Working with the Language Curriculum: On Methods and Teacher Agency

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Abstract. Language curricula come in a wide range of scales to meet various stakeholders' needs. The development and changes, vitality and enervation, and constraints and promises of a language curriculum reflect the needs of the society that gives birth to it. When it comes to developing a language curriculum, what could teachers do? The first half of the talk outlines the present trends in language curriculum development and the hard choices that teachers may face when tackling the task. The second half emphasizes the role of teachers in the process of curriculum development and suggests that teachers take their place as agents of change because they, inadvertently or not, steer the course of life of a language curriculum.

Keywords: Language · Curriculum · Teacher

1 Introduction

A curriculum, no matter how big or small, reflects the philosophical, historical, psychological and social foundations [1] of those who create it and those who use it, reflecting the time and place and economic, political-social and cultural environments that have given birth to it. It seems therefore that most, if not all, individuals should have an invested interest in a curriculum.

The English language curriculum is the epitome of a ground of competing interests. The list of interested stakeholders, each with their own agenda, can be long [2]. This is partly because language curricula vary in scope and scale, ranging from a multinational framework to a school curriculum programme to a one-week intensive training or a one-on-one tuition course. As the global English language market keeps expanding, with an estimated worth of $43.6 USD billion by 2027 [3], there is an increasing demand for language curricula that meet public as well as private needs.

Globalization, technology, politics and research in language teaching and learning have constantly pushed the language curriculum to evolve fast. In this process, new trends, models and frameworks of language teaching and curriculum, together with new definitions and terminology, are introduced at a dizzy speed. Christison and [2], Murray (2021) have methodologically organized language curricula around four approaches (linguistic-based, content-based, learner-centred, and learning-centred) and provided detailed guidelines about designing a language curriculum along the theoretical and

practical considerations of each of these approaches. A quick survey of current scholarship in curriculum reveals that the learning-centred approach seems to be occupying the stage at the present, with curricula developed based on learning outcomes, competencies, and/or standards. This shift reflects the general movement in curriculum ideologies towards emphasizing 21st century key competencies [4] and involving practices and values for real-world glocal contexts. With all the available options to develop a curriculum, it seems that curriculum designers and teachers are spoilt for choice.

Yet this plethora of choices presents a problem for teachers: what to do with all this information. This paper aims to partly answer this question by outlining the choices teachers can make when working with a curriculum. The paper first considers the validity of the questions of methods and then highlights teacher agency as a professional power teachers have when making curricular decisions.

1.1 To Method or Not to Method?

When required to develop a curriculum, one would probably ask the question of "to method or not to method", especially if one feels the need for a theoretical ground to validate a language curriculum. Yet unless there is a specific requirement to adopt a certain approach, it may not be a useful question to ask, as shown in the example below. The question is not new either. [5], has long written about teachers' frustrations in the post-method paradigm where no approach to language teaching seems to work and called for "principled pragmatism" in devising an alternative to methods.

For the purpose of illustration, let's consider a case study of a writing curriculum for a ten-week intensive English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course developed especially for English language learners aspiring to do a postgraduate degree at a university in New Zealand. According to this curriculum, in terms of writing skills, the graduates from this programme should be able to:

- Present specific information, ideas, arguments, and opinions in the expected text types, text structures, text forms in academic register and style.
- Develop own coherent and analytical line of reasoning.
- Construct information, facts, ideas, arguments, opinions, positions from relevant and credible sources, elaborating and respecting the original while glossing with own interpretation.
- Synthesize and re-construct relationships and multiple perspectives on a topic from a range of relevant and credible sources, distinguishing own viewpoints from those in the sources.
- Employ and interpret data and visual information to achieve task purposes.
- Show awareness of audience in text progression and development of argumentation/reasoning, anticipating audience response and mediating audience comprehension while achieving task purposes.
- Exploit language features (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, figures of speech) effectively when formulating thoughts to achieve task purposes.
- Demonstrate orthographic control.
- Demonstrate autonomy in exploiting opportunities (e.g., planning, revising, feedback conferencing), resources (e.g., course materials, reference materials) and tools (e.g., dictionaries, reference management software) to achieve task purposes.

- Develop own writing style.

These goals are translated into learning and assessment tasks and corresponding indicators which constitute evidence of the desired results, which are then mapped on to a plan of sequenced contents and learning and feedback cycles throughout the course.

Overall, the curriculum is guided by the competency statements listed above. However, a closer look at the course contents, learning cycles, and feedback cycles in the writing component of the course reveals that the course materials are content-based and skill-integrated, the learning activities are task-based, and the writing assessment tasks reflect both the genre-based approach and process-oriented approach to writing instruction. Fluency, language-focused learning, and vocabulary are embedded in the learning and feedback cycles, reflecting the four-strand approach to curriculum development [6] Students work with their teachers to set goals for their writing, language and learning-to-write skills and decide on self-evaluation and feedback, which shows the characteristics of a negotiated syllabus. In addition, teachers on the course engage in the moderation of and reflection on the delivery, assessment practice, and the implementation of the curriculum.

