

## **Practices of Elementary School Teachers for Developing English Language Competencies among Students**

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### **Abstract**

The school curriculum introduced in 2006 was a major curricular reform in the history of Pakistan as it emphasized on the standards set for students in achieving essential competencies. This study explored teachers' practices with respect to the competency-based learning outcomes embedded in the National Curriculum for English Language 2006. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample comprising of ten elementary English language teachers from public schools in Lahore. The interview guide was based on competencies and standards of English language provided in the National Curriculum for English Language 2006 related to the elementary level. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse interview data. The analysis of the data revealed that not all five competencies identified by the English language curriculum were the main focus of English language teaching at the elementary level. Moreover, book-based written tasks were dictating most of the teaching-learning processes. Along with other factors, the examination system was identified as the biggest hurdle in teaching competency-based curriculum because the examination system only measured students' performances related to written content that was well qualified by students through rote learning. Therefore, the re-structuring of the examination system is suggested.

**Keywords:** Competency, Curriculum, elementary school, policy-practice gap, English

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## Introduction

Twenty-first-century educationists advocate the idea of an education system where skills for life should be taught as part of the English curriculum. For example, Wan and Gut (2011) argued that curriculum in the twenty-first century should be different because students start interacting with the real world at a very early stage of their life through the use of social media. Therefore, there is a need for a curriculum that can integrate knowledge and skills with real-life experiences in the core subjects. These skills, that is, communication skills, thinking skills, technology skills, critical thinking skills, and media literacy skills are important to learn in the twenty-first century equipping students with such competencies and skills that would enable them to be successful in the workplace that would exist ten years after the present time. Due to rapid advancement in technology and expansion of the corporate world, the nature of jobs will be different from the jobs in today's world. Students' skills will help them to communicate and collaborate with others effectively.

Competency-based language teaching (CBLT) is underpinned by interactional and functional perspectives on the nature of language. CBLT is "closely linked to the notion of observable and measurable learning outcomes, or statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand, and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of learning" (Cañado, 2012, p. 4). CBLT seeks to develop the communicative competence of the learners. However, functional communication skills are not linked to the performance of specific real-world tasks. They are generally described. Hence, CBLT has some commonalities that it shares with Communicative Language Teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This approach to teaching the English language seeks to teach language in relation to the social contexts in which it is used. This is based on the central assumption "that language can be functionally analyzed into appropriate parts and subparts, that such parts and subparts can be taught (and tested) incrementally" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 143).

The competency-based curriculum enhances students' abilities and students attain learning outcomes by grasping command over skills with a combination of information gained in lessons (Richards, 2006). Dewey (1997) introduced the notion of organic connection between education and experience. According to him, an effective curriculum controls and connects knowledge to the real-life experiences of students. These experiences are provided in the form of activities that supplement students' skills to work. According to Dewey, education itself is a process of living in the world a student lives in, and not a preparation for the world they will live in. This notion is strongly supported by Bruner and Gagné (2011) who define learning as a process, not as a product. Therefore, in order to make learning possible, the curriculum needs to provide

opportunities for students to develop certain abilities, skills, and competencies. Through developing competencies, learning will go on and on as a spiral and cyclic process (Howard, 2007). It is argued that the competency-based curriculum prepares students to face challenges in the globally connected community and gives them the opportunity to be successful in the workplace (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Competencies equip students with essential skills to face the challenges of the real world.

The major curriculum reform that took place during 2006-2009 incorporated competency-based language teaching. Anwar and Aman (2010) underscored that the important features of the National Curriculum reform 2006/7 were as follows: A skill-driven curriculum was proposed and developed. Educational goals were linked to students' learning objectives. Life skills were incorporated across all subjects. A major emphasis was made on creative writing and logical thinking abilities in students rather than passive learning methodologies. Delivery of instruction through active learning strategies was recommended. Teachers' guidelines were provided for the effective delivery of the curriculum. The provision of guidelines to take learners beyond what is only provided in the textbook for effective learning was also an important feature of this reform.

