

CHAPTER 3

Methodologies and Curriculum: Incongruence in Teachers' Knowledge and Practices

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Introduction

As Chapter 1 detailed, English proficiency is paramount to the economic development of Latin American countries. As such, many countries in this region have implemented large-scale curricular reforms designed to improve English education with varying degrees of success. Chile, for example, has implemented orderly, effective curricular reforms with respect to language teaching (Dussel, 2005). Ecuador, however, is among those countries that has seen less success. Despite decades of reforms that prioritize English in the national curriculum, Ecuador consistently ranks among nations with the lowest English proficiency in Latin America (Cronquist and Fiszbein, 2017; *El Universo*, 2020).

Compelling as that generalization may be, it provides little insight into how curricular goals are approached, if not met, in the classroom, and how these teacher practices relate to outcomes. Recent anecdotal evidence from one Ecuadorian school suggests that implementing the mandated English curriculum at the national level has stalled, at best, because curricular goals do not match either teachers' or students' needs (Burgin and Daniel, 2017). As discussed in Chapter 2, moreover, poor student outcomes can be attributed, at least in part, to limited EFL teacher language proficiency and the varying degrees of formal training those teachers hold. To gain some insight into the relationships between such deficiencies, teacher practices, and student outcomes this chapter considers teachers' perceptions of their methodologies and classroom practices vis-à-vis the national curriculum that emphasizes communicative competencies.

Aligning teacher and curricular expectations and outcomes in Ecuadorian education, of course, is an ongoing process. As detailed in the Introduction, the MINEDUC has introduced a complete, holistic educational system that includes second language education as part of the national curriculum, but the EFL curriculum has not been successful (Cronquist and Fiszbein, 2017). Some of the problems have been linked to teacher methodologies and class practices and in particular to inadequate implementation of communicative approaches. Because teachers tend to offer grammar and vocabulary to students in non-interactive ways, students have inadequate opportunities to practice and absorb their English (Morales Rios and Ferreira Cabrera, 2008). Although such limited studies are hardly demonstrative, the consistent underperformance of Ecuador among its regional peers in English language proficiency speaks to the nationwide discrepancy between the stated curricular goals and measurable outcomes. Thus, improving outcomes

depends on exposing and understanding misalignments between Ecuadorian teaching methods and the national curriculum and, accordingly, identifying and implementing opportunities for improvement.

With this background in mind, this chapter examines the systemic disjuncture between the Ecuadorian national curriculum, teacher methodologies, and EFL classroom practices. These efforts to align policy with practice must be situated within the unique political and cultural challenges that hinder Ecuador's transition from traditional and objective-based learning to critical and inquiry-based pedagogy (Soto, 2015). Accordingly, the survey questions related to methodology and curricular design highlight teachers' perceptions about their practices both in the classroom and in relation to national curriculum standards. The resulting analysis creates a picture of teachers' constructed knowledge of their teaching methods and practice vis-à-vis the curricular expectations and constraints in which they work.

Principles and Practice in the National EFL Curriculum

To ground this chapter's inquiry into the relationships between teacher practices, outcomes, and reform, the next section briefly reviews the scholarship addressing how teachers construct curricular knowledge, how they teach, and how these issues relate to each other. Thus framed, the methodology traces dominant tendencies in teachers' self-reported methodologies and perceptions of the national curriculum. The analysis reveals contradictory results between teachers' reported methods and practices and mandated ones. Although teachers report that they align their methods with national curricular standards and goals, they are not in fact doing so. Despite the teachers' best efforts, their classrooms cannot or do not fulfill these goals.

Teacher knowledge and experience of methodology and practice are essential elements of curricular design and implementation and, thus, essential to reform efforts (Aksu, 2012; East, 2014; Lira, 2012; Mussawy, 2009; Sugesti, 2019; Winke, 2011; Xu and Liu, 2009). In the scholarship, "knowledge" refers to the combination of beliefs, viewpoints, and perceptions that collectively inform teachers' understanding of their own practice; experiences include viewpoints, educational backgrounds, self-awareness, and self-reflection and experiences (Alghanmi and Shukri, 2016; Borg, 2006).

Both knowledge and experience, moreover, combine objective and subject elements, which evolve over time in stages as teachers practice their craft (Yap and Tam, 2008). During this evolution, new teachers integrate their present, available knowledge and experience with newly acquired information. Thus, the nascent teachers start the process of professional development by drawing on their personal needs and expanding their use of resources, including institutional ones, in critical ways to construct their teaching worlds (Yap and Tan, 2008, p. 3).

