

Developing Guidelines for Improving the Curriculum for BA Program in English Language Teaching in Iranian Universities

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Abstract

The main goal of this study is to present some guidelines for improving the curriculum for BA program in English Language Teaching field in Iranian universities. The traditional English Language teaching curriculum aims at using English language as a tool, with training of language skills as the main objective. However, such graduates can't meet the requirements of the current social development. Therefore, the ELT curriculum has to be reformed and the new objectives should be the training of talents with strong language ability, a creative quality and specialized professional knowledge in ELT teachers. Considering the developments in technology and education, nowadays, learning English language is considered as a key and important task in Iranian society. Therefore, trying to improve the quality of English language teaching program in universities might be extremely useful for language learners.

I. Introduction

In this study an attempt was made to recognize the skills and contents needed in a teaching curriculum and present the strategies for application of them. The main concern of this study is to develop some practical guidelines for designing a new curriculum for BA program in English language teaching; by using experts' views in order to train more efficient English language teachers. Furthermore, it tries to suggest ways for promoting the motivation of ELT candidates. Therefore, the findings of this study might shed light on preparing more useful ELT programs with the hope of training more efficient teachers who are familiar with recent methods and teaching techniques and can do their job properly, and can meet their students' needs. That is why careful attention should be paid to effective curriculum development which as a result leads to effective teaching.

Key words:

Syllabus: A syllabus is a specification of what takes place in the classroom, which usually contains the aims and contents of teaching and sometimes contains suggestions of methodology. (Richards, 2001).

Delphi research method: The Delphi method of data collection is a repetitive process to collect and organize the anonymous judgments of experts using a series of data collection and analysis techniques, usually in the form of questionnaires interspersed with feedback (skulmoski, 2007).

Review of related literature

Curriculum planning and syllabus design are the first steps in any language teaching program and are of great significance in the field of ELT.

Johnson (1996) defines the word curriculum as all the relevant decision making processes, which generally exist in some concrete form and could be observed and described, for example; syllabuses, teacher training programs and teaching materials and resources.

According to Nunan (1991), materials are an important component within a curriculum. They are often the most tangible component of pedagogy and their real potential or lack of potential could only be evaluated in relation to real learners in real classrooms.

According to Howard (2007), at the university level, where we have major fields of study that encompass a collection of courses, we have the opportunity to design a coherent curriculum. Such a curriculum needed not be sequential in the traditional sense. It might be problem-based or issues-based, with students making ever-deepening inquiries into central concepts and principles.

Richard (Richards, 2001, p. 41) defines curriculum development as "the range of planning and implementation of processes involved in developing or renewing a curriculum". He put these processes as focusing on "needs analysis, situational analysis, planning learning outcomes, course organization, selecting and preparing teaching material, providing for effective teaching and evolution" (Richards, 2001, p. 41)

Pishghadam claimed that ELT has achieved an autonomous status, and therefore, it cannot be considered a part of linguistics anymore. ELT has already been enriched in theoretical foundation and now it is ready to export and contribute its ideas to other disciplines of knowledge (Pishghadam, 2011).

Considering the fact that the selection and ordering of what is to be taught are of great concern to teachers, a considerable number of syllabi have been proposed in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) to give shape to instruction. These syllabi have been designed in terms of structures, notions, functions, topics, or tasks, to facilitate language learning. Traditional procedures for syllabus design primarily involved the selection and sequencing of integrated linguistic features like grammar and vocabulary as well as notions, functions, and topics. Nevertheless, these approaches to syllabus design were criticized for their failure to satisfy learners' communicative needs, and also for misrepresenting the process of second language acquisition as linear (Baleghizadeh, 2008).

Based on this general objective, the study intends to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What should we do to promote motivation in ELT candidates at Iranian universities?
2. What skills and contents do we need in ELT curriculum to enhance trainees' functionality in the field?
3. Which strategies should we follow to apply these skills?

II. Methodology

The participants of the study were 30 experts in the field of English Language Teaching from 5 universities in Iran including Tabriz university, Urmia university, Tabriz azad university, Urmia azad university and Nabi-Akram university of Tabriz.

