

# **Dreams and Realities:** Developing Countries and the English Language

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Paper 13

More than just 'technology': English language teaching initiatives as complex educational changes

by Martin Wedell

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## More than just ‘technology’: English language teaching initiatives as complex educational changes

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### Introduction

Recent papers by, for example, McGrath 2010 and Brock-Utne 2007 (which review and critique a range of current development thinking from the mostly Anglophone developed world) suggest that, for the time being, degrees of success in development will continue to be judged principally through apparently straightforward and easily interpreted measurable changes to universally applicable economic indicators, rather than through analysis of more context-bound and complex processes of social change. The role of education in such materialistic views of development seems to be to enable economic growth, through forming and expanding individual, and national, human capital:

*... the knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes that allow people to contribute to their personal and social wellbeing, as well as that of their countries.*  
**(Keeley 2007:3)**

The rapid expansion of English language teaching into state education systems worldwide over the past 20 to 30 years has been an obvious trend. For the first time in foreign language teaching history, national governments and individuals worldwide seem to see teaching a language (English) to all learners in state schools as an important means of increasing the human capital on which future national economic development and political power depends. At national level in Kenya, for example, the Ministry of Education sees the development of communication skills in English as important because English is:

*... the pre-eminent language of international communication. Consequently those who master English reap many academic, social and professional benefits.*  
**(KIE 2002:6)**

Meanwhile, the Philippine government sees its English curriculum as helping to develop 'language learners aware of and able to cope with global trends' (Waters and Vilches 2008:8) while, for individual learners in India:

*English is seen more as a language of power and empowerment, a tool for career making and a practical necessity. It is now increasingly seen as necessary for upward social and financial mobility. (Padwad and Dixit forthcoming 2011)*

At both individual and national levels in the Ukraine:

*... the enthusiasm of ordinary Ukrainians for English coincides with the government's ambitions for integration with the European Union on the one hand and strategic and economic partnership with the United States on the other. (Smotrova 2009:728)*

Despite a lack of hard evidence to show whether the policy of providing universal English language teaching is beneficial and/or cost effective (Coleman 2010), the perception introduced above has resulted in innumerable English Language Teaching (ELT) initiatives to try to develop citizens' English proficiency. While most such initiatives have (in name at least) been nationally instigated, there has also been considerable direct or indirect influence on and investment in ELT by governmental agencies from (mostly) English-speaking countries as part of their international aid budgets. New English curriculum documents and teaching materials proliferate in state education systems worldwide. English has become a compulsory subject for ever more years of basic schooling. High stakes English tests are increasingly important gate-keepers for entry to higher levels of education. Although there has been massive human and financial investment in such initiatives, outcomes to date have often been disappointing. Reports (Nunan 2003, Wedell 2008) suggest that there are relatively few state school classrooms anywhere in which most learners are developing a useable knowledge of English. Those learners worldwide who do succeed in developing the hoped-for communication skills have often been at private schools and/or have had extra private tuition.

It seems unlikely that prevailing views of the important role that the development of citizens' English proficiency plays in supporting national development in a globalising world will change in the immediate future. National ELT initiatives aiming to better enable the development of English proficiency are likely to continue to be introduced. This being so, then, both for the sake of social equity, and in order to use limited educational resources to best effect, it is important that such initiatives should begin to better achieve their desired outcomes.

The remainder of this chapter has three parts. In the first I introduce a number of core issues emerging from the growing educational change literature, which are increasingly agreed to need consideration when planning a major educational change and I discuss what these issues imply for implementation processes. Next, in the light of these issues and their implications, I claim that many national, large-scale ELT initiatives are examples of complex educational change and that the failure to recognise this is one important reason for their apparent frequent failure. Finally, I briefly analyse two case studies of existing or recent ELT change initiatives

from developing countries, to illustrate some consequences of acknowledging or failing to acknowledge the importance of such issues. The chapter concludes with a number of questions for further consideration.

## Supporting successful large-scale educational change

National-level changes to (ELT) curricula, materials, timetable weighting for particular subjects and modes of assessment in schools represent a large-scale change in any context. Planning the implementation of such changes involves consideration of the interactions between a range of people playing many different roles at many different levels of responsibility both within the overall education system and outside. The context of change implementation planning is therefore complex and it is impossible to identify all the micro-level factors that may contribute to successful implementation. The study of the process of educational change thus accepts the inherent complexity of the process and the literature (based mostly on experiences in ‘developed countries’) offers no simple formulas for ensuring success. Nonetheless, over time, certain issues have been seen to reoccur time and again in different educational change contexts, and in this section I discuss three factors, from a recent paper by two extremely experienced Canadian educational change thinkers, that are generally agreed to be important when considering the implementation of educational change:

The central lesson of large-scale educational change that is now evident is the following: Large-scale, sustained improvement in student outcomes requires a (i) *sustained effort to change school and classroom practices, not just structures such as governance and accountability*. The heart of improvement lies in changing teaching and learning practices, (ii) *in thousands and thousands of classrooms*, and this requires focused and sustained effort by (iii) *all parts of the education system and its partners*.