Knowledge, experience, and their growth is thoroughly context-based and should be considered in terms of internal and external factors (Alghanmi and Shukri, 2016; Borg, 2003). Internal, or tacit, factors are those that teachers hold within and are articulated in relatively subjective terms; external, or explicit, factors are those codified and expressed in more conventional terms (Alghanmi and Shukri, 2016; Borg, 2003). Through on-the-job practice, as indicated above, teachers acquire and adapt knowledge and experience to their specific curricular contexts (Westbrook et al., 2013; Williams and Burden, 1997; Xu, 2012; Yap and Tam, 2008). Together and over time, these factors mediate how teaching practices interact with the curriculum in day-to-day classroom experience (Johnson, 1994; Handler, 2010). As such, teachers not only implement and validate the curriculum with their pedagogical approaches and practices, but they also transform the curriculum as they interpret and modify it based on their knowledge, experiences, and beliefs (Sugesti, 2019; Westbrook et al., 2013).

Certain circumstances, however, can hinder teacher interaction between what happens in the classroom and what affects those activities beyond it. Curriculum is frequently encoded in official textbooks and teacher guides, and these materials are often the only resources available to teachers. This is certainly the case in Ecuador where, since the 1990s, the educational reforms implemented by the Ministry of Education have attempted to standardize English language educational outcomes and the curricular and methodological guidelines through which those standards must be achieved. Standardization, however, precludes teacher involvement in the design. Teachers therefore appear to have little influence over the curriculum they use and its implementation, let alone influence over class size, teaching load, and other administrative matters. Still, teachers shape the curriculum through their daily practice, even if the teachers are not involved explicitly in curriculum development in the Ecuadorian EFL system. Hence, it is critical that teachers be aware of the various aspects of teacher knowledge and experience as well as develop and revise this awareness as they acquire more teaching experience.

Thus grounded, this chapter's analysis of Ecuadorian EFL teachers' beliefs about the curriculum and their own practices will provide insights that can inform the design and implementation of future national systematic reform efforts. As detailed in the results and discussion sections, the survey responses present a panorama of teaching methods across Ecuador, one that reveals points of convergence and divergence with national curricular goals and expectations.

The present study draws on teachers' perceptions of their methodologies and curriculum as revealed in responses to two sets of survey questions. As the other chapters in this volume, results were tabulated and analyzed by means of a mixed methods approach, based on frequency counts to individual questions and the central tendencies of responses as well as comparisons and correlations between and across the questions in this chapter and beyond.

The first set elicited teachers' perceptions about applying their own teaching methodologies. Some of these teaching methods focus on memorization and explicit linguistic knowledge and are, therefore, considered traditional, objective-based approaches to language instruction. Other approaches are aligned with the communicative methodologies specified in the Ecuadorian national curriculum, methodologies including activities such as interactive games, role-playing, collaborative, task-based, project-based, cooperative, and content and language integrated learning (CLIL). Using 5-point Likert scales, with 1 representing the lowest frequency of use and 5 representing the highest, the analysis counted the respondents' self-reported replies to how often they use specific teaching methodologies. The second set of questions pertained to the national English curriculum and its perceived influence on classroom practice and student learning. Once again, the methodology used a 5-point Likert scale of agreement to indicate degrees of agreement and disagreement with each statement about the national curriculum. The responses were coded into numeric values that permitted statistical analysis.

The frequency of responses to questions helped determine which views were most prevalent among teacher responses and to rank them accordingly. The analysis not only identified the dominant perspectives on specific topics, but it also compared these tendencies across questions to construct a more general profile of teacher views and practices. Through cross-tabulations, the analysis also explores the relationship between teacher's views on their methodologies and the curriculum, as well as other datasets from the survey, including demographics indicators (see Chapter 1). In so

doing, correlation provided the means to evaluate the degree to which generalizations regarding about English teaching practices could be posited to determine which demographic factors relate to the construction of curricular and methodological knowledge, and to hypothesize how this knowledge may vary across the variety of English teaching contexts and situations in Ecuador. Testing for statistical dependence was determined by applying Kendall's coefficient to the qualitative multi-categorical variables with the statistical significance evaluated at 0.05 (5%). Lastly, to determine overall trends in the relationship between teaching methodologies and the curriculum, the analysis calculated a simple average of Kendall's tau-b coefficient across each category.