To do this study, Delphi research method was used, according to which an open-ended questionnaire was given to the participants to elicit their notions on the topic under study. Based on the elicited notions from the experts, a structured questionnaire was constructed and submitted to the same experts. The completed questionnaires were collected and prepared for data analysis.

The first phase of the study i.e., the open-ended questionnaire amounts to an anonymous brainstorming on the part of the experts. In the second-phase questionnaire, the researcher requests the panel of experts to consider, rate and comment on the responses developed during first phase. Ideally, the rating is done on a Likert scale (Murry and Hammons, 1995). A Likert scale measures the extent to which a person agrees or disagrees with the question. On a survey or questionnaire according to Likert scale (Likert,1932) the individuals are asked to respond to the statements by demonstrating weather they strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree(are undecided), disagree, or strongly disagree with each statement.

III. Results and analysis

After collecting the questionnaires in the first phase, the answers of the panel of experts to the open-ended questionnaire were classified, analyzed and organized based on which a new questionnaire was designed. The second questionnaire contained more detailed questions and was in the form of a structured questionnaire, to be easier and less time consuming for the participants to complete.

The items of the second questionnaire answered by the experts were analyzed in terms of their frequency to recognize which items won consensus by the panel of experts (N=30). Table I shows the results in detail:

Table I.
 Descriptive analysis of the items of the questionnaire

Item	strongly disagree	disagree	undecided	agree	strongly agree	item	strongly disagree	disagree	undecided	agree	strongly agree
X1	0	0	1	6	23	X43	0	1	3	18	8
X2	0	0	3	19	8	X44	0	1	4	16	9
X3	0	0	4	15	11	X45	0	0	1	16	13
X4	0	0	2	19	9	X46	0	0	1	15	14
X5	0	0	3	14	13	X47	0	1	7	13	9
X6	0	0	2	12	16	X48	1	2	6	16	5
X7	0	2	1	15	12	X49	0	0	3	16	11
X8	0	0	1	11	18	X50	0	0	2	17	11
X9	0	2	7	14	7	X51	0	0	0	16	14
X10	0	1	5	12	12	X52	0	0	2	18	10
X11	0	0	3	11	16	X53	0	1	1	14	14
X12	1	0	2	9	18	X54	0	0	3	21	6
X13	0	0	1	13	16	X55	0	0	2	18	10
X14	0	4	10	14	2	X56	0	2	3	13	11
X15	0	0	2	14	14	X57	0	0	2	20	8
X16	0	0	1	13	16	X58	0	2	9	14	5
X17	0	0	0	15	15	X59	0	1	6	17	6
X18	0	0	4	16	10	X60	0	1	10	12	1
X19	0	1	8	16	5	X61	1	3	2	10	14
X20	0	0	13	11	6	X62	0	0	0	14	16
X21	0	1	8	15	6	X63	2	7	8	5	8
X22	0	0	1	13	16	X64	0	1	0	16	13
X23	0	1	0	17	12	X65	1	1	1	19	8
X24	0	0	4	15	11	X66	0	0	1	15	14
X25	0	1	7	15	7	X67	0	1	5	14	10
X26	0	3	3	16	8	X68	0	2	5	13	10
X27	0	3	7	13	7	X69	0	1	0	13	16
X28	1	1	3	16	9	X70	0	4	0	15	7
X29	0	0	1	15	14	X71	0	0	0	13	17
X30	0	2	8	15	5	X72	0	1	1	15	13
X31	0	2	8	14	6	X73	0	0	3	15	12
X32	0	0	1	19	10	X74	0	0	3	11	16
X33	0	0	0	16	14	X75	0	0	2	12	16
X34	0	0	3	13	14	X76	0	0	4	18	8
X35	0	2	3	17	8	X77	0	4	6	11	9
X36	0	1	5	14	10	X78	0	2	5	12	11
X37	0	1	3	19	7	X79	0	0	6	15	9
X38	0	1	4	13	12	X80	0	1	0	16	13
X39	0	2	6	13	9	X81	0	0	1	19	10
X40	0	0	1	17	12	X82	0	2	3	17	8