***(Levin and Fullan 2008:291; my italics and numbering)***

I interpret the three factors numbered above as follows:

1. Educational change requires sustained effort over time, to change what actually happens in school classrooms rather than just the surface language or appearance of the curriculum or the materials, or the manner in which schools are evaluated. The length of time for which such sustained effort will be needed will be strongly influenced by the degree of ‘reculturing’ (Fullan 2007) that the change entails for those whom implementation affects directly. Funding provision and the commitment of ongoing active leadership and management of change implementation needs to reflect this reality.
2. Implementation of national educational change takes place in numerous classrooms. Schools in different parts of a city, region or country are different. The classrooms within them are different. Implementation will never look identical across the whole of any education system anywhere. Any evaluation of success will need to bear this in mind.

3. Those directly affected by large-scale educational change include educational leaders, teachers and learners. However, other components and actors in the existing education system and wider society are also affected and can critically influence implementation outcomes.

The above points are discussed more fully below. Although treated as discrete points, it will be obvious that they are in fact interdependent and influence one another in more or less predictable ways.

### **Sustained effort over time**

Despite rhetoric that might suggest otherwise, many of the education systems into which ELT initiatives have been introduced are set within societies that retain many features of what Kennedy (2011, Chapter 2 this volume) calls the ‘traditional’ stage of social development. The beliefs about what teaching, learning and assessment ‘mean’ – and so what ought to happen in classrooms within such education systems – remained ‘didactic’ (Kennedy 2011) until at least the very late 20th century. Many remain so still.

The last 20 years have seen an expansion of educational change initiatives (with new English curricula often in the vanguard) that have claimed to be introducing more student-centred, interactive, participative, ‘open’ approaches to teaching and learning. The extent to which such approaches result in genuine changes to what happens in classrooms will be strongly influenced by how fully the people whom the changes affect can cope with the significant professional and personal ‘reculturing’ that such changes entail.

No professional likes to feel that their existing knowledge and skills are no longer sufficient. Everyone finds it difficult to make significant changes to their settled and unquestioned professional behaviours. Van Veen and Slegers (2006), for example, point out how vulnerable Dutch teachers felt when they sensed that their existing professional competence was no longer adequate at a time of change from a more traditional to a more learner-centred classroom. English teachers everywhere, teacher educators, those who are supposed to be training them and those who are managing and leading the change implementation process in a school or a locality may all feel uncertain when confronted with such changes. They will all need capacity-building support over time to become able to implement some form of such professional change in classrooms.

The more ambitious and demanding an educational change is, in terms of its scale, and in terms of the degree of difference it hopes to bring about in what happens in classrooms, the longer it will take. Exactly how long is difficult to judge. Fullan (2007), using examples of change mostly from North America, suggests that a large-scale change may take five to ten years to become part of normal classroom life in the majority of schools. Polyzoi et al. (2003) suggest that in other contexts, for example many countries of East and Central Europe in the 1990s, educational changes of the kind outlined above represent such an intense degree of reculturing that they may take a generation to achieve.

Whichever timescale we subscribe to, it is clear that successful implementation of educational change takes a long time. It is an ongoing process, not an event

that takes place at a particular point in time. In multiparty political contexts the timescales suggest that a culturally challenging national educational change initiative – such as the introduction of a ‘Communicative English curriculum’ – needs to be understood from the very start as a national, not a party, political issue (Cox and Lemaitre 1999). It will continue to need economic and political support over what may be a decade or more. In many contexts this can happen only if governments can be persuaded to ‘put educational investment beyond their own need for political survival’ (Fullan 2001:233).

### **Implementation of educational change does not take place in a uniform manner**

*There is an implicit assumption that implementation is an event, that change occurs next Tuesday or in September. (Hopkins 1987:195)*

What the implementation of any national educational change actually looks like in any given school classroom will be influenced by the behaviours of different people who are in turn influenced by their own differing socio-economic, geographical and historical realities. Local conditions, which may vary from one school or one region to another, include:

- Teachers’ current practices: what they are familiar with and do well, how difficult they are likely to find the new practices
- Class sizes: how supportive these are of new educational practices and whether anything can be done to make them more so
- Available resources and teaching materials: whether the new educational practices require use of particular resources or teaching materials and whether these are present or could be provided
- How well the immediate community expects its learners to perform in high stakes tests and whether expected levels of performance will be affected by the introduction of new practices
- The availability of local support for capacity building
- Awareness of and attitude to any new classroom practices on the part of local leaders and parents
- Funding actually available to help support all aspects of the implementation process and understanding of how best to spend it.

Since all these (and other possible factors) may vary between different parts of the same country or even from one school to another, the route which implementation takes, the rate at which it occurs and the degree to which the ‘spirit’ of the change is present in its final form may all vary. Trying to evaluate success through a uniform set of (often purely quantitative) measures is unlikely to provide an accurate picture of the outcome of any implementation process.

## Large-scale educational change affects the whole of the existing education system

Many attempts at policy and programme change have concentrated on product development, legislation and other on-paper changes in a way that ignored the fact that what *people* did or did not do was the crucial variable (Fullan 2001:70).