Based on this methodology, this chapter's analysis of Ecuadorian EFL teachers' beliefs about the curriculum and their own practices will inform the design and implementation of future national systematic reform efforts. By taking teachers' perceptions as a valid source of knowledge about teaching methods and the curriculum, this chapter identifies significant disjuncture between teachers' beliefs about their teaching methodologies, the national curriculum, and student learning outcomes.

Understanding Consensus and Contradictions in EFL Teachers' Methodologies

In response to questions about methodologies, teachers reported combining traditional and objective-based methods with more communicative and content-oriented approaches. As detailed in the Introduction to this volume, methodologies considered "objective-based" include those which do not overtly engage the communicative and content-integrated approaches emphasized within the current national curriculum. As identified in the survey, those activities include completion exercises, homework based on readings and audio, as well as grammar, repetition, substitution, and memorization exercises. In contrast, activities aligned with the communicative focus of the national curriculum include interactive games and songs, pair and group work, cooperative reading and writing, interactive activities (dramatizations, interviews, and roleplay), and integrating thematic content. Figure 1 classifies these types of activities as objective-based activities (represented with striped bars) and communicative activities (represented with solid bars). They are sorted in descending order according to the frequency with which teachers report their use.

Figure 1. Frequency of Use of Objective and Communicative Teaching Methodologies

A simple mean average revealed that teachers depend on methodologies classified as traditional, objective-based only slightly more than communicative methods (3.60 vs. 3.48). The most frequently used methods are objective-based activities, such as completing and ordering of texts and phrases (3.90) as well as homework based on readings and audio (3.89); they are followed by more communicative activities including interactive games (3.79) and working in pairs or groups (3.77). The least used methods are narration and storytelling (3.31), group projects and research (3.26), integration of thematic content (3.25), and memorization activities (3.13); they are primarily communicative but the last one is traditional. Still, as the mean average of all activities falls within a narrow range of 0.77 on the 5-point frequency of use scale, the results suggest that no particular methodology is used to a greater or lesser extent than others. Therefore, the results reveal no compelling evidence that teachers in the aggregate depend on a particular methodology or approach; instead, they draw on a variety of resources and methodological knowledge across the spectrum of objective-based and communicative activities.

However, some evidence suggests that individual teachers tend to use similar methodologies across their repertoire of class practices; methodologies that are similar in design and purpose. That is, teachers who rely on one kind of objective-based method are somewhat more likely to rely on other similar methods, and the same is true for those who use more communicative strategies. For example, a correlational analysis using Kendall's tau-b found the strongest relationship between teachers who use completion and ordering exercises with other traditional practices such as grammatical pattern exercises ($\tau = 0.523$). Similar relationships can be found among teachers who combine collaborative activities such as group research projects and collaborative reading and writing ($\tau = 0.482$), as well as other communicative such as interactive games, dramatizations, interviews, and roleplaying ($\tau = 0.480$). Interactive activities involving narration and storytelling are also moderately related with dramatic performances and simulations ($\tau = 0.445$), collaborative research ($\tau = 0.424$), and collaborative reading and writing ($\tau = 0.452$).

Conversely, the results show negligible relationships between strikingly disparate teaching methods. Specifically, teachers who tend to use traditional repetition and substitution exercises are least likely to use communicative dramatizations and roleplaying ($\tau = 0.085$), content integrated teaching ($\tau = 0.095$), group research

projects ($\tau = 0.104$), or interactive games ($\tau = 0.138$). The results indicate consistently that individual teachers cultivate their approaches and styles according to similar types, without necessarily eschewing other methods.

Furthermore, the methodologies teachers apply depend more on individual preferences than training, experience, or English proficiency. Correlations between these variables and teaching methodologies reveal only weak relationships. Teachers with higher English proficiency, for instance, are only slightly more likely to use communicative methods such as interactive games ($\tau = 0.77$) and dramatizations ($\tau = 0.102$), while they are less likely to use objective-based methods such as repetition exercises ($\tau = -0.081$). Other factors such as gender, ethnicity, geographic location, and years of experience showed relationships weaker than those related to English proficiency or showed no relationship at all.

