

Teachers' fidelity to curriculum: an insight from teachers' implementation of the Indonesian EFL curriculum policy

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Abstract

While the notion of partnership has become the new genre of curriculum implementation, Indonesian government has decided to shift back to centralized curriculum policy by issuing the 2013 curriculum (K-13). The reason is that teachers are incapable of shaping their own school curriculum based on the National Standards of Education. Centralized curriculum policy leaves the classroom as the end of the chain of decisions in which the position of teachers is merely as implementers, rather than involved decision-makers. This type of curriculum clearly demands high degree of teachers' fidelity. The purpose of this study is to investigate the extent to which EFL teachers faithfully commit themselves to fidelity approach to curriculum implementation of the K-13 at Senior High Schools in Makassar, Indonesia. Four EFL teachers were interviewed using ethnographic interviewing technique. The findings showed that these EFL teachers implement the K-13 with high degree of fidelity. The findings, however, indicate that these teachers' commitment to fidelity approach split into two distinctive reasons: interactive and coercive. The former means that teachers adhered to K-13 because they perceived it as being comprehensible through their interaction with the K-13 documents, while the latter seemed to be influenced by the K-13 curriculum policy that was typically coercive and top down practice.

Keywords:

Curriculum implementation; Centralized curriculum; Fidelity approach; Interactive adherence; Coercive adherence.

1 INTRODUCTION

By tradition, curriculum implementation comes up in two different approaches: top down or bottom up (Sabatier, 1986). However, these two approaches are insufficient for recognizing the implementation process (Chan, 2012). In today's world, the terms 'hard' and 'soft' policy are sometimes used in place of top down and bottom up approaches and are commonly used to consider multi-level systems of governance (Chan, 2012, p. 372). In the field of education, hard policy may refer to any educational policies issued by central governments and are intended to be faithfully implemented nationwide; whereas soft policy is related to any recommended educational policies issued to be flexibly implemented based on a given situation.

Current Indonesian EFL curriculum policy, Kurikulum 2013 (henceforth K-13), adopts hard policy in which the government, through their curriculum experts, plans the curriculum to be devotedly implemented by teachers at classrooms. At this centralized type of policy, the success of implementation is seen from the extent to which teachers implemented it as intended. In other words, this policy requires high fidelity of implementation. As the consumers of the curriculum, the role of the teachers is to read the document and occasionally attend an in-service training program to familiarize themselves with the properties or the components of the curriculum.

This paper intends to discuss how teachers implement this curriculum policy from fidelity perspective, that is, to what extent teachers adhere to the K-13 through the alignment of their teaching practice in favor of the curriculum prescription. This is in line with the definition of curriculum fidelity as "the extent to which teachers implement an intervention, curriculum, innovation, or program as intended by the developers" (Pence, Justice, & Wiggins, 2008, p. 332). Teachers' adherence to curriculum maybe interactive, coercive, or random; therefore, there is a need to have an attention to what type of adherence the teachers have during the implementation. The discussion will also cover the possibility of emerging gaps between the intended and the enacted curriculum, that is, between how designers intend for teachers to make use of the curriculum materials and how teachers actually do with the curriculum (van den Akker, 1988; Spillane, 1999).

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Curriculum change has become a world-wide phenomenon, and has become a mantra in the field of education. In many instances, this change is made to align with emerging educational ideologies. In any educational institutions, there are at least three key players involved in curriculum innovation: policymakers, middle-level administrators, and the teachers (Wang, 2006). If one of the key players is not participating, it is likely that the implementation of the innovation will encounter problems. Policymakers are those who formulate curriculum policy, middle-level administrators are those who interpret the policies and communicate them to the teachers, the actual implementers of the policy.

Snyder et al. (1992) identified three perspectives in relation to curriculum implementation: the fidelity perspective, the mutual adaptation perspective, and curriculum enactment perspective. The fidelity and mutual adaptation perspectives view the curriculum as the product of experts or specialists. It is the teachers who are bound to implement it in classroom instruction. The enactment perspective views curriculum as formulated through "the evolving constructs of teachers and students" (Snyder et al., 1992, p. 404). Any syllabuses and teaching materials provided by the government through their experts or specialists are considered as instruments that students and teachers use when they engage in classroom interaction.