When we think about which people need to ‘do’ or ‘not do’ certain things in order for an educational change to succeed, the first group to be considered are usually teachers. As Leithwood et al. (2002) point out, how teachers think about knowledge and about learners’ roles and how their ideas translate into classroom teaching and learning is central to any concept of education. However, while teachers are central figures in any change implementation process they cannot succeed alone:

*Real reform requires sustained attention from many people at all levels of the education system. It is not enough for a state or national government to be fully committed, difficult as this is in itself. Many, if not, most schools, and, where they exist, districts or regional authorities, must also share the goals and purposes of reform and improvement. It is even better when the efforts of the school system are understood and supported by external groups such as community agencies, since this is important to the political legitimacy of the education system. There can be – indeed, there should be – room for a variety of strategies to achieve the goals, but there cannot be substantial dissent on the main purposes themselves. (Levin and Fullan 2008:294)*

For teachers to feel supported and thus motivated to invest the effort over time that is usually required for them to understand and become comfortable with the new practices, change planners need to recognise that any large-scale change affects the whole education system. Establishing systems to help teachers to become confident in new practices over time is of course one important aspect of implementation planning. However, for such systems to ‘work’, planning also needs to consider two further points.

First there needs to be an honest appraisal of whether adjustments will need to be made to other components of the system such as teacher education, teaching materials and methods of assessment in order to support the change process. Secondly planners need to consider which other people more or less directly affected by change (the educational leaders and administrators at many levels, the teacher educators, inspectors and supervisors, the test and textbook writers, the school heads, the learners and even the parents) may also need to be helped to change some of their practices and expectations. Both points impact directly on whether the national education system will be able to work collaboratively to make the change a success (Wedell 2009).

In the next part of the chapter I consider to what extent ELT initiatives have so far seemed to consider the issues mentioned above.

## Are educational change ideas relevant to ELT initiatives?

In the introduction I noted that judgements about the success or otherwise of development initiatives often currently focus primarily on empirical measurement of economic ‘product’ indicators. This product orientation of much ‘economics-based’ development thinking also influences how the challenge of educational change in developing countries is understood.

*More money and policy effort will get children into schools and education’s effectiveness can be improved by scientifically-tested investments in the ‘right’ instructional materials [and] teacher upgrading. (McGrath 2010:250)*

I suggest that such a rational view of how changes in the goals of teaching and learning can be supported (very much at odds with the current consensus regarding the influence of complex ‘process’ factors on the outcomes of educational change initiatives) influences the planning of many ELT initiatives. In the remainder of this chapter I propose that in most contexts the transition from foreign language teaching (in our case ELT) for a small elite to the provision of ELT for everyone – and the accompanying introduction of new curricula which aim to develop learners’ communication skills – together represent a very complex educational change. I also propose that the issues reviewed in the previous section are directly relevant in such complex educational change contexts. I consider each of them below in terms of the extent to which they appear to be acknowledged in the planning and implementation of ELT change initiatives.

### The need for sustained effort over time

The time needed to implement change depends greatly on the degree of reculturing that the change represents for those who will be most directly involved in implementing it. I believe that despite official rhetoric to the contrary, the contexts into which many large-scale ELT initiatives are introduced remain ones in which, ‘From a cultural perspective, the prevailing pedagogical approach in Tanzania can be summed up as “we teach; students listen”’ (Vavrus 2009:304). In most such contexts, the lines of communication and decision-making within education systems remain strongly hierarchical and teacher–student relationships remain formal:

*Children are brought up to respect adults and those in authority. Questioning or challenging them are not often considered appropriate behaviour. Indeed, in many African societies, the relationship between adult and child is one of respect and authority. Children are not encouraged to question; they are expected to be respectful, charming and smiling in the company of elders. Consequently, the expectations raised by CCP [child-centred pedagogy] directly contradict the cultural context of African societies. (Altinyelken 2010:167)*

Such systems rarely encourage individual teachers or schools to show much personal or professional initiative, or to develop a sense of personal agency and autonomy:



*Institutions, teachers, and learners follow centrally prescribed norms of working, evaluation and administration, and centrally designed uniform syllabuses and textbooks. Teachers do not have much freedom in choosing or dealing with their material, methods or schedule. (Padwad and Dixit forthcoming 2011)*

Regardless of whether the main focus of the initiative is stated to be a new curriculum, new materials, new teacher education curricula, or starting English at a younger age, ELT initiatives nowadays focus on enabling learners to use English for communication. The teaching approaches which are thought to enable learners to develop English communication skills tend to be expressed in terms imported from the 'western' literature of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), learner- or child-centred classrooms and constructivist approaches to teaching and learning (Vavrus 2009 in Tanzania, Waters and Vilches 2008 in Philippines, De Segovia and Hardison 2009 in Thailand, Padwad and Dixit forthcoming 2011 in India). I suggest that making such a transition is potentially threatening to many implementers' existing 'key meanings' (Blackler and Shinmin 1984). Key meanings can be seen as our day-to-day perceptions of ourselves and personal and professional relationships with others. These provide us with important stability and security. If teachers have rarely been encouraged to take personal professional decisions, it can be an:

*emotionally very challenging and upsetting task for teachers to disturb their comfortable routines, to experiment and innovate, to try and err, and to risk failure and loss of face. (Padwad and Dixit forthcoming 2011)*

In many contexts the changes of behaviour and professional practice that ELT change initiatives imply for those directly concerned with implementation do entail an adjustment of some 'key meanings'. This is true not only for teachers (and learners) but also for the educational leaders and teacher educators who share teachers' professional and cultural assumptions and, less directly, for parents and other members of the wider society.