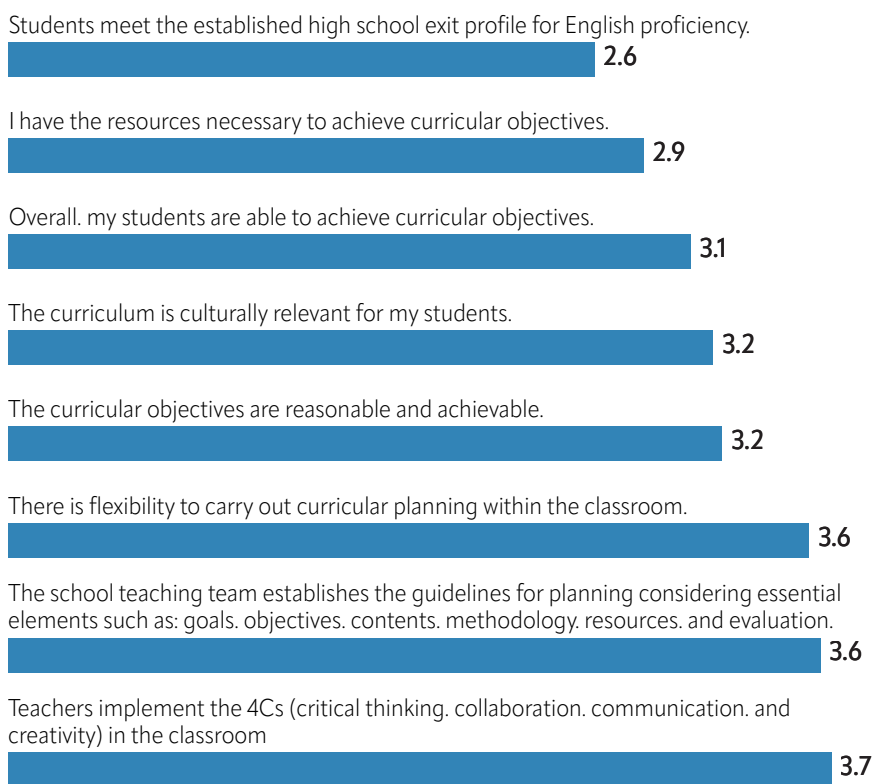
Aligning Teaching Methodologies to Curricular Goals

Teachers' perceptions of the English curriculum also fall into a narrow range within which teachers express general ambivalence about the curriculum and their students' abilities to achieve stated curricular goals. On the 5-point Likert scale of agreement, the mean average response to questions regarding the curriculum is 3.23, wherein 3 represents "Neither Agree nor Disagree." As illustrated in Table 2, teachers agree most strongly with statements about themselves and their peers when it comes to meeting curricular expectations. For example, teachers agree (mean = 3.69, mode = 4) with the statement that they implement the four "Cs" of a connected classroom (critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity) and that they plan their teaching according to essential curricular elements (mean = 3.64, mode = 4). Such planning, teachers also agree, is carried out in ways that allow for flexibility within the classroom (mean = 3.59, mode = 4). These results suggest that teachers generally feel confident in their own knowledge, methods, and resources to fulfill curricular expectations; a subject that will be taken up in subsequent chapters.

The results are somewhat less generous with respect to teachers' perceptions of their students and more systemic issues related to curricular design and student achievement. Teachers are ambivalent about achieving curricular goals (mean = 3.20, mode

= 3), the cultural relevance of the curriculum for their students (mean = 3.16, mode = 3), and their students' ability to meet general curricular objectives (mean = 3.06, mode = 3). They also express slight disagreement when asked about the availability of resources necessary to meet curricular goals (mean = 2.85, mode = 3). Lastly, teachers most strongly disagree with the specific curricular outcomes related to English proficiency; most believe that students do not meet the established profile for a high school student's knowledge of English upon graduation (mean = 2.63, mode = 2).

Figure 2. Teachers' Agreement with Statements about the National Curriculum



While teachers express general ambivalence or weak disagreement with statements about the curriculum and achieving learner outcomes, teachers who use more objective-based methodologies are somewhat less likely to agree with statements about the curriculum and student outcomes. The use of traditional methodologies reveals an overall relationship of $\tau = 0.13$, while teachers who use more communicative methods show stronger agreement with statements about

the curriculum ($\tau = 0.178$). When ranked, 4 out of the 5 objective-based methods demonstrate the weakest relationship with curricular statements. Such results are predictable, as the national curriculum itself privileges communicative and content-based methodologies.

Little evidence suggests that training or teaching experience shape teachers' perceptions of the curriculum. Only class size, discussed at length in the previous chapter, consistently offers a significant statistical relationship with responses about the curriculum and learning outcomes. Those with the largest class sizes are least likely to agree that students can achieve curricular outcomes for English proficiency ($\tau = -0.168$); they are also least likely to agree that the curricular goals are achievable ($\tau = -0.127$). Teacher's English proficiency and highest educational attainment show significant yet weaker dependency by these measures; other factors such as gender, ethnicity, geographical location, and years of experience reveal at best only negligible relationships. The total number of students and number of class sections do not appear to influence views of the curriculum.