The National Curriculum 2006(NCEL, 2006) is designed on twenty-first-century skills and it emphasizes skills and competencies so that students can compete in the global learning community. Pakistan's national education policy supports individual potentials and emphasizes the need to prepare students with the necessary knowledge and skills that will help them to be successful in their future careers. The curriculum acts as an operational curriculum at the provincial level. This curriculum is learner-centered and competency-based, specifying learning outcomes that every student must achieve based on certain benchmarked standards. The curriculum broadly covers the objectives, content, scope, teaching methodologies, evaluation and assessment techniques; and guidelines for textbook development (NCEL, 2006).

Most methods and approaches used in the teaching of English in Pakistan have been focused on inputs to language learning. However, the National English Curriculum 2006 incorporated the features of competency-based language teaching—and emphasized the outputs of learning. This is an obvious shift in the policy arena. The National English Curriculum 2006 aims to develop “reading and thinking skills, writing skills, oral communication skills, skills related to formal and lexical aspects of language and skills related to appropriate ethical and social development” (NCEL, 2006, p. 7). Moreover, the curriculum encourages teachers to use a range of instructional strategies such as input about different aspects of language, discussion, role-play, inquiry/investigation, cooperative learning, projects, and presentations (NCEL, 2006). Curriculum developers

believe that these strategies would be helpful “to create learning environments and achieve learning objectives which cater to the differing interests, abilities and learning styles of students in order to make them independent and confident learners” (NCEL, 2006, p. 152).

The National English Curriculum 2006 is guided by the following framework. The curriculum has been divided into five competencies and is: Competencies are further measured against certain standards (NCEL, 2006). These standards are further associated with individual benchmarks. Based on the benchmark, the curriculum determines very clear students learning outcomes (SLOs) which could be used for the selection of topics and relevant content of teaching material. The SLOs clearly describe the day-to-day and systematic teaching guidelines to teach certain topics. In addition, this curriculum consists of objectives pertaining to existing knowledge and long-term future learning outcomes. Current issues were included in learning objectives in the English language curriculum. The curriculum incorporates skills, attitudes, behaviours, and knowledge that must be obtained by the students. These competencies can build a strong base for developing life skills among students (NCEL, 2006).

For the teaching of the English language or any other language of the world, it is important to equip learners with the four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing (Richards, 2001). However, it is an irony of the teaching system that listening and speaking are the most neglected areas in the teaching of English in Pakistan (Nawab, 2012; Patil, 2008). Speaking skills were added in the National English Curriculum 2006 so that students could develop strong skills for language and communicate without language barriers. In addition literature suggests fun-filled active learning strategies to be used in English language teaching for developing speaking skills, that is, “games, role-play activities, information gap tasks, brainstorming exercises, riddles, puzzles, cartoons, anecdotes, jokes, songs and other low-cost and easily available teaching materials” (Patil, 2008, p. 239). However, unfortunately, the purpose of adding speaking skills does not seem to be fulfilled at all at the elementary school. It is argued that this is so because the curriculum implementation is centralized, which is mainly driven by exams requirement involving students in a race of getting good marks through rote learning methods. Moreover, monitoring staff is not mobile to ensure the effective implementation of the curriculum in schools (Shah, 2003). As a result, a weak curriculum monitoring system results in deteriorated educational quality in public schools (Farooq & Kai, 2017). In addition, students in Asian countries feel shy and nervous while using English due to less provision of speaking opportunities in the English classroom and school as well (Patil, 2008). Thus, it seems the development of speaking skills, an important aspect of the English language that is much needed in this competitive world, is being neglected in elementary schools in Pakistan.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to develop an understanding of the implementation of the competencies embedded in the national English curriculum of the elementary school. More specifically, this study aimed to explore teachers' practices regarding competencies embedded in the national curriculum in order to illuminate the gaps (if any) between the documented curriculum and pedagogical practices (implementation) of the English curriculum. This study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What are elementary school teachers' practices with respect to the competency-based learning outcomes embedded in the National Curriculum for English Language 2006?
- 2) What are the factors which enable or hinder elementary school teachers' practices with respect to the competency-based learning outcomes embedded in the National Curriculum for English Language 2006?

This study was specifically focused upon elementary school education because it is one of the most crucial and productive years of school learning and it is during this period that students find the answers to most of their questions. Moreover, teachers pay special attention to education at this level. It is the time when absenteeism is controlled, the behaviour of students towards education is monitored, the selection of courses is given due importance, the teacher's way of teaching is evaluated more precisely, and policies are strictly followed. In addition, it is motivated by the assumption that when a competency-based curriculum is designed and constructed at the national level, teachers should devise teaching strategies that have a blend of subject knowledge and the skills needed for life which may help students become successful professionals, responsible citizens, and effective resource for other people and their families.

