

From “Curriculum as Product” to “Curriculum as Process”: An Autoethnographic Critical Review of English Language Curriculum Development in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This autoethnographic paper critically examines the development of English language curriculum in Hong Kong secondary schools by juxtaposing the author’s educational experience with the principles outlined in the English Language Curriculum and Assessment Guide (2021). Drawing on curriculum theory, this paper analyzes the transition from traditional “curriculum as product” and “curriculum as knowledge” models, characterized by examination-oriented instruction, discrete skill assessment, and behaviorist pedagogy, towards the process-centered and learner-centered approaches advocated in the current curriculum framework. This paper identifies a persistent gap between official curriculum intentions and classroom practices, noting that product-oriented methodologies continuously dominate despite the fact that post-reform education policies in Hong Kong nowadays emphasize learner autonomy, communicative competence, and formative assessment. Pedagogical implications include the need for systemic support in teacher training, assessment reform, and resources allocation to facilitate genuine curriculum transformation. This paper argues for a dialectical approach that integrates both product and process orientations, enabling meaningful language learning while addressing contextual constraints in Hong Kong’s educational landscape.

Keywords: autoethnography, curriculum development, English language education, Hong Kong secondary schools, pedagogical implications

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Introduction

Through examining my personal experience studying at a government-funded English Medium of Instruction (EMI) secondary school from 2008 to 2014, this review paper offers a critical account of analyzing how the curriculum approach I encountered in my school years compares with the contemporary framework in English Language Curriculum and Assessment Guide (2021). Curriculum theory—specifically examining the conceptualizations of curriculum as knowledge, product, process, and praxis—is applied for considering the implications of devising English language education in Hong Kong.

My local school had paid a strong focus on promoting an English-rich learning environment through organizing English Speech Day, English Reading Week, Movie Society and Debate Team. Nonetheless, from the standpoint of curriculum development, my school's approach perennially perpetuated the traditional examination-oriented teaching system that emphasizes considerably discrete language skills (predominantly grammar) and measurable outcomes. The pedagogical framework combined elements of structural-situational methodology with task-based learning, though the former appeared to dominate classroom practice.

Under this curriculum structure, two main components, namely grammar and vocabulary building occupied a central position. First, acquisition of grammar was usually consolidated through regular quizzes designed to establish what teachers termed our grammatical foundation. These assessments followed rudimentary patterns: presentation of grammatical rules (including prescriptive and descriptive grammar), controlled practice exercises and testing of specific structures in isolation. Explicit teaching of grammar that functions within genre writing is particularly popular in Hong Kong teaching (Halliday, 2003). Second, the building of vocabulary was addressed primarily through dictation and vocabulary quizzes. We were required to memorize predetermined lists of phrases and expressions deemed useful for DSE English writing, which had a set focus on particular topics, such as social issues, popular culture and sports communication. At my school, there were frequent examinations on developing reading and writing skills that trained us to respond to specific question formats and produce writing articles specially complying with DSE examination rubrics.

In addition to examinations and quizzes, the School-Based Assessment (SBA) component represents a kind of language learning that involves the acquisition of linguistic and communication skills. We were required to write reviews of books and deliver presentations to the class. Following each presentation, the English teacher posed spontaneous questions requiring students to provide immediate responses. While these activities ostensibly engaged multiple skills and promoted higher-order thinking skills, the implementation was very likely constrained by assessment criteria and time pressures. More often than not, SBA (although exposing students in a relatively low-stakes context) in English classrooms seems to amount to nothing more than regular summative testing, grading and record keeping of marks to prepare students for high-stakes examinations, given that SBA accounted for 15% of the entire English DSE grade at my time. The tasks in general were formative and similar administered subsequently as part of the public assessment process to generate marks for standardizing the learning progress.

Theoretical Underpinnings of English Language Curriculum and Assessment Guide (2021) and Its Relevance

It is worth noting that the 2021 English Language Curriculum and Assessment Guide emphasizes flexibility, learner autonomy and holistic development. The guide principle comprises three interlocking components: subject knowledge and skills; generic skills; positive values and attitudes. This tripartite structure signals a departure from purely linguistic competence toward broader educational outcomes that guarantees the promotion of interpersonal development, knowledge and experiential engagement in English language acquisition.