Teachers play a key role in any curriculum implementation since they determine whether to execute any innovation in their classroom as intended (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Firestone, 1989). Teachers' decision whether to implement or not to implement an innovation is crucial since it has consequences on students. Teachers do their profession behind closed doors; therefore no one can control the decisions that they make, even in a highly specified and detailed instructional episode (Tanner & Tanner, 1995). This statement implies that teachers should be considered in curriculum policymaking. Failure to do so will result in ineffectiveness in the implementation of the curriculum.

In fidelity perspective, teachers are expected to implement the policy faithfully as intended by the policymakers (Berman, 1980), in this case the government or curriculum authorities. Analysis of fidelity implementation emphasizes on adherence to principles of curriculum designers (O'Donnell, 2008). Therefore, the purposes of curriculum materials must be designed to be transparent and carefully structured to enable the teachers to follow the curriculum and reduce the gaps between the intended and the actualized implementation in the field (Remillard, 2005). The structure of the curriculum may include time allocation for topics and how to group students in which, in turn, leads to a better student learning outcome (Freeman & Porter, 1989). It may also include details scripts or teaching scenario about what the teachers should do and say in the classroom to ensure that the learning takes place (Sawyer, 2004).

There are a number of reasons why studying curriculum fidelity is eminent. It may reveal the failure to implement the program as planned. It may help explain why an innovation succeeds or fails. It can also reveal the visibility of an innovation (Fullan & Pomfret, 1977). In practice, there are many factors that potentially hinder teachers in implementing curriculum innovation. According to Marsh (2009), the factors include complex educational terms that are hard to understand, insufficient time to understand new approaches, insufficient professional training, and the accountability requirements of the innovation.

People involved in curriculum policy need to understand the nature of change. Changes are mainly intended to improve educational practice. However, despite this virtuous intention, it is frequently implemented not as intended or is not used at all in the classroom (Morris, 1984). For instance, Iskandar (2017) studied that although primary EFL teachers in South Sulawesi of Indonesia had adequate competence in translating curriculum framework, their pedagogical practices still varied. Parish and Arrends (1983) studied that only about 20% of innovatory programs are successfully enacted. In schools, for instance, teachers usually admit they have changed their practice, but they are still carrying on as before (Karavas-Doukas, 1995). Research in the educational field has reports on how policies affect practices. In 1980s and 90s, for example, studies reported that in United States, policies' influence on teaching practices were weak and inconsistent (Sarason, 1971; Rowan & Guthrie, 1989; Cohen, 1990; Stake & Easley, 1978). However, despite this undesirable result, policymaking keep continuing with faster rate with many states launching new policies in an attempt to shift teaching and learning in new directions.

In a curriculum designed by specialists, there are four chief domains: curriculum planning, specification of ends and means, program implementation and classroom implementation. In this approach, in the first three domains, there are specialists responsible for decision-making and for producing curriculum products. In the last domain, classroom implementation, teachers and learners implement the received curriculum (Graves, 2008, p.149). With this type of curriculum, there is a great potential mismatch because each different group of people perform different curricular functions, use different discourses, and produce different curriculum products (Goff, 1998). Another problem is that by putting the classroom as the end of the chain of decisions, the position of teachers and students is merely as implementers and recipients of received wisdom, rather than decision-makers. The specialist view of curriculum clearly suggests that teachers should faithfully implement the curriculum. If there are problems with the implementation, it will be considered as teachers' fault because they were not faithful to the curriculum (Graves, 2008). They will also be identified as the cause of failure in reform efforts (Cohen & Ball, 1990, p. 233).

The level of detail or the specificity of an innovation document also determines the possibility of its implementation (Iskandar, 2014). Teachers may find that, at one extreme, a curriculum guideline is so specific that the same thing is taught at the same time in suitable classrooms. Textbooks and syllabus-style curriculum are provided with minimum possibility for further interpretation. At the other extreme, statements in the document may be so broad; making anything appears to be consistent with the policy. At this extreme, there is every possibility for interpretation (Connelly & Connelly, 2013).