Item	strongly disagree	disagree	undecided	agree	strongly agree	item	strongly disagree	disagree	undecided	agree	strongly agree
X1	0	0	1	6	23	X43	0	1	3	18	8
X2	0	0	3	19	8	X44	0	1	4	16	9
X3	0	0	4	15	11	X45	0	0	1	16	13
X41	0	1	5	12	12	X83	2	7	7	10	4
X42	0	1	1	18	10	X84	0	1	4	17	8
						X85	0	1	1	17	11

To analyze the questions of the second questionnaire which consisted of 85 items (each item followed by 5 answers), the first two and the last two scales were combined. That is strongly agree and agree were considered as one scale and strongly disagree and disagree as another scale. Items 14, 27, 30, 31, 58, 60, 63, 77, 83 do not have a high frequency for yes answer. That is the majority of the participants have chosen “No” for these items.

However there is a need to validate the high frequency items using inferential statistics. To do so, the chi-square test was applied to high frequency items of the questionnaire. The result is presented in the following table along with chi-square results.

Table II.

The chi-square test results

Item	Frequency			Sig	Chi	Item	Frequency			Sig	Chi
	No	Un	Yes				No	Un	Yes		
1	0	1	29	.000	26.13	43	1	3	26	.000	38.6
2	0	3	27	.000	19.2	44	1	4	25	.000	34.2
3	0	4	26	.000	16.13	45	0	1	29	.000	26.13
4	0	3	27	.000	22.53	46	0	1	29	.000	26.13
5	0	3	27	.000	19.2	47	1	7	22	.000	23.4
6	0	2	28	.000	22.53	48	3	6	21	.000	18.6
7	2	1	27	.000	43.4	49	0	3	27	.000	19.2
8	0	1	29	.000	26.13	50	0	2	28	.000	22.53
9	2	7	21	.000	19.4	51	0	0	30	.000	22.53
10	1	5	24	.000	30.2	52	0	2	28	.000	48.6
11	0	3	27	.000	19.2	53	1	1	28	.000	19.2
12	1	2	27	.000	43.4	54	0	3	27	.000	22.53
13	0	1	29	.000	26.13	55	0	2	28	.000	29.4
14	0	10	16			56	3	3	24	.000	22.53
15	0	2	28	.000	22.53	57	0	2	28	.000	27.4
16	0	1	29	.000	26.13	58	2	9	19		
17	0	0	30	.000	31.4	59	1	6	23	.000	26.6
18	0	4	26	.000	16.13	60	1	10	19		
19	1	8	21	.000	20.6	61	4	2	24	.000	29.6
20	0	13	17			62	0	0	30	.000	46.4
21	1	8	21	.000	20.6	63	9	8	13		
22	0	1	29	.000	26.13	64	1	0	29	.000	26.13
23	0	1	29	.000	26.13	65	2	1	27	.000	43.4
24	0	4	26	.000	16.13	66	0	1	29	.000	26.13
25	1	7	22	.000	23.4	67	1	5	24	.000	30.2
26	3	3	24	.000	29.4	68	2	5	23	.000	25.8
27	3	7	20			69	1	0	29	.000	26.13
28	2	3	25	.000	33.8	70	4	4	22	.000	21.6
29	0	1	29	.000	26.13	71	0	0	30	.000	39.4
30	2	8	20			72	1	1	28	.000	48.6
31	2	8	20			73	0	3	27	.000	19.2
32	0	1	29	.000	28.4	74	0	3	27	.000	19.2
33	0	0	30	.000	19.2	75	2	28	30	.000	22.53
34	0	3	27	.000	31.4	76	0	4	26	.000	16.13
35	2	3	25	.000	33.8	77	4	6	20		
36	1	5	24	.000	30.2	78	2	5	23	.000	25.8
37	1	3	26	.000	38.6	79	0	6	24	.001	10.8
38	1	4	25	.000	34.2	80	0	1	29	.000	26.13
39	2	6	22	.000	22.4	81	0	1	29	.000	26.13

40	0	1	29	.000	26.13	82	2	3	25	.000	33.8
41	1	5	24	.000	30.2	83	9	7	14		
42	1	1	28	.000	48.6	84	1	4	25	.000	34.2
						85	1	1	28	.000	48.6

Research question 1

_ What should we do to promote motivation in learners?

The freshmen starting their 4-year BA program at universities need to get more familiar with the importance of their discipline first.