If implementation of ELT initiatives involves significant reculturing for a wide range of implementers, national plans need to be made to support the process, flexibly, over long periods of time. In my experience, which will, I imagine, be shared by many readers, the complexity of what ELT change entails for the many people it affects is rarely acknowledged by national policy makers or international aid providers. Instead they often behave as if the implementation planning of strategic ELT change initiatives is a technological process (Blenkin et al. 1992), with implementation viewed 'as a linear, sequentially ordered industrial production line' (Pettigrew and Whipp 1991:32). Such a process requires funding over a series of discrete stages to be completed at pre-determined points, after which impact will be evaluated and the initiative will be considered complete. Sustained context-sensitive effort over enough time to enable those affected to develop sufficient genuine understanding of and confidence in new ELT practices to make some form of these practices visible in most classrooms is rare.

### **The need to acknowledge that implementation will never be uniform**

ELT and other education initiatives in most developing countries borrow (or are strongly encouraged to adopt) ideas about appropriate approaches to teaching and learning from very different cultural contexts (Altinyelken 2010, Vavrus 2009). The literature on the importance of taking context into account when considering what will and will not be possible in English classrooms stretches back almost 30 years (to Holliday and Cooke 1982), and books like Holliday (1994) and Coleman (1996) have been widely read. Nonetheless, in official change documentation at least, an assumption that it is possible to achieve the same change outcomes (English communication skills), to the same level, through the use of the same materials in the same ways in all environments, is often apparent.

This may be unsurprising given the hierarchical and prescriptive nature of most education systems and the lack of autonomy that this engenders among classroom-level change implementers. However, for many ELT initiatives this very prescriptiveness, when applied to the planning and design of support for reculturing (of teachers, teacher educators and educational leaders), results in uniform provision that ignores the varying contextual realities that exist in different parts of a country or region. By so doing it inherently contradicts the context-bound ideas underpinning ‘communicative’ and ‘learner-centred’ classroom teaching and the need to explicitly prepare and encourage teachers to view implementation as a process of trying out new ideas, teaching techniques and materials in ways that are sensitive to the contextual realities of their own classrooms. This prescriptiveness is also often present in the (usually brief) training that may be provided for (some) teachers when a change is introduced. Such ‘trainings’, perhaps partly due to their brevity, rarely explicitly acknowledge the classroom realities in which change is to be implemented. They often therefore represent poor preparation for actual introduction of change practices into classrooms once the training ends (Wedell 2005).

### **The need for the whole system to be consistent**

It seems clear that if teachers are to be able to implement a contextually realistic version of change in their classrooms then they will not be the only ones who need to change. If teacher educators are to help teachers to understand change and how to interpret change for their own contexts, they too need training and support in the planning and design of teacher support provision that reflects the need to fit the ‘spirit’ of change to existing realities. Similarly, school leaders within top-down systems may need to be helped to accept that implementation of new practices may mean adjustments to existing teacher and learner behaviours; school leaders will also need to understand that the more independent teachers, able to take personal professional decisions about some of what happens in their classrooms, are not a threat to leaders’ status.

All of the above can be made more or less difficult to achieve depending on the extent to which the ELT change planners consider the ‘whole’ system within which English teaching will take place before launching their initiatives. For example, the introduction of a communicative English curriculum has implications for initial teacher education programmes, for how teacher performance will be evaluated and – critically – for the content and format of any high stakes English examinations that

learners will be expected to take during their school careers. If such issues are not considered and planned for in tandem with the apparent main focus of the initiative, they can act as further contextual barriers to implementation. Again I imagine many readers will reflect on how infrequent such internal coherence between all the affected parts of the system has been in the ELT or educational change contexts which they have experienced.

In the next section I give two brief case studies of real ELT initiatives to illustrate what may happen when the above three factors are insufficiently acknowledged, or are ignored. I was personally involved in the first case from the inception of the project to its end. (The process of implementing English at primary level, of course, continues to the present.) In the second case I was continuously involved at a remove over a three-year period as a supervisor of the thesis from which the case data has been extracted.

### **Case 1: Introducing English at primary level**

The ELT initiative in this case aimed to support the introduction of a national primary English curriculum in all schools. The cultural context in which it was situated was highly centralised, top down and hierarchical, and the educational culture reflected this. The decision to introduce English at primary level was made with minimal consultation: local educational planners and administrators were instructed to plan for English to begin to be taught in the third year of all the primary schools by a set date. An outline curriculum was provided which stated that English should not be formally assessed.

The lead-in time for the implementation of this initiative was about two years. However, few primary English teachers were available and, due to the arbitrary and non-consultative manner in which the change had been introduced, most educators, school principals, educational administrators and members of the wider society had little understanding of the implications for teaching approaches. There was a great deal to do in the time available.

The provision of ‘bodies’ to teach English in classrooms was a pressing concern for regional educational policy makers and their planning for implementation thus included the establishment of a group of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) trainers. It was decided that four trainer training groups (approximately 100 trainers) would have three months’ TEYL and trainer skills training at a British university. Each returning group would then be responsible for running a three-week TEYL training programme for up to 800 primary school teachers in the summer or winter holiday following their return. Members of later groups would each be expected to attend one such programme as ‘training assistants’, prior to their departure.

Participants were carefully selected and were existing district-level teacher trainers, educators from colleges specialising in the training of primary teachers or primary teachers considered to have trainer potential. Most parts of the region were represented, but the majority came from the more developed areas and had some prior TEYL experience.

