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A Knowledge Management View of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in General Educational System (GES) of Iran

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Abstract

English is the main foreign language in Iran. It is used and taught more than other foreign languages. Teaching this language in General Education System (GES) of Iran, occurs during two high school levels. The process of teaching English during these six years was probed from the viewpoint of knowledge management (KM) , using the Delphi method of obtaining information to grasp GES weaknesses . Conducting two rounds of Delphi and exerting Kendall's coefficient of concordance on the acquired informatin from 18 English teachers -who have taught English for thirty years-about the process of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) in GES, we could acquire 41 viewpoints that can be counted on as the tacit knowledge of the teachers and may be used in future studies.

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Keywords: KM, General Educational system (GES), TEFL;

1. Introduction

To communicate to foreigners and acquire their knowledge or to tell them your ideas, you need to know a foreign language. From this viewpoint, if a foreign language is considered as a communicative media, in order to communicate to others, you need to know it and its skills including: listening, speaking, writing, and reading. . In GES in Iran, there are curricula, planned to teach the foreign languages. In GES, teaching a foreign language, which is usually English, begins from the first level of high school and ends at the end of the second level of high school.

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Analysing the process of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) in this system can be viewed from different perspectives which one of them can be KM. KM, defined as:"exerting management in order to change tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge and vice versa in an organization, through collecting and sharing tacit knowledge as a human capital in order to reach the organization aims (Hassanzadeh,2005)", we can analyse what happens in GES for teaching English as a foreign language from the viewpoint of KM and look for English teachers' tacit knowledge.

This research is going to obtain the tacit knowledge of English teachers who have taught English in the GES and they are about to be retired. After a brief look at the knowledge management literature needed in the research, we go to the Delphi method of acquiring information and during two rounds the teacher's viewpoints will be obtained.

Data, Information and knowledge

A commonly held view is that data is raw facts _ a number or word or letter_ without any context. Data is obtained from different sources such as: surveys, operations, experiments and the like. Data are meaningless points in space and time. The key point to recognize data, is "out of context", and since it is out of context then it has no meaningful relation to anything else. Data is highly explicit.

Information is data put into context, what is essential in making data or a collection of data into information is the context, that is, the relation between the pieces of data. A mere collection of data is not information. This means that if there is no relation between the pieces of data, and then it is not information. So, information can be said to be the product of processing data to create or add meaning and utility (Gray, 2003).

Davenport and Prusak (1998) define knowledge as information acquired through implicit and explicit means and in the process combined with experience, context, interpretation and reflection. Mere information is context dependent, while knowledge has the tendency to create its own context. It means that knowledge is self-contextualizing. Knowledge, which includes the insight and wisdom of employees, is highly subjective and hard to codify.

A very common hierarchical view is that data is accumulated to form information in order to provide knowledge, (Bach and Belardo, 2003). Knowledge is the information, which exists in the mind of individuals (Alavi and Leidner, 2001). Therefore, knowledge is very difficult to manage and control (Alvensson and Karreman, 2001: Grover and Davenport, 2001).

Tacit and Explicit Knowledge

In general, there are two types of knowledge: tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is personal. It is stored in the heads of people and is accumulated through study and experience and is developed through the process of interaction with other people. It is difficult to be expressed in words, and/or numerals (Teece, 1998). It is subconsciously understood and applied (Zack, 1999) , It is transferred only through observation and practice (Harigopal and Satyadas, 2001) and is rooted in action, experience and involvement in a specific context (Nonaka, 1994). Examples of tacit knowledge in an organizational context are skills and competencies, experiences, relationships within and outside the organization, individual beliefs and values, and ideas.

There are six types of tacit knowledge:

1) **know-how:** It can be considered as the technical knowledge to do a task.
2) **know-who:** knowledge that allows finding the right person in a search for solution.
3) **know-why:** knowledge which explains desirable objective.
4) **know-when:** knowledge that defines when to do something, and when not to.
5) **know-where:** knowledge which shows the right place to find knowledge or do the task.
6) **know-that:** knowledge that defines correct course of action.

Explicit knowledge is documented information that can facilitate action. It can be expressed in formal, shared language. Examples include formulas, equations, rules, and best practices. Explicit knowledge can be packaged, and easily codified. It is communicable and transferable.

Knowledge Management

There is no universally accepted definition of KM. There are various definitions suggested by the theorists. These definitions depend on the practical views that the theorists consider for KM (Arabi and Mussavi, 2011). KM can be defined as the conversion of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge and sharing it within the organization (Nonaka, 1994). KM is, also, the process through which organizations generate value from their intellectual and knowledge based assets. Therefore, it becomes apparent that KM is concerned with the process of identifying, acquiring,

distributing and maintaining knowledge that is essential to the organization. Jennex (2005) defines KM as the practice of selectively applying from previous experiences of decision making to current and future decision making activities with the clear purpose of improving the organization effectiveness. Holsapple and Joshi (2004) define KM as an entity's systematic and deliberate efforts to expand, cultivate, and apply available knowledge in ways that add value to the entity, in the sense of positive results in accomplishing its objectives or fulfilling its purposes. Alavi and Leidner (2001) concluded that KM involves distinct but interdependent processes of knowledge creation, knowledge storage and retrieval, knowledge transfer, and knowledge application. These definitions focus on the key elements of KM: a focus on exploiting knowledge for decision-making and selective knowledge capture. The decision making focus emphasizes that KM is an action discipline focused on moving knowledge to where it can be applied. Ultimately, KM may best be described by the phrase "getting the right knowledge to the right people at the right time (Stamps, 1999) and can be viewed as a knowledge cycle of acquisition, storing, evaluating, dissemination, and application.