After making the trainees aware of the importance of English Language, the instructor should select the material for class work and homework according to their interest. Furthermore, it would be better to establish a situation in which students compete in a friendly manner in a communicative state and the teacher should provide proper feedback when necessary. Even the physical state of class such as light, appliances, size, form and etc. would affect the class progress and the way students feel.

Just like other university fields which require students a training period after their 4-year program, it is recommended that ELT students also follow the same rule and spend a training period somewhere outside university as part of their 4-year BA program. Robert Harris (2010) has emphasized on the efficiency of “motivation” in language teaching context. Kaylene C. William (2010) also had studied key ingredients for improving students motivation.

Research question 2

_ What skills should be incorporated in ELT curriculum (BA program) to help the trainees adapt themselves to the new changes in their field?

It is clear that the first step towards planning ELT curriculum is to find out what skills and specifications should be reinforced in the candidates, so that they can adopt themselves to the new developments in the field and while in occupation.

The trainees should be informed that changes all the time are happening in this field and they should always wait for new things and new ideas.

It is necessary to integrate all 4 language skills in ELT classes and to teach language holistically. Communicative activities should be reinforced and the textbook should be used as a guide rather than as a mean to determine teacher’s and students’ role in the class.

A critical perspective on the status quo of English Language Teaching in Iran as a country in which English is considered a foreign Language raises important questions; questions regarding the applicability of approaches, methods and techniques developed by second language acquisition scholars in the field who are English native speakers at the same time. We should

see what is particular about a specific context of learning. Hence, a foreign language learning context is quite different from a second language learning one in terms of contextual variations, performance factors, and social and cognitive roles of learners and their teachers. Even how people understand one another, their norms of interaction, non-verbal behavior, attitudes, beliefs, discourse strategies are different across different cultures. So decisions about teaching methods, classroom activities, and materials selection must take into account differences in various contexts of teaching and learning and also learner characteristics (Razmjou,2006).

Research question 3

_ How do you think the environment of learning should be in terms of teaching / learning, teacher-student relation, classroom seminars and group activities etc.?

It is necessary to change classes from teacher-centered orientation in ELT classes to a more workshop-like one. This kind of orientation helps the candidates to solve their problems with their classmates and with supervision of their teacher. In this situation, every each of the problems would be discussed in a group and teachers control of the group would be more feasible. This cannot be gained, but for establishing a friendly, encouraging, flexible and active environment in classes in which the candidates think and ask questions and seek for answers.

The other important matter in ELT classes is that the instructor should focus on progress rather than perfection, since one can start with less knowledge and reach relative perfection through practice. Ultimately, having a limited number of students in class is a major factor, since it allows the teacher to take the responsibility and control of the class well and supervise the groups more easily in class.

IV. Conclusion

This study entitled “Developing Guidelines for Improving the Curriculum for BA Program in English Language Teaching in Iranian Universities” was done through Delphi research method and intended to find appropriate answers to three research questions about the ways to promote motivation in learners; the skills, techniques and contents needed in English Language Curriculum, and the strategies which should be followed to apply by suggested skills.

Generally speaking, as Riazi & Razmjou (2004) state, curriculum renewal is an ongoing process in the educational planning. It provides educators and curriculum developers with the opportunity to incorporate new insights and expectations in academic programs so that the prospective graduates of such programs become functional in the careers available to them. So, it can be concluded that, the ELT curriculum in BA program at Iranian universities need necessary changes with regard to the motivation of the learners, skills and contents it covers and the strategies that are applied to teach these skills.

Emphasizing on transmission of knowledge in our system of education, rather than knowing and using the sources of knowledge is one of the reasons that makes the trainees lose their interest and motivation. There is no training period for the students outside the university, so the trainees

never experience a real teaching situation in the four year BA program. Most of the ELT classes in Iranian universities are still teacher-centered. The teacher is the authority in class and there are very little workshops for trainees. Most of the classes run traditionally and there are not enough group and pair tasks. Besides, having large numbers of students in classes reduces the effectiveness of the class as well. There is the hope that compensating for all the points mentioned so far, will improve the quality of our English Language Teaching curriculum greatly at Iranian universities.

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