Significantly, the 2021 guide advocates task-based learning as a central pedagogical approach, with a focus on “learning to communicate through purposeful interaction” and engagement in “processes that require them to exercise critical thinking and creativity” (CDC-HKEAA, 2021, p. 30). Such an approach reveals a constructivist orientation, in which students construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through making meaningful connections and critically reflecting on experiences. This outcome is further substantiated when language learning is described as “a dynamic, interactive process in which students play an active role in using language to make sense of the world” (CDC-HKEAA, 2021, p. 29). It is clear that the guide reflects a more formative and learner-centered vision in assessment for learning and assessment as learning, that empowers students to “reflect on and monitor their progress” (CDC-HKEAA, 2021, p. 62).

To explore the relationship between my educational experience and the 2021 framework, it is helpful to employ the typology of curriculum approaches articulated by Smith (1996) and Finney (2002), which distinguishes curriculum as knowledge, product, process and praxis. Curriculum as knowledge is the more traditional and passive ways of transmission of established content and facts (Posner, 2004), with authorities (e.g. teachers) delivering predetermined learning items to recipients (e.g. students). Curriculum as product views curriculum development as systematic specification of educational purposes. It focuses on the learning experiences to achieve them, actual interventions and evaluation methods (e.g. providing feedback and changes) to determine whether purposes have been attained. Curriculum as process shifts from predetermined outcomes to the learning journey itself (Stenhouse, 1975). This approach emphasizes what transpires in classrooms, encourages experimentation and critique, and recognizes that curriculum is unique for each teaching context: learners occupy a voice in learning while teachers judge the effectiveness of teaching and adapt (Smith, 1996). Finally, curriculum as praxis extends the process model, which deals with practical deliberation and differentiated curriculum. Grundy (1987) states that curriculum is “constituted through an active process in which planning, acting and evaluating are all reciprocally related and integrated”. This means that there is always a collective need to tailor made teaching environments and practices that create appropriately different learning experiences for students, who can then feel safe and flexible to engage their abilities to the greatest extent possible.

My educational experience mostly reflected the concepts of “curriculum as product” and “curriculum as knowledge”. The utilization of grammar quizzes, dictation exercises and examination reveal an objectives-driven model centered on measurable linguistic outcomes. The regular-basis testing of grammatical structures in isolation, coupled with memorization of predetermined phrases for examination writing, exemplifies Tyler’s rational curriculum model (1949): specific language items were identified as objectives; teaching activities were designed

to facilitate their acquisition; and assessment measured whether students had mastered these skills necessary for examination. All these point to the behaviourist pedagogy of my school's English teaching, where the focus is on "intended products" and "teaching to help acquisition of products" (Cunningham et al., 2007). In addition, the repetition of grammar-translation methodology in structural practice indicates a generic view of language learning as accumulation of linguistic knowledge rather than development of communicative competence. Although my school's SBA seemed to incorporate some formative elements, such as teacher's feedback and opportunities for oral interaction, its prime function remained summative assessment for public examination. The emphasis on training to produce specific response formats constrained the potential for genuine formative assessment supporting genuine communication skills and interpersonal interaction.

In contrast, the 2021 guide positions itself as "curriculum as process" and subtly touches upon "curriculum as praxis". According to the guide, teachers and schools should be given flexibility and ownership in curriculum planning, which suggests that effective curriculum emerges through situated practice rather than generic prescription applied to all. The guide also pays attention to values, attitudes and critical engagement at the level of praxis, where curriculum should be more activity- and metacognitively centred. The encouragement to develop students' "critical thinking skills" and ability to "evaluate critical views and attitudes" around their living (CDC-HKEAA, 2021, p. 38) also suggests concern for learner empowerment beyond functional linguistic competence.

In terms of the roles at school, I as a student was positioned primarily as recipients of transmitted knowledge and performers of prescribed tasks. The grammar-translation approach and examination focus afforded limited opportunities for genuine choice, creativity, or critical engagement. We learned predetermined grammatical structures, memorized selected vocabulary, and practiced producing texts conforming to examination rubrics. This reflects the behaviourist metaphor of learning as acquisition, reproduction, imitation, modelling among students who are dependent on teachers (Cunningham et al., 2007). But the 2021 guide envisions substantially greater student agency in autonomous learning. Instead of being a passive learner, students are encouraged to develop independence and self-directed learning skills in order to set goals and make informed choices as to what, when and how they want to learn. The guide advocates engaging students in self-assessment and self-reflection, which can help them plan, monitor and evaluate the strategies adopted and their own learning effectiveness. Such a vision is fortified by the curriculum as process which recognizes learners as active meaning-makers and signals the commitment to cultivating self-motivated learners rather than passive recipients of instruction.