The responses reveal certain discrepancies between teacher internal knowledge and external curricular matters. In addition, teacher responses tend toward ambivalence and toward numbers revolving around the mediate, even when they show some degree of agreement or disagreement with the questions. The contradictory as well as ambivalent results provide insight into the seeming insignificant results and thus into misguided and ineffective EFL teaching and lead to recommendations across the board to reform the system.

Conclusions

Overall, Ecuadorian EFL teachers believe they are implementing appropriate teaching methodologies that align with the national curriculum and promote communicative competency among their students. More specifically, teachers by and large respond that their methods are communicative and their curricular knowledge sufficient to their teaching task. Although, as it follows, teachers are confident about their teaching, student proficiency is low, and teachers are generally ambivalent about their students' ability to improve. Teachers recognize the disjuncture between the national curriculum and student learning outcomes. But their perceptions of and confidence about their curriculum and practices indicate tacitly that it

is the students who are not making the grade, so to speak. In other words, teachers attribute the systemic curricular failure to students and to external issues rather than to their own teaching practices.

The data supports this thinking. The frequency result counts notwithstanding, significant discrepancies exist within and across teacher perceptions of the curriculum and the relationships between them. As the data shows, Ecuadorian teachers report using communicative-based approaches, including the reflective and critical thinking strategies required by the national English curriculum. But, in fact, they also use objective-based strategies at least as much as communicative strategies. Moreover, teachers do not prefer one methodology over another. These circumstances suggest that teachers are uncertain both tacitly and explicitly about the distinctions between communicative and objective-based approaches. This lack of certainty is reflected negatively in teacher inability to implement the curriculum and meet their goals; a circumstance which correlates with actual outcomes. Teachers are planning classes based on inaccurate understanding of mandated methodologies and means of achieving their goals. As such, teachers and students alike are engaged in teacher-centered education, despite the prevailing belief among teachers exposed in this study that their methods are primarily communicative and student-centered, and thereby conform to national guidelines.

These problems in misunderstanding and misusing curricular methodologies are compounded in the classroom by the fact that individual teachers tend to use the same methodological practices across their assigned classes. Pedagogical consistency can benefit students in the sense that it creates a framework for student expectation; but variety, not typical in Ecuadorian EFL classrooms, constitutes best teaching practices. Teachers not only describe their methodologies as communicative, but they feel generally confident that they have the knowledge, methods, and resources to fulfill curricular expectations.

Although teachers express general ambivalence or weak disagreement with statements about the curriculum and achieving learner outcomes, teachers who use more objective-based methodologies are somewhat less likely to agree with statements about the curriculum and student outcomes. Their higher disagreement might reflect the fact that the national curriculum supports communicative approaches; it might also reflect tacit knowledge about the natures of communicative and objective methods. Nevertheless, the ambivalence in responses suggests similar ambivalence about

available methodologies. Since the students perform poorly, even with the teachers and methods they think are appropriate, the inference once again is that they do not understand what is expected and how to achieve these expectations. From the holistic results of the participants' responses, teachers tend to think that they are deploying the communicative best practices required by the national curriculum. Nonetheless, teachers are generally confident in themselves and generally ambivalent about the curriculum and students' ability to achieve it. Implicitly, they justify poor student outcomes without looking to the needs of the students. They attribute these shortcomings not to their training or methodological approaches but to unrealistic curricular expectations, the cultural irrelevance of the established curriculum, and limited material resources. If students do not meet the standards, the fault lies in these institutional failings, not in their own teaching.

Addressing these issues requires further research on Ecuadorian EFL teachers' perceptions of curriculum and practice. More information is needed about what effects these teachers' methodological choices and practice. What do teachers think communicative and objective-based approaches are? Moreover, the only strong relationship this survey revealed is class size, not number of students and sessions nor experience issues. In addition, little data is currently available about what relationships exist between curriculum and gender, ethnicity, and geographic location as well as on teacher background. And, of course, there is no data on what Ecuadorian students think about learning EFL or about how this information correlates with, contradicts with, and otherwise informs teacher responses and other data. It is critical that teachers use student-centered activities and think about their students while being able to reflect on these activities and evolve professionally. One key element of these efforts where intervention is possible is professional development for teachers once they enter the practice, which is the subject of the next chapter.

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