It was hoped that this study would highlight the experiences of English language teachers involved in the implementation of the competency-based English curriculum. Furthermore, it will give meaningful insight into context-specific factors enabling or disabling teachers the implementation of the competency-based curriculum. In addition, it will contribute to the local and international body of implementation literature giving insights into the nature and dynamics of competency-based English curriculum implementation in a developing country context.

## **Methods**

A basic interpretive research design (Merriam, 2009) was used to understand how teachers make sense of their experiences related to the implementation of the new competency-based English curriculum. A central characteristic of this qualitative study is how teachers construct their meanings of the curriculum in interaction with their social

world (Roulston, 2010). Therefore, it is asserted that this study is underpinned by constructionism. Qualitative research is highly useful for exploring the conundrums and complexities of the immensely complicated social world and that since qualitative research is a person-centred enterprise, it is particularly suitable for the field of language teaching. In addition, its transformative potential for the researcher is a profound strength of qualitative research.

A purposive sampling technique (Patton, 2015) was used to select ten teachers from public schools of Lahore. After a field investigation on the public school teachers in Lahore, a purposive sample was selected to ensure that English language teachers displaying certain attributes were included in the study (Lune & Berg, 2017). It was ensured that only those participants were recruited who had knowledge about the area of focus of the study (Beitin, 2012), that is, teachers' practices related to the National Curriculum of English language and they can provide a perspective on it. All these teachers had teaching experience spanning from five or six years.

In-depth interviews were conducted to explore the teachers' practices. This means that the interview process combined structure with flexibility: Interviews were based on the interview guide in which the key topics and issues to be covered during the interview were set out. However, flexibility was also ensured by allowing responses to be fully probed and by permitting topics to be covered in a natural way (Foddy, 2001). The general strategy was that the participants were asked open-ended, descriptive questions about the focus of the study so that they could talk about their point of view based on their experiential knowledge of the context (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). After that, follow-up/probing questions were asked so that participants could provide details and specific descriptions of their perspectives or experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

The instrument used for research was an interview guide comprising of open-ended questions (Kvale, 1996). "A skeletal outline of the interview" (Howitt, 2016, p. 69) was developed prior to beginning the data collection process. For the construction of the interview guide, the main features in the English language curriculum document (NCEL, 2006) were identified. For this, document analysis was conducted. The National English Curriculum 2006 is easily accessible and downloadable through the internet. The interview guide was designed based on competencies and SLOs of English language provided in the curriculum related to the elementary English. More specifically, the categories/ dimensions of the interview guide were designed based on the competencies of English language provided in the curriculum. Questions included in the interview guide were derived from the students' learning objectives (SLOs) of the English Curriculum. To ensure that the interview guide was aligned with the features of the curriculum and matched with the context of the study, one pilot interview was conducted.

For this, a critical friend was interviewed, and the answers were reviewed for further improvement and clarity of interview questions.

Qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2014) was conducted to analyse data since this method is deemed useful in identifying a person's perspective on the focus area of the research study (White & Marsh, 2006). All the interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim. Then each transcribed interview transcript was read in detail for pre-coding, by "circling, highlighting, bolding, underlining, or colouring rich or significant participant quotes or passages" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 19). This helped to identify important topics related to the purpose of research from the material. Since the study was dealing with multiple participants, one participant's data were coded first, and then progressed to the second participant's data. Similarly, all data related to ten participants were coded. Clustering similar codes helped in identifying sub-categories from data. Comparing and contrasting various categories and sub-categories, several assertions were developed—and some quotes were identified as evidentiary warrants for the reporting of the findings.

### **Findings from Interviews**

The analysis of the data revealed that all five competencies identified by English language curriculum, that is, "reading and thinking skills, writing skills, oral communication skills, skills related to formal and lexical aspects of language and skills related to appropriate ethical and social development" (NCEL, 2006, p. 7) are not the main focus of English language teaching in the practices of selected elementary teachers.