3 METHODS

Since the fidelity of implementation was analyzed in depth based on teachers' curricular experiences, ethnographic interviewing technique (Bauman & Adair, 1992) was employed to qualitatively capture the phenomena being studied. This study was carried out with voluntary participation of four EFL teachers teaching at Senior High Schools in South Sulawesi province of Indonesia. These teachers teach at different level/grade students, and the reason for taking them is with the intention of benefiting from different experiences of the teachers with the curriculum. Professional experiences of these teachers varied; ranging from 5 to 25 years. All graduated from universities with bachelor degree in English education.

This study is typically phenomenology study. Accordingly, interview protocols were prepared, and questions about teachers' implementation of the curriculum were included. By making appointment in advance, interviews were done outside the schools to allow the teachers express themselves as freely as possible. All interviews were done using a voice recorder to ensure the prevention of data loss. Qualitative data analysis is done with two approaches. The first is done simultaneously with data collection. The second is done after the data is collected (Bogdan & Bicklen, 1992). In this study, the data analysis is done at the end of data collection.

4 FINDINGS

The findings were analyzed based on the two categories: the extent to which teachers adhered to K-13, and the type of adherence they applied.

4.1 Category 1: Teachers' adherence to curriculum

Teachers' fidelity of implementation of K-13 or the extent to which they adhered was highlighted by the participating teachers of the study.

"I found the K-13 informative and comprehensive. The curriculum document is well set. The overall aim and the objectives are clearly defined. I think, the scientific learning is a good approach, although in some units of the lesson it is quite challenging because I feel it is not quite fit. But the new ministry regulation allows us to apply methods other than the recommended models, such as discovery learning, problem-based learning, and project-based learning. In short, the features of the K-13 are provided in more detailed, so we do not need to construct our own curriculum like the KTSP [previous curriculum]. We simply follow..." (T-2)

"K-13 is issued because we had problems implementing the KTSP. In KTSP, we are only provided with National Standards as our frameworks in shaping our school-based curriculum. As a matter of fact, not all of us were able to make it. In K-13 we are equipped with fully set of curricula. Just stick to that document, and all sorted out. This is what most of us expect from the government. It makes our job easy..." (T-1)

"I don't know exactly whether I am doing it properly. I do not have any training on this. So, I try to create procedures which I believe suitable with scientific approach. [In scientific approach] We have 5M: Mengamati or observing, Menanya or questioning, Mencoba or experimenting, Menalar or associating, and Mengkomunikasikan or communicating. In my lesson plan, the teaching procedure is made based on this frame" (T-4).

These teachers seem to believe that K-13 is well prepared by the government; therefore they found no reason to not implement it with fidelity. T-2, for instance, argues that K-13 is informative and comprehensive; meaning that this curriculum is better than its predecessor, the KTSP. KTSP, T-2 added, is considered more difficult to implement since teachers must construct their own school-based curriculum. Constructing curriculum themselves was viewed as problems in KTSP, as opined by T-1. T-1 argues that it is fact that not all teachers have the capacity to shape their own school-based curriculum; therefore, the government decides to launch a new curriculum in place of the KTSP. It is believed that this curriculum provides more detailed guidelines for teachers that enable them to align their teaching with what is intended by the curriculum. T-3 views K-13 slightly different way. He said:

"What I understand is that although K-13 has been designed for us to implement it as intended, I feel I still need to do some bits of adaptation, such as the materials. Sometimes, I found the materials are not suitable to my students' level. I lowered down a little bit to make it more comprehensible to my students. It doesn't mean that I turned away from the K-13..." (T-3)

T-3's adaptation reveals that even in a highly detailed prescription of curriculum, there is still a chance that teachers adapt the curriculum to suit to their own context. At this point, teachers may modify the instructional objectives by lowering the level of difficulty of the instruction. This kind of adaptation, according to T-3, is not an indication that he does not faithfully implement K-13. Rather, he assumes that this should be the way of adhering to curriculum. Teachers perceive scientific approach as luminous innovation of K-13; therefore, they maintain this approach in practice. Although it is evidenced that they are not accustomed to this approach, but the 5M help them tailoring their teaching procedures.