The first two months of the UK trainer training courses discussed the main principles underlying the teaching of languages to young learners and the rationale for these. It demonstrated and tried out some of the most widely used classroom techniques and activities for turning principles into classroom practices suitable for young learners. Efforts were made to relate these techniques and activities to local realities as far as possible, for example, through reference to participants' prior experiences of their context and use of local textbooks.

The final month of the programme had two main foci. The first was on developing materials to use on the teacher training programmes which participants would be expected to run on their return. The second was to develop training skills that would enable them to use the materials with teachers as effectively as possible. In a recent follow-up study involving 15 members (60 per cent) of the third group, Li (2010:59), herself a member of the group and an active trainer, reports that there was a general consensus that one month was insufficient to 'grasp the [training] techniques, at least not at a level at which they can be articulated.'

Each teacher training programme which the trainers led on their return was residential over three weeks, with approximately 800 teachers divided into 20 to 25 classes of 30 to 40 teachers each. Each trainer (with an assistant) was responsible for one class. The programme content was based on the trainer-produced materials, initially heavily based on the content of the UK programme. These were adjusted in terms of weighting and examples to meet local realities in the light of experience over time. The training context could be considered supportive in two ways. Firstly since the teachers were all primary school teachers some TEYL ideas about how children learn, how they learn language, and what children's characteristics imply for the sorts of activities that help them to learn were broadly familiar. Secondly many suggested techniques fitted what was said in the outline curriculum about the need for primary English learning to focus on activities involving games, stories and songs and for children not to be subjected to formal assessment.

Despite such implicit support, the prevailing educational culture in society as a whole was not at all consistent with the types of teaching and learning activities that the training programmes suggested. Most of those both within the education system (educational administrators, school leaders, learners) and outside it (parents) continued to view learning at all levels of education as a process involving first the learning of tangible and visible knowledge (which in the case of language meant mostly grammar and vocabulary) and then being assessed on this learning.

In addition the classroom environments into which primary English was to be introduced presented further challenges. In a study of 511 teachers attending the third teacher training programme, 98.2 per cent said that the techniques and activities introduced during the training could be used in their primary English classrooms (Wedell 2005). However, 85 per cent also answered 'Yes' to a question asking whether there were any factors (apart from their own lack of experience or lack of confidence) that might make it difficult to actually use these techniques and activities in their classrooms. Factors mentioned by more than ten per cent of these teachers included (in order of frequency):

- large class size, insufficient physical space and the difficulty of classroom management
- the pressure to ‘finish the book’ to meet the demands of the test, while having only a few lessons a week, making it difficult to find the time to use other suggested techniques/activities
- the critical role of test results in leaders’ judgments of students’ and teachers’ performance and the incompatibility of testing content and format with the use of the suggested techniques and activities
- learners’ language level making them unable to understand meanings and instructions
- learners’ cultural reluctance to participate
- inappropriacy of textbooks, meaning that there was a shortage of materials to support the use of the suggested activities
- excessive teacher workloads and so lack of time to plan classes and materials which incorporate these techniques/activities.

Given these multiple visible and invisible challenges, the great majority of primary English teachers needed support beyond a single teacher training programme to feel able to introduce new teaching practices in their classrooms.

The only explicit expectation of all the newly trained trainers was that they should contribute to just one teacher training programme after their return. While a minority did contribute to more than one programme – and a small number had explicit training roles in their existing jobs – for many there was no opportunity to develop their training skills any further. Li’s (2010) follow-up study reports that 12 out of the 15 members of the group that she contacted had had no formal training role since.

Similarly, Li’s (2010) study suggests that availability of further support for teachers has been dependent on the attitudes and understandings of individual educational leaders and head teachers rather than being planned for all. Where such leaders themselves understand and feel positive towards the implementation of TEYL, support is provided. This may take the form of direct resource or explicit moral support:

*The education bureau support the TEYL training a lot. The vice director of the bureau responsible for teaching ... many times when having the training he came to the spot, to confirm the management. If we ask for any resources for the training course he always agrees to provide them. (Li 2010:65)*

Alternatively, support may be more indirect, as for example through ensuring that the content and format of low stakes assessment supports the use of some TEYL practices:

*Local research bureau are writing very simple examinations so the teachers who use appropriate techniques get high marks. (Li 2010:70)*

### **Case 1 in the light of the educational change principles**

The case described above represented a very complex change. A high degree of reculturing at many levels was a prerequisite if teachers were to feel able to successfully introduce some recognisable version of TEYL ideas and activities into the majority of classrooms in this context. The development of such confidence would take time and depended on serious consideration of each of the three factors which we have been examining, both at the initial planning stage and when planning implementation. As will be evident from the above description such consideration was limited. Below I consider the consequences of the way in which the programme was implemented.

#### **The need for sustained effort over time**

National policy was that primary English should be introduced in all schools by a certain date. Responsibility for enabling implementation was delegated to regional educational planners. I do not know what form their 'instructions' took or the extent of regional autonomy that they allowed. In this case the regional planners were actively involved for the two years of the trainer training project. However, the lack of any longer term scheme for utilising expensively trained trainers to provide ongoing support to teachers over time suggests that planners did not have a complete understanding of what degree of change to 'normal' classroom teaching the introduction of English in primary schools entailed, or how alien it might seem to those more or less directly affected by its introduction. Consequently there was insufficient sustained and active leadership of a region-wide, ongoing process of implementation planning and support. Trainers' skills were under-utilised (outside their own institutions) and few teachers had access to the professional and leadership support over time that might have enabled them to overcome the many practical, professional and personal problems (see below) that made it difficult to implement a version of TEYL appropriate for their own circumstances.