Book based written tasks are dictating most of the teaching-learning processes. Students are made to learn book content using tailored made notes, key books, and dictated texts. As a result, students do not get any opportunity to practice all the language competencies in the classrooms. Most of the teachers rely on the textbook as a teaching resource. Students are not encouraged to think and write about certain topics. Repetition, drill and practice methods are being used to teach students at the middle level.

Our textbooks are good enough for teaching English to students. (Participant 10)

I do not think these competencies are important because our students learn well with ready-made notes. They cannot enjoy activities. These students come from a very low background. They cannot take an interest in activities. (Participant 5)

Teachers avoid creating worksheets in lessons due to different reasons. Some teachers do not possess a skillset to design worksheets, some teachers have budget constraints in their schools and some teachers think it as a waste of time for the teacher. Most of the teachers do not involve students in question and answer sessions.

Most teachers religiously follow traditional writing tasks such as letter writing, essay writing, story writing, grammar skills and comprehension of paragraphs in classes. Teachers focus more on completing classwork, checking notebooks and marking exam papers. They do not give high weightage to developing competencies that are benchmarked in the national curriculum. There is a high tendency of teacher-centered practices instead of student-centered practices in schools. They provide ready-made material for students to be used for exams. Most of the teachers, trained or untrained, young or old, all emphasize more on written tasks. One of the participants has expressed this issue as follows:

Oral communication skills are very important for students learning but unfortunately, there is no time allocated in the timetable for such activities. It becomes difficult to manage oral communication activities in such a short time, so we mostly skip these activities and go for written classwork. (Participant 1)

In the English syllabus, too much emphasis is given on grammar. The exercises at the end of every lesson are larger than the actual lesson. Every lesson and even exams are based on some aspects of grammar: Types of verbs, adjectives or nouns, etc. Exercises provide ample practice of these aspects of grammar...so I emphasize grammar. (Participant 2)

Most of the teachers do not provide opportunities for students to analyse pieces of text and share their opinion about the events orally. Students are made to write everything through rote learning, copying from teacher provided material or spoon-feeding of the ready-made answers. Teachers avoid using dialogue delivery, panel discussions, talks on topics, role-plays, and general discussions in English. A participant provided reasons for these practices:

Our board exam demands lengthy answers to the questions. With the addition of an unseen comprehension paragraph of 10 marks, it is very important to make students practice writing answers. The more they write, the more are their chances of success in the board exam. Spoken English is not assessed in the exam, then why should we waste time on it? (Participant 3)

Though most of the teachers show resistance in implementing competency-based teaching processes, a few teachers use competency-based learning. These teachers were trained by PEF (the Punjab Education Foundation) and PEELI (the Punjab Education and English Language Initiative). They highlight their practices for imparting language skills among students:

PEF training enabled me to know about a variety of pre-reading activities in class. I use a few strategies more often and they are shared reading, reading for



meanings and reading for comprehension. The strong grip on reading would definitely help them in the exam. (Participant 7)

I provide blank papers to all groups. They write a paragraph using shared writing. I collect their paragraphs and check for corrections. The next day I return them their paragraphs and they copy the corrected text in their copies. (Participant 4)

Another teacher stated:

I always encourage students to have dictionaries with them. I ask them to use a dictionary for synonyms and paraphrasing skills. But I would mention here again that no other English teacher put time and effort into developing skills of students. (Participant 4)

These teachers think out of the box and they exhibit the potential of imparting competency-based education among students. However, their practices with respect to the competency-based English teaching were narrow.

The time slot for life skills was not allocated in any of the school rather teachers take this program as wastage of time. Although teachers prepare students for assemblies on special days, topics like traffic problems, self-medication and respecting community resources have never been taught in schools. Teachers report that the school timetable does not have provision for fieldwork and project-based work tasks so that life skills can be developed.

Several reasons were identified for their over-reliance on the traditional methods of teaching the English language: Weak monitoring of teaching practices, lack of purposeful training for teachers, overcrowded classrooms, lack of teaching aids and other resources, content-based examination system, weak language skills of teachers and weak pedagogical skills of teachers.

The memory-driven exam system has pushed teachers to use rote-learning practices. The national curriculum supports learning competencies and skills as evident in SLOs, but the examination system does not measure competency-based performances. Therefore, the teaching practices are inclined towards writing skills, which are very much developed through rote learning, dictation, and key books. The curriculum implementation is centralized based on the exam that pushes students towards a race of getting good marks through rote learning methods. A teacher elaborates this point:

I do not have time for all those life-skills you mentioned. See their scores. They are far too low. I have to ensure they pass the tests/exam at the end of the year.