Finally, the pedagogy I experienced revealed a blend of structural-situational methodology and emerging task-based approaches, though implementation favored the former. The Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) sequence was evident in my grammar lessons. The English teachers presented rules while we as students completed controlled exercises and were tested on specific structures. This reflected the audio-lingual tradition's behaviourist theory upholding that language learning is a habit formation through stimulus-response conditioning. Meanwhile, the dictation exercises similarly reveal behaviourist influences, which centre on the practices of mimicking and receiving instruction from the human role models (Cooter & Reutzel, 2004). In this way, vocabulary acquisition is grasped through memorization of decontextualized items and consistent repetition. This approach contradicts the 2021 guide suggesting that vocabulary is best introduced in context using reading, listening or multimodal texts, and practised through tasks and language games. It is claimed that students should be consistently provided with

purposeful contexts and engaged in processes that require them to exercise critical thinking and creativity reflects understanding of language learning as active knowledge construction, rather than a process of habit formation in which English patterns were presented for memorization. This student-centred instruction and promotion of self-directed learning strategies indicate alignment with a more diversifying learning principle that values learner autonomy, intrinsic motivation and individual development.

The framework explicitly critiques approaches like those I experienced, noting that “formal explanation of grammatical rules in isolation and the use of decontextualized and mechanical drills are not always useful in helping students develop communicative competence” (CDC-HKEAA, 2021, p. 32). Instead, it advocates teaching grammar “in context” within meaningful tasks, positioning grammatical knowledge as means to communicative ends rather than ends in themselves.

Discussion and Conclusion

From my personal account, it is obvious that my educational experience in a mainstream government school suggests substantial gaps between official curriculum vision and classroom reality. While the 2021 guide represents an ideal vision for an interactive teaching pedagogy rather than radical departure from earlier curriculum documents, the predominantly product-oriented, examination-focused approach I encountered indicates that progressive curriculum rhetoric often fails to transform classroom practice. My education experience had unravelled a type of knowledge-transmission pedagogy that entailed predetermined linguistic objectives, examination preparation and measurable outcomes. In contrast, the 2021 guide places a great emphasis on ideally process-oriented approaches which uphold meaningful communication, learner agency, flexible organization and formative assessment. Such an implementation gap likely reflects multiple factors: examination pressure; teacher preparation and beliefs about effective language teaching; resource limitations; class sizes; and the path-dependent nature of educational institutions. As Finney (2002) observes, teachers inevitably interpret and adapt curriculum frameworks through their existing pedagogical commitments and contextual constraints.

In light of this, curriculum development may require supportive implementation structures. Progressive curriculum visions necessitate aligned teacher education, assessment systems, resource provision and school cultures. Without these supports, such a developmental plan risks remaining rhetorical exercises. Genuine curriculum transformation requires examination reform that authentically assesses the communicative competence, critical thinking and creativity the guide intends to espouse. Additionally, teacher agency and professional judgment play a pivotal role in effective curriculum implementation. How to localize the context and make it adaptive or tailor-made to students requires investment in teacher education and creation of school cultures supporting pedagogical experimentation. While it is understandable that teachers have been juggled with many tasks other than teaching and designing curriculum, there needs to be more resources (e.g. manpower) allocated to avoid teachers’ work overload and increased pressure. Last but not least, in lieu of viewing product and process orientations as mutually exclusive, effective curriculum development might consider embracing their dialectical relationship. This may facilitate meaningful learning processes that can lead to valuable knowledge and skill products, while acknowledging students’ need for linguistic tools to participate in valued communicative practices.

Reflecting on my own language learning journey, I recognize both the limitations of the product-oriented approach I experienced and the foundation it provided. The grammatical knowledge and examination skills I acquired have served me well, though I have often needed to develop communicative fluency, critical thinking skills and learner autonomy through advanced study and professional experience.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Generative AI was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The ideas, design, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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