Many of these difficulties needed long-term national-level leadership and encouragement if they were to be overcome. This too was not forthcoming. However, even at regional level planners might in the first instance have helped implementation by clarifying what was actually expected of teachers. Project evaluators noted that 'all teachers lacked direction from the curriculum whose targets were vague and non specific' (Yu and Hurst 2004:29) and that 'a significant number of teachers had problems handling the textbooks' (Yu and Hurst 2004:15). Given that curriculum targets were not clear, even if structures for ongoing teacher support had been established, it would still have been difficult to decide how best to develop teachers' confidence in using their textbooks in ways consistent with TEYL principles. Overall, insufficiently sustained effort over insufficient time (at both national and regional levels) was devoted to planning the implementation in a manner which would maximise the development of teachers' confidence in the new professional behaviours and so increase the likelihood of some version of the hoped-for changes becoming visible in most classrooms.

#### **The need to acknowledge that implementation will never be uniform**

The outline nature of the curriculum alluded to above may suggest that national planners recognised that due to wide socio-economic disparities – and consequent inequitable distribution of resources and qualified teachers – actual implementation would 'look different' in different classrooms. Li's report (2010) also suggests that

the ongoing curriculum implementation support available for teachers has been dependent on the enthusiasm of individual school or administrative leaders and that there is no template for implementation at the regional level. This recognition of the need to encourage different parts of the country to implement policy in ways appropriate to their own circumstances does, if consciously planned, show a clear sense of what is realistically possible. However, a combination of the lack of sustained support (see above), the centralised nature of the education system and the strong educational culture (see below) has meant that in fact much classroom teaching of primary English has been strongly influenced by the content and format of the form-focused examinations that primary school leavers need to take to enter junior secondary schools. The uniformity of teaching and learning that result from such influences probably bear little resemblance to the outcomes which the curriculum had envisaged!

### **The need for the whole system to be consistent**

Given the potential threats to their 'key meanings' that the introduction of TEYL posed for teachers, consistency of message regarding what was expected of them was important. In fact, existing cultural and physical classroom realities were largely inconsistent with the classroom behaviour that the implementation of TEYL might have expected. It is in the failure to address such inconsistencies that the effects of lack of sustained effort over time become most evident.

Given the largely transmission-based nature of the existing educational culture there was a need for a national or regional awareness-raising process to try to ensure that people surrounding and influencing teachers (for example, head teachers, parents and local educational administrators) understood that what the primary curriculum would like to see happening in classrooms was different in certain ways from existing primary teaching-learning norms. Instead most English teachers remained in contexts in which:

*Most parents do not know anything about the National Curriculum ... Usually they would expect their children to learn some specific things in school each day. If the children cannot show to their parents what they have learned, the parents would question the teaching quality of the teachers or the school.*

**(Zeng 2005:20)**

The national policy stated that primary language learning should not be formally assessed. Again, existing educational assumptions and the key role that examinations play within almost all education systems meant that this message needed serious reinforcing from the top if it was to be heeded. Without such reinforcement most members of society both outside and within the education system continued to believe that testing was the only way of ensuring learning; moreover, they were of the view that learners' performance at all ages should be evaluated (usually) through formal, objectively marked tests:

*Parents also care about examinations. They could not understand the formative assessment. What they believed was the marks their children could show them on papers. They would worry that their children might not be able to achieve good marks at the end of term. (Zeng 2005:21)*

In most educational contexts worldwide schools are increasingly judged by their perceived examination success. If parents cared about examinations primary English teachers and head teachers also had to care, since, once English was available in all primary schools, it also became one of the examinations taken to determine entry to 'good' secondary schools.

As if the above were not enough to persuade most English teachers that maintaining the status quo made sense, the prevailing ethos of the education system positively discouraged teachers from being autonomous innovators or experimenters in their classrooms, even though these qualities are exactly those needed by teachers able to flexibly interpret the goals of TEYL for their own context. Most teachers have little say regarding the selection of the textbooks that they are given; they are told what point in the textbook they should reach by when; and the examinations that their learners take are based upon what is supposed to have been covered. In such working contexts teachers thus had little 'overt support and encouragement to trial new methods' (Yu and Hurst 2004:37).

Finally the physical classroom conditions were often not supportive of the implementation of TEYL techniques and activities:

*How could a teacher use different techniques like playing games in a small classroom which holds more than 60 children (my son's class)? How could they play other interesting activities to arouse every child's interest in learning English with a class of more than 80 (my nephew's class)? The mentioned class sizes are not a rare phenomenon. (Zeng 2005:14)*

All of the above suggest that lack of sustained effort over time by policy makers and implementation planners makes it unlikely that the change environment within which teachers are trying to introduce change into classrooms will be consistent enough to support their efforts. Similar themes appear in the next case.

## **Case 2: Training pre-service teachers to teach the national English secondary curriculum**

This case is described only briefly, but highlights many similar issues to the one above. It is based on a PhD study with which I was closely connected. The study investigated pre-service English language teacher education.