As can be seen, the contents, tasks, and learning and assessment cycles are informed by a range of approaches to language learning. In this way, the curriculum is positioned to exploit the strengths of each approach to serve its students. The question of "to method or not to method", if it had been asked, would not have made a meaningful question. It was the context of learning, the learners' needs, the desired learning outcomes and the availability of resources and options that informed the development of this writing curriculum.

This example also shows that curriculum developers have the freedom to make choices from a range of methods as well as the flexibility to adhere to one approach in one circumstance, promote another in another case, and/or combine different models to achieve the desired results. This would also help them avoid the weaknesses of a particular approach. After all, methods are tools: they serve their relevant purposes but do not solve the curriculum problems.

It is safe to say that the best curriculum in the curriculum developers' mind is just what it is: the best in their opinion. It is a fantasy for curriculum writers to wish to teach it to the group of students they have in mind when designing the curriculum, with all the resources and time they need and all the support they want. It is known that a curriculum is dynamic and complex and seems to live a life of its own.

[7] put forward a model that recognizes the social, historical, political, and personal forces that affect a curriculum. This model identifies seven types of curricula. The first one is *the recommended curriculum*, the ideal one which outlines the goals, requirements, standards, or recommendations for teaching and learning. The recommended curriculum usually has a direct influence over policy makers who, in turn, have the capacity to influence the curriculum. Second, *the written curriculum* aims to ensure that goals of a system or a programme can be achieved by specifying the learning activities and learning materials to guide teachers and learners in the achievement of the objectives. The written curriculum, also seen as the curriculum guide, helps to mediate the implementation of the recommended curriculum but, since it is cultivated by the guide writers, it can be both controlling by nature and open to further interpretation among its end users. This written

curriculum is not always afforded, however. Context constraints in resources, time, or staffing shape it into *the supported curriculum*, which is the recommended one in reality. The next type of curriculum is the one that has been filtered through the teacher's lenses, *the taught curriculum*. Even in the strictest curricular situations, teacher cognition, their professional beliefs and personal preferences result in the teacher's interpretations of the curriculum and decisions on what to teach. The taught curriculum can also be strongly influenced by *the tested curriculum*, the part of the curriculum to be assessed in the classrooms, at the program levels or in many cases, at the national levels. Next, what is learned, experienced, and valued by the learners form *the learned curriculum*, which can be remotely distanced from the recommended curriculum. Finally, the interactions between the different stakeholders in the process of implementation give rise to *the hidden curriculum*. While unintended, the hidden curriculum makes its presence felt when the different push and pull forces influence thinking and behaviour in and beyond the classrooms, overpowering the written and the taught curriculum and demanding changes in goals and values of a curriculum and the larger society.

[7] model emphasises that it is difficult to predict the precise directions and lifespan of a language curriculum of a particular context. How a curriculum is conceptualised, resourced, implemented, and learned can be quite different from what curriculum developers intend to do at the beginning. With regards to methods of curriculum development, it becomes clear that no one single method is powerful enough to sustain the vitality and value of the curriculum against all the tensions and challenges presented to a curriculum in the course of its life. We are also reminded that a curriculum exists in multiple layers of contexts, each one being a dynamic complex system in itself [8]. This explains why a particular method or curriculum may be the laureate in one context but struggle in another (Think the multiple adapted versions of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

2   The Role of Teacher Agency

For the teachers, working with a curriculum can be seen as solving a teaching and learning problem [9, 10], which means taking the responsibility to create and organise learning opportunities to enable learners to achieve their learning goals. Many factors influence how one practices as a teacher, but within the space allowed, this paper will focus instead on teacher agency and three practices teachers can influence through exercising their agency to ensure the curriculum delivers quality learning.

Agency, or "the ability of individuals to exercise choice and discretion in their everyday practices" [11] enables accountable actions. These actions, when applied to a curriculum, can have a transformative effect on both student learning and teacher professional development. In this way, teacher agency enables teachers to create professional space [12] when making curricular decisions.

First, teachers can exercise agency and decide on their role when working with the curriculum. If working with a curriculum, whether developing, implementing, evaluating, or innovating it, means solving a problem, the teachers are the problem-solvers.

There are (mis)perceptions that teachers are only tools in the curriculum system who do not have the power over the curriculum (but see the taught curriculum above).

However, it is unrealistic to expect the teacher to be in charge of the whole process of curriculum development, from designing the curriculum to writing materials, from teaching to setting evaluation criteria, from working with stakeholders to conducting the curriculum evaluation. A more realistic and accountable way is for the teachers to assume their role as problem-solvers in this process so that they can become aware of their individual and collaborative power and take responsibility to enact the curriculum. In the same way that teachers expect their students to be active and take control of their learning process, they need to realise the same expectations can be asked of themselves.