The students' learning is always borderline, so this new curriculum is not important. (Participant 6)

Twenty-first-century demands the need for a curriculum that can integrate knowledge and skills with real-life experiences in the core subjects. The national curriculum of Pakistan at the middle level has also emphasized critical thinking skills and other competencies so that students are able to compete in the global learning community, but teachers' resistance is evident from the following interview excerpts:

They are just in grade 7, not students of a Ph.D. program. If they can read a paragraph, understand it and are able to answer the questions related to that paragraph, that is more than enough at this age. (Participant 6)

Another participant states:

Students are not responsive to tricky questions. If I change the words of a question, they cannot reply even if they know the answers. They have weak language skills to comprehend the text. (Participant 5)

There are problems everywhere in the school. There is no proper school building. The students sit on bricks in the schoolyard. The education department does not take any action regarding furniture and school building. The building has been declared 'unsafe' as the building is in the dangerous condition since 2014. Now the cracks in roof and walls have grown so big that we cannot take risk of students sitting in those rooms. It is very difficult to do activity-based learning in this situation. (Participant 8)

Most of the teachers in schools do not make lesson plans. Rather, they teach based on the monthly division of topics. They report that this is because of the non-academic duties they are forced to perform. For instance, a participant states:

How can we take time out for planning lessons? There are so many non-academic duties. All teachers have to perform duties related to anti-dengue drives, polio vaccination campaigns, and elections. It is not possible for us to concentrate on our teaching or to think about new teaching methodologies. There is a lot of paperwork associated with these duties. (Participant 10)

Most of the elementary school teachers were of the view that students bring weak language skills of students from primary classes. It is very difficult for them to develop essential basic reading and writing skills among students especially in grade eight. They have to focus mostly on word knowledge, sentence knowledge and usage of grammar. Development of critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills largely lacks in the teaching of elementary school teachers:

The most effective reading strategy is to read aloud. I translate each sentence of what they read. This skill is very helpful in the exam because the translation of the lesson is the key to success in the board exam. (Participant 2)

There is no need for a pre-reading strategy. Reading itself is a pre-writing task. By reading, I prepare students for writing in their copies and exams. After reading, I ask exercise questions from students given at the end of every lesson. (Participant 2)

### **Conclusion**

The National English Curriculum 2006 is a masterpiece of competencies that are essential to succeed in this century. The documented curriculum excellently displays ideas for activity-centered, skilled oriented and competency-based English language program but most of the part is not being practiced in schools. There is a need for a standardized curriculum implementation evaluation system/curriculum implementation inspection system—and the teaching of elementary schools should be evaluated through that inspection system. The monitoring and evaluation need to be strengthened.

Teachers' understanding of teaching methods required for competency-based curriculum seems scanty. Therefore, internal school mentoring systems for in-service teachers may be established. The authorities need to play a vital role in the effective implementation of this curriculum and for this; there is a need for more in-service training of schoolteachers frequently. Though these teachers have the experience, they lack understanding of teaching methods required for a competency-based curriculum. Thus, these teachers do not possess the skills to develop and prepare students for twenty-first-century skills. Moreover, for appointing English teachers in schools, a written and oral test should be conducted to check their command on subject and language. All teachers should get frequent in-service training on the importance and ways of activity-based learning. The master trainers trained by experts should give regular in-service training to staff members.

The examination system does not measure students' performances regarding speaking/listening skills. Only specific written content is tested repeatedly in the exam that is well qualified by students through rote learning. Therefore, the re-structuring of the exam is required which should be based on outcomes. The exam should measure the competencies, not the memory of the students.

Speaking skills play an important role in the success of today's labour world. There is a strong need for implementing speaking skills activities in schools. The evaluation departments need to monitor and enforce listening/speaking skills through

classroom observation and frequent visits to schools. They should ensure that the teaching strategies are aligned with the outcomes of the curriculum.

The students of elementary level become the workforce almost after a decade of leaving grade eight. It is the right of every child that he/she should be prepared for “a world that is extremely fast-paced, constantly changing, increasingly culturally diverse, technologically driven, and media-saturated” (Wan & Gut, 2011, p. 1)

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