The Ministry of Education in a centralised, top-down, education system, in which the prevailing educational culture remained largely transmission based, introduced a new English curriculum. This stated that its main task was:

*... to shift from overemphasising the transmission mode of teaching and learning based on grammar and vocabulary to the development of students' overall ability in language use. The provision of English should attach great importance to activating students' interests in learning, relating the course content to the students' life experiences and cognitive stages of development, promoting learning through their active involvement in the process of experiencing, practising, participating in activities, co-operating with each other and communicating with the language – learning through doing. (Ministry of Education 2001:1)*



The main goal of the new curriculum was to enable school leavers to be competent communicators (Ongondo 2009:4). It recommended that English be taught using communicative language teaching methodology without providing detailed information about what implementing such a methodology might look like in terms of classroom activities and behaviours. The curriculum had two syllabus strands, language and literature, and the documents stressed the need to teach and assess these in an integrated manner. As previously stated, I consider the introduction of a 'communicative' curriculum and the methodology, activities and behaviours that it is generally understood to imply, as representing a complex educational change for English teachers. It seems reasonable to assume that the professional development and support provided during English teachers' pre-service training would reflect the understandings and skills that novice teachers would need to be able to implement the curriculum in school classrooms.

Universities are responsible for the four year pre-service training of English teachers. The study showed however that they do not seem to be aware of what the Ministry expects English teachers to know and be able to do in classrooms when they reach schools. As autonomous entities the universities make their own decisions about the content and weighting of the various courses that make up the pre-service English teacher education curriculum. Ongondo (2009) points out that in most universities this curriculum is taught by a number of different departments, often with little or no co-ordination between them. In one university which Ongondo examined, during their four years of study trainees are required to take 12 or more courses each year. Over the four years only two of these courses are specifically focused on pedagogical content knowledge, while none specifically help the development of curriculum knowledge (Shulman 1987). The university teacher education curriculum also views English language and literature as two separate subjects, taught in two different departments and assessed separately. Trainee teachers therefore receive little exemplification of how the two strands might be taught in an integrated fashion, which the curriculum expects them to do once they enter schools.

After the above pre-service training, the novice teachers investigated in this study (Ongondo 2009) were thus professionally unprepared for teaching practice in a multitude of ways. As future English teachers their lack of preparation meant that they lacked two key sets of understandings and skills: when, how and why to use a communicative methodology to teach English and when, why and how to teach English in an integrated manner.

The schools they attended were in a relatively prosperous part of the country with good communications. Their school experience demonstrated further mismatches between classroom reality and documentary rhetoric. Firstly they found that the school-based 'co-operating teachers', who they hoped might be able to help them develop the skills needed for 'integrated teaching', were themselves unclear about how to operationalise the ideas in their classrooms (unsurprisingly, since they had received the same initial training). Consequently, few examples of actual 'integrated teaching' could be observed in any of their practice schools.

Next, the novice teachers discovered that an 'alternative' English syllabus existed, devised by the National Examination Board. This syllabus identified the areas that

learners needed to cover if they were to be appropriately prepared for national high stakes tests. It did not integrate the skills in the manner recommended by the Ministry's national curriculum, but instead assessed language and literature separately. The following quote suggests what usually happens in such situations:

*If people in a change context (parents, learners, teachers, institutional leaders) see an obvious lack of harmony between the behaviours/practices underlying the proposed changes and those that are perceived to help learners pass high stakes exams, it is the practices that support success in assessment that will 'win'.*  
(Wedell 2009:25)

Teachers in Case 2 were no exception; their reaction of course affected teaching materials. Teachers who are judged (and whose schools are judged through league tables) on their learners' success in high stakes tests are likely to choose textbooks which they feel will help them help their learners to pass such exams. Textbook writers therefore had little incentive to produce textbooks to support teachers in implementing the integrated, national, communicative-language-teaching-based curriculum.

### **Case 2 in the light of the educational change principles**

As in the previous case teachers would need support over time to be able to develop the understandings and skills that would enable them to make the transition from being transmitters of information about grammar and vocabulary to being developers of students' language use ability. While it is logistically difficult, time consuming and expensive to provide such support over time to practising teachers, the context of pre-service teacher education, extending over four years, would appear to be a perfectly natural setting within which to try to ensure that the nation's future English teachers become able to teach in ways that the national curriculum recommends. As the above description shows, the opportunity to make the link between what is emphasised in training and what the teacher needs to know for classroom practice is not being utilised in the case context.

### **The need for sustained effort over time**

The curriculum was introduced in 2002. At least two cohorts of English teachers have graduated from pre-service training programmes since then. If there had been sustained effort to raise awareness of this curriculum among those affected by it (again, not only teachers but also, in this case, especially teacher educators) and to provide appropriate support over time to teacher educators working on pre-service programmes, one might by now expect to see a minority of classroom teachers able to implement a recognisable version of what the curriculum hoped for in classrooms. However, national planners and policy makers do not seem to have made any medium- to long-term effort to support the change from the top, in terms of providing guidance or material support to encourage the institutions responsible for training English teachers to adjust their pre-service programmes to better enable their graduates to implement the curriculum in classrooms.

Communication between the various levels of the education system seems very poor. There is little evidence of effort to disseminate information and raise awareness about the new curriculum, or to provide practical support for

its implementation at any level of the education system. The teacher training institution level seems to be oblivious to what the new national curriculum expects and so makes little or no attempt to link the courses that it teaches for trainee English teachers to the principles and practices that the curriculum embodies. At school level neither heads nor existing teachers in the schools studied seemed to have any real understanding of what the curriculum expects of them or of how to operationalise ‘communicative, integrated methodology’ in secondary English classrooms. Overall, therefore the schools studied suggested that there was little sense of the national curriculum affecting what actually happened in classrooms.