EFL teachers are found to approach the curriculum in three ways [13]. Some teachers adopt the fidelity approach and become a curriculum transmitter, confining the curriculum to a course of study, a textbook series, a guide, or a set of teacher plans. Others adopt the adaptation approach and become active to adjust the curriculum to match their classroom and local context. Still others adopt the enactment approach, becoming the curriculum makers and see the curriculum as a process jointly developed, and jointly and individually experienced by students and teachers. Each of these approaches, as reported in [13] entail different sets of strategies that their adherents deploy. When teachers overcome the fidelity pressure and constraints by adapting or innovating and making changes to the language curriculum, they not only solve their curriculum problem, but also address the two issues of teacher underdevelopment and curriculum irrelevance.

One might think that the curriculum is meant for students' learning purposes only. However, a curriculum is only sustainable when it has visions, creates lasting values, and fosters healthy relationships with its users. Such a curriculum makes space for teacher professional growth, so they can become experts at learning [14] and feel comfortable with exploratory practice [15] in making curricular decisions.

Another area over which teachers have complete power is their own expectations of the learners. Research has shown that the effects of teacher expectations are pervasive because it is the teachers' expectations that determine students' achievement[16, 17] When teachers' expectations increase, their attitudes, beliefs, and teaching practices change, resulting in more advanced opportunities to learn. Because students are very aware of their teachers' expectations for them, the positive attitudes and equitable teaching practices of high expectation teachers lead to higher levels of engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy among students.

Finally, teachers can push the curriculum to optimize learning opportunities for learners. A learning opportunity could mean access to learning in a general sense, but in the language classroom, it means access to specific conditions [14] that ensure learning can happen and can be sustained. In very simple terms, a language learning opportunity is access to any provision that is likely to lead to an increase in any aspect of language knowledge or skills, or in many cases, a positive attitude towards language learning. In the EAP writing curriculum above, learning opportunities can be created by giving students the opportunities to engage in discussion throughout the process of writing, work with texts to figure out the expected text forms, register and style, review source integration skills, write multiple drafts, receive feedback through multiple channels, to reflect on their writing progress and so on. This sometimes can be as simple as showing the students a website which can assist their writing process or having a conversation about their future self as a scholar in their discipline.

The development of multilingual communities through migration and travel, the growth of virtual social and professional communities on the Internet as well as the increased availability of new learning management systems make language learning opportunities seemingly more readily available than ever before. Different teaching approaches would look at different conditions to identify learning opportunities, and each teacher would have their own preferences. But learning opportunities can be identified based on the understanding that learning is a social behaviour which happens as a consequence of social interaction in a process that needs to be scaffolded deliberately and flexibly. When we place the learners and their learning goals in their contexts, it becomes easier to identify the learning opportunities that are present and those that are absent but needed. Once this is done, the next step would be to prioritize those that will benefit learners most within the constraints of the context and create options for other opportunities. It is also useful to think that in-class learning needs to have value beyond the class, that learning does not have to be restricted to the classroom, and that, besides learning the language, language learners construct and co-construct cultural and socio-political thinking and practices at the same time. In any one context, learning opportunities can be organised into in-class and out-of-class learning, individual and collaborative learning, with textbook and without textbook learning, explicit and implicit learning, and short-term learning of today's lesson and long-term learning of the learner's future learning and expertise area [18]. Can work as useful guidelines to ensure learning opportunities are provided and balanced.[1] Teachers also need to involve their students in the process of managing learning opportunities. This is because the availability of learning opportunities does not guarantee uptake of learning opportunities on the learners' part.

It is worth noting that the seemingly increased availability of learning opportunities does not necessarily mean that they are more accessible. Their availability, quality and quantity vary between contexts, classes in the same context, and even individuals within the same class. In addition, learners may not have equal access to the learning opportunities provided: they may have different learning needs and may be in different learning positions. When building learning opportunities into the curriculum, teachers need to think critically about the range of abilities and differences of the whole group and individual learners to make sure that the learning opportunities they provide are inclusive and equitable.

3   Concluding Remark

This paper has argued that teachers should exercise agency as a professional power in working with the curriculum. In any case, teachers constantly make decisions in their daily practice, from choosing an activity or which words to teach in the syllabus to conducting assessment and giving feedback to evaluating the curriculum. Without the teachers, the curriculum cannot deliver its promises to society. Without exercising their

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[1] The seven principles can be grouped into three main principles: 1) The Focus principles (Focus, Transfer-appropriateness, and Accuracy), 2) The Quality principles (Repetition and Time on task), and 3) The Quality principles (Desirable difficulty/effort and Levels of processing).

agency, teachers may lose sight of their roles as agents of change and may inadvertently let the curriculum restrict learning.

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