4.2 Category 2: The types of teachers' adherence

K-13 is a centralized curriculum which demands high fidelity of implementation. There is every possibility that teachers implement it with fidelity because the government may exercise coercion. When asked about the reasons of implementing K-13 with fidelity, T-1 offers his argument:

"I don't feel like the government drives us to implement this curriculum. In fact, I like this type of curriculum. I learned the document prior to implementing it, so I know exactly the virtue of it." (T-1).

The same question was asked to other teachers. T-2 said:

"In my mind, the government wants us to implement this curriculum exactly as intended. That is why I do not dare to modify the teaching procedures, for example because we do not know for sure whether it complies with the scientific approach or not. We have examples from teacher training. We made it exactly as the examples..." (T-2)

Meanwhile, T-4 elaborated his opinion a bit cynical:

"I have been teaching English since 1994, and I have experienced several curricula. We have had 1994 [the 1994 curriculum], the KBK [Competence-Based Curriculum], the KTSP or School-Based Curriculum, and now the K-13. I believe that the government changes the curriculum to make it suitable with the needs of students. They have experts who think what is best for our students. My task is doing the instruction based on what have been assigned for us to do." (T-4).

T-3 seems to be consistent with his view that the curriculum needs to be adapted. Instead of expressing the sense of fidelity, he said:

"I have read the curriculum documents, and I feel that the government has done their job seriously. They provide us with the curriculum as the guidance in doing our teaching. It makes us relief since we do not need to be bothered in this part. Our part is to present the teaching materials the best we can; such as applying teaching strategies that promote students' learning..." (T-3)

It can be inferred from this statement that T-3 is not worried whether to implement K-13 with fidelity or not. Central to his attention is how to present the lesson in such a way that the students can learn. This includes adapting the curriculum if he considered necessary.

5 DISCUSSION

In a typically centralized curriculum, the demand for high fidelity of implementation is obvious. Furthermore, with this type of curriculum, the authorities or the government very often exercise coercion to ensure that the policy is implemented. Teachers' implementation of K-13 was evidently in high degree of fidelity. All these teachers maintain that it is their task to implement this curriculum in favor of the designer's intention. This is inconsistent with curriculum of other countries with typically centralized, such as the 2007 Education Reforms in Ghana (Kwarteng, 2013), in which teachers failed to implement it with fidelity due to less clarity of the reform. It revealed from the excerpts that the teachers found K-13 as informative and comprehensive, in contrast with Ghana's curriculum which was not so clear to teachers.

Another example of study inconsistent with this study's finding is Karavas-Doukas' (1995) study on curriculum innovation in Greek secondary schools. Teachers did not implement it with fidelity since the curriculum is considered impractical or incompatible with the teachers' practice. Whether coercion is exercised by the government to seek teachers' adherence, this study reveals two different perspectives. The first perspective is interactive adherence. With this type of adherence, the teachers follow the curriculum because they have a comprehensible understanding of the curriculum through their reading and discussions. The latter perspective, coercive adherence, is a situation where teachers follow the curriculum because they perceive that they are obliged to do so.

6 CONCLUSION

Apparently, there is a considerably high fidelity of implementation of K-13 by these teachers. Irrespective of curriculum adaptation in some point, the teachers seem to believe that K-13 is comprehensible in nature that it makes easier for teachers to implement. Unlike previous curriculum, the KTSP, in which teachers must construct their own school curriculum based on the national standards, this curriculum, as perceived by these teachers, provides all curriculum components needed for implementation. Teachers' task is merely implementing it with fidelity.

There is yet a different perspective among these teachers why they adhered to K-13 with high fidelity. Teachers like, T-1 and T-3 adhered to this curriculum in interactive way, that is, to adhere to curriculum through their interaction with curriculum document. Their interaction is established through their comprehensive reading and insights they got during teacher training. Teachers, like T-2 and T-4, adhered to K-13 since they have similar perception: the government designed this curriculum in such a way that they demanded us to implement it with fidelity, no matter what.

In terms of T-3's adaptation, it can be inferred that this teacher are competent in understanding the curriculum, and paralleling the curriculum with school context. It is therefore recommended that study of fidelity levels of adaptive teachers to curriculum be undertaken. Since this study relies on self-report data from the teachers, study on fidelity implementation in which the data is taken from real implementation in classroom is highly recommended.

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