Applying KM in Education

Using KM techniques and technologies in education is as vital as it is in the corporate sector. If done effectively, it can lead to many merits including better decision-making capabilities, reduced “product” development cycle time (for example, curriculum development and research), improved academic and administrative services, and reduced costs.

Problem statement and research requirements:

Teaching English as a foreign language, in Iran, occurs in high schools. The process of teaching during these seven years, from the view point of retiring English teachers and acquiring their tacit knowledge, is what is going to be done, based on KM, and it may help the improvement and progress of language teaching, which, in turn, can heighten the level of English language in Iran.

Aim of the research:

The aim of this research is to obtain the tacit knowledge of retiring English teachers in the GES of Iran, using the viewpoint of KM.

Research question:

What is the tacit knowledge of English teachers, who have taught English for thirty years, about the problems of language teaching, here English, in GES schools in Iran?

Methodology

Eighteen English teachers who have finished their thirtieth year of teaching English in GES and were about to be retired, agreed to take part in the Delphi method of acquiring information. All have BA or MA of teaching English as a foreign language.

The Delphi study was carried out in two parts—a brainstorming phase to generate a list of weaknesses in teaching English in GES and a categorizing phase to identify the domain of problems. The participants took part in two rounds of collecting information. During the first round, a brainstorming happened. The participants were asked to write about the most important problems of teaching English as a foreign language in the GES of Iran. A list of weaknesses was produced and based on the received answers, four domain of problems- similar to what happens in Grounded Theory- were recognized. The rest of the problems that could not be categorized under these four domain were titled "extra" domain. As the second round of Delphi, the list of weaknesses and the four domain (teachers-related items, students- related items, books- related items, authorities- related items) and "extra" domain were sent to the participants. The participants were asked to evaluate the domains. Receiving their answers,

Finally, Kendall’s coefficient of concordance (W) was used to measures the strength of association for the ranking of items.

Based on Schmidt strong consensus exists for $W > 0.7$; moderate consensus for $W = 0.5$; and weak consensus for $W < 0.3$.

Results and conclusion

All 18 participants answered all the questions completely. The final results are as follow:

A) The teacher-related items:

1) Majority of teachers do not use appropriate methods for the teaching, specially using old-fasion grammar translation method as the backbone of the teaching process.

2) Teachers cannot exploit active methods because of the imposed limitations by the structure of the books.
3) Considering the high number of students in the classes, use of active methods seems to be impossible by teachers.
4) Teachers, to make their livings, have to teach many hours in a week, and in practice, this won't let them use active methods.
5) Low motivation in teachers.
6) The questions planned by teachers for the exams especially for final exams and university entrance exam are not in accordance with the use of active methods in classes.
7) Teachers consume much of their energy in order to calm the class and solve the problems which are not related to teaching.
8) Low capabilities of some English teachers in teaching English skills.
9) Low capabilities of some English teachers to control the class.
10) Overemphasis of teachers on grammar and vocabulary.
11) Teachers do not pay any attention on writing skills.
12) Teachers do not endeavour to include conversation in their teaching process.
13) Teachers assume that listening skill is not essential at all because this sort of questions cannot be found in university entrance exam.
B) The student-related items:
1) Low student's motivation to continue their studies.
2) Different levels of English knowledge among the students.
3) **S**tudents prefer to learn English at institutes rather than in their schools.
4) Many students think that learning English is difficult.
5 Many students think that learning English is useless.
C.) the book-related items:
1) Underlying knowledge based on which the English books are written are out of date.
2) Many passages used in books are not authentic.
3) There are problems in the books due to this fact that the authors are not English.
4) The books are not attractive.
5) The books in two high schools levels are not harmonious.
6) Books are not conversation -oriented.
7) Lack of writing skills in books.
8) Lack of pragmatism and functionalism in books.
9) Lack of nuance of English culture in the majority of the books.
10) In comparison to the books available in the market, English books used at schools are very weak from the viewpoint of content, attractiveness, conversation and so on.
D) The authorities-related items:
1) Lack of a suitable position for teaching English in the authorities mind paradigms.
2) The authorities in the Ministry of education cannot adjust the time of syllabi including English.
3) Lack of willingness to expand English.
4) Their lack of seriousness for teaching English as a second language.
5) Fear of the authorities about cultural invasion through English.
E.) Extra items:
1) Students should start learning English as a foreign language from elementary school. Starting from the first level of high schools is late.
2) **S**ome other subject(s) such as science should be taught in English.
3) **A**s far as we can find no listening, writing and speaking skills at university entrance exam, these skills won't be the focus of attention at classes.
4) Two or three hours of teaching English in a week are not enough.
5) Many students do not continue studying English in summers.
6) Mark10 is not appropriate as the pass or fail mark. 16 is suggested.
7) Classes are book- oriented not student- oriented.
8) The majority of exams are harmonious with the university entrance exam. They are not skilled oriented.
The teacher-related title has the most items and the authorities-related title has the least.
The researcher, among the ideas, was looking for teacher's tacit knowledge, in which the highest number of the

statements (13) belonged to the teacher-related items. The majority of these items refer to limitations imposed to the teacher by educational environment. The participants focused heavily on the methods and skills used in the classes. In student-related items, the majority of these items refer to the way the students look at English. In authorities – related items, they, somehow, show the political concerns of the authorities.

If we take a closer look at the statements, we can perceive that the majority of them belong to technical and scientific teaching points such as negligence to language skills, or overemphasis on vocabulary and grammar. It seems that English teachers are more concerned about the correct methods of teaching and also active methods of teaching. The second place belongs to the students and especially to their motivation aspects of learning.

We also can grasp that they believe in the poor performance of the authorities.

Forty-one statements and points in this research were extracted and can be categorized as:

1) Technical methods and skills get the gold medal.
2) Motivation problems of students get the silver medal.
3) Authorities items get the bronze medal.

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