### **The need to acknowledge that implementation will never be uniform**

Given what was said above, there seems to have been no real commitment to curriculum implementation outcomes in any settings. As in the previous case, in so far as anything was being consistently implemented in the classrooms studied it was mostly those teaching and learning techniques and activities that reflect the content, formats and weighting of the high stakes English tests which influence children’s academic and professional futures. Again, therefore, English language teaching in the schools studied took place in a more or less uniform manner and – rather than reflecting the teaching behaviours and activities that the curriculum recommended – it reflected the language demands of the high stakes tests.

### **The need for the whole system to be consistent**

It is difficult to imagine how this particular system could be much less consistent. As noted above, lines of communication between the various ‘power centres’ – in particular the Ministry of Education and the national body responsible for high stakes tests – seem very poor. The same is true for communications between the Ministry and the universities responsible for pre-service teacher education, within the universities between the different departments responsible for teaching the English teacher education syllabus and between these universities and the schools that they send their trainees to. While there may be context-specific political and cultural reasons for this comprehensive failure to communicate, the consequences are clearly very unhelpful for any attempt to introduce English-related educational initiatives.

The financial and human resources that are being invested in national ‘English language education for everyone’ are clearly not being used effectively. At national level, the lack of communication between Ministry and testing authority result in the hoped-for outcomes of the Ministry’s curriculum apparently being ignored in favour of the outcomes required by high stakes tests. At university level, the efforts being made by staff and students over the four-year English teacher training course are not actually preparing novice teachers to teach the national curriculum. Meanwhile, at school level, the confusion among serving teachers again means that new teachers have no examples of how to teach the integrated ‘communicative’ curriculum available. Learners therefore find themselves in classrooms where their teachers do not really know why they are doing what they are doing, and so seek support from the only seemingly stable element within the system as a whole, the high stakes tests.

## So what?

If policy makers in developing countries continue to believe that, despite the complexity of the process, the development of citizens' ability to use English, through the introduction of culturally challenging teaching approaches remains a suitable goal for national education systems, then I feel that in the case study contexts the factors highlighted in the educational change literature all seem relevant and these are discussed below.

### **The need for sustained effort**

We need to face up to the fact that ELT education initiatives designed to enable the majority of citizens to develop an ability to use English will take a very long time to yield visible results. This will be especially so if such initiatives hope to introduce new more interactive English teaching-learning behaviours and activities into schools without introducing similar changes in the teaching of other school subjects. Active leadership at the national level will be needed throughout the extended planning and implementation timeline, particularly during the initial planning stages, to identify potential inconsistencies within the education system and to plan how to minimise the extent to which these may hinder implementation. To be able to identify possible inconsistencies effectively, national planners anywhere need to be willing and able to be honest about the 'baseline' from which the initiative is beginning. For reasons that include politics and (misplaced) pride, such honesty seems rare everywhere.

For practical and contextual reasons, detailed implementation plans for different parts of the country or different types of school will almost certainly need to be delegated to education professionals of various kinds at other levels of the system. However, sustained active national leadership will continue to be needed, for several years at least, to retain an overview of how the system is responding to the initiative and to consider and co-ordinate responses to what is learned from the monitoring of local implementation processes. Without sustained national and local leadership it will be impossible to establish and maintain consistency.

### **Implementation does not take place in a uniform manner**

In terms of classroom implementation, this factor did not at first seem an explicit issue in these cases. This is probably because, as reported, policy makers provided only very limited detail of what they wished to see happening in the young learner or communicative-integrated English classroom. If this was a conscious decision on their part, it suggests that they understood that uniform implementation would be impossible in their very varied countries. However, their approach to implementation support suggests that such consciousness was not likely. While no 'template' for uniform classroom implementation existed, the support that was provided was uniform, and made no reference to teachers' (or trainee teachers') contextual realities. In these cases, it was thus the inappropriacy and uniformity of implementation support, rather than some stated desire to see certain things happening in every classroom, that contributed greatly to the limited curriculum implementation.

### **The need for the system to be consistent**

Changes to any national state education system directly and indirectly affect a majority of any national population to differing extents. In addition there are a number of components within any subject micro-system. A key issue for national leaders and planners from the very beginning of the process is to decide what can be done to ensure that as many of the people and subject components as possible are sending broadly consistent, broadly supportive, ‘messages’ to classroom implementers over time. If messages are seriously inconsistent (as in both the above cases) there will be little encouragement for the implementers to sustain their efforts to make the challenging professional changes that most current ELT initiatives entail.

Credible reports of cases in which national state education ELT change initiatives are successfully enabling the majority of learners to develop a degree of English proficiency are rare. Given the massive scale of the human and financial investment that continues to be devoted to the teaching of English worldwide, the continued lack of such success cannot be considered acceptable.

Evidence that such proficiency (if eventually gained) does materially add to individual – and so to national – human capital in a manner that supports national development goals, is at present equally difficult to find. An eventual reaction to the current state of affairs might be to seriously question the extent to which the investment in English for Everyone makes a genuine contribution to ‘global development’. This debate is just beginning.

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