their children to learn a foreign language? What resources are available to them for that purpose, compared to other sectors of the Israeli society?”

Teacher 4: “The new English curricula expects the pupils to activate high level thinking skills’ reflective thinking, assertiveness, etc. To reach the required level, these skills should be taught at much earlier educational stage. The pupils I get to teach in Junior High can barely read English and possess very poor vocabulary, which, if we want them to succeed, will oblige the school to invest much more resources and facilitate additional afternoon activities to strengthen the pupils. These resources are unavailable due to economic difficulties of the local municipal authority.”

Teacher 7 also notes the gap between pupils who come from economically solid homes and those who come from poor homes, regarding achievements in English: there are pupils whose parents are educated and aware of the importance of knowing English. These parents are willing to invest in their children. But for the others who regretfully are the majority, the parents have no tools...”

Teacher 8: “There are children who come from supportive multi-lingual environment. they are exposed to music and movies, and the parents register them to enhancement clubs. These children demonstrate different thinking levels than other pupils, and it is obvious that in most cases, their social status will determine their future track...”

Teacher 9: “I visited rich schools situated in economically strong communities, where I saw English corners equipped with computers, and allocation of practice hours, while in the school where I teach, the nurturing index is of the lowest level measured in Israel. The children all come from disadvantaged layers and have barely a school to go to. The pupils have no support at all, so it is very clear that the socio-economic background affects both pupil and teacher”.

C. Curriculum Related

In a discourse between the researcher and the head of English teaching faculty in the Teachers’ College of the Arabic sector, the latter emphasized that learning programs must adapt to the current principles of meaningful learning. According to this view, the current English curricula should contain value to the learner and to the society; it must be relevant to the learner and get both teacher and learner involved. She stated that: “learning program in English as such the program in every other discipline, should include high level thinking skills and be based on teaching learning methods encouraging and promoting profound thinking and understanding of the subject matter.

Today obviously, there is a need to combine digital aspects which would encourage and advance the learning alongside diverse teaching methods, learning modes and learning encouraging and advanced evaluative methods”.

The school’s English coordinator claimed that the new English curricula lacks the provision of ideological accessibility, methods and tools to enable learning diversity. The program’s rationale is clear to the teaching team, but it

is inaccessible to many teachers. We have no recommendations regarding the best teaching methods to use, no teaching aids in school and no access to content providers.

“Last year, 10 out of 1000 pupils joined an enhancement class of experiential learning with an external highly contributive content provider and had truly benefitted from the class. But, is it enough to have access to one content provider, as adapted to the program as he may be? And the main question is: “Is the advancement of 1% - 10 out of 1000 pupils is pedagogically sufficient?”.

One teacher claimed that the mode of teaching wordlists is very difficult and demanding. She cannot bring the pupils to remember all the word in the lists for long, and she has no tools to verify what has been successfully memorized.

Another teacher referred to the lack of evaluative tools: Yes, the program is good, it contains a lot of materials that could be adapted for the pupils, but its current overall construction does not provide any evaluative tools or assessment measures. I desperately need evaluative methods the program does not offer”.

Teacher 5 spoke of the order and organization aspects of the new English curricula and emphasized two major problems: “There is a significant gap between the content taught in Junior High and the high school requirements, especially regarding the matriculation exams. The new program does not offer solution to this gap and it seems that there is no connection between the material taught in Junior High and the materials of the matriculation exams. In addition, the literary requirements of the English program are vague; there is no directive or recommendations or at least some supportive booklet regarding literary demands and preferences of the English program”. The teachers also raised the difficulty to adapt the program’s contents to the pupils. They generally agree that the new program is better adapted and therefore more relevant to the Arab pupil, compared to the previous program, however, it still contains contents which are culturally unsuitable for the Arab pupil. These contents cause rejection of English and development of negative stance toward learning it.

The researcher asked the interviewees what they would change in the program if they were policy makers. Following are some of the statements received:

1. I would have investigated the field and the existing gap and try to build a program that will provide a suitable answer and bridge the gap.
2. I would design a specific English curriculum for the Arabic pupils.
3. I would have omitted the entire subject of grammar, since it does not exist in the matriculation exam.
4. I would distance myself from the super-target of the program which is the pupils’ success in the matriculation exam.
5. I would change only the contents; the program is right for the skills of the Arab pupil, but it has no reference to his world.
6. The pupils have a difficulty to fulfil a sequence of short instruction that come in a regular preset order, the thinking should be adjusted to the pupils’ level.
7. Exposing the pupils to the English language within the class context.
8. I would take linguistic issues, such as language phonology into consideration.
9. The hours allocation is insufficient and overload the pupils.

V. CONCLUSION

This essay examines the assimilation difficulties of the English curricular reform in the Israeli Arabic schools. A profound change in an educational program requires simultaneous performance of three processes in three major areas:

1. Adjustment of the existing learning programs and development of learning materials.
2. Teachers’ directive training and professional development.
3. Adjustment of the evaluation processes.

Institutional challenges are problems caused by lack of prior organization and lack of support by either the school management or the Ministry of Education. Instructional challenges are problems hindering teachers in providing effective learning environments. Socio-economic challenges are caused by lack of parental understanding the importance of learning a foreign language.

The participants defined two problem categories caused by the schools they work in: 1). Lack of support 2). Lack of understanding the nature of language teaching.

The schools lack the basic infrastructure for teaching communicative English and unwilling to seek solutions to problems brought by teachers. They also complain that the schools burden teachers with heavy workloads and crowded classrooms. In addition, not enough English language teachers are being recruited. The research participants claim that building more schools complicates matters. The research participants reported that implementation of the new curriculum caused a variety of problems. They also said that some of the content studied did not fit the Arab students’ culture and that the program did not consider the fact that for Israeli Arabic speaking students, English is a third language and not a second language. Other deficiencies mentioned were the lack of equipment required for the implementation of the new program, and lack of technological infrastructure and content providers.

The findings of the study showed that the new curriculum did not meet the participants’ expectations due to the deficiencies in its contribution to the needs of Arab students. Nevertheless, they believe that implementation of the new program could provide answers to several types of problems: (a) institutional, (b) instructional, and (c) socio-economic.

Considering the above, this essay recommends the establishment of professional educational team in all Arabic schools, to maintain discourse, counseling, input, and exchange of thoughts and ideas. Such discourse would facilitate the transformation and adaptation of the new English program's infrastructure proposes and enable the strengthening of HALA processes in classes and in the school at large. It will also provide the professional base for the realization of the pedagogic policy set by the Ministry of education in accordance with the national program for meaningful learning.

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