

Review of Reading Goals in the National Curriculum of English Language (Grades 11-12) in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This review of an official document launched by the Ministry of Education of Pakistan reports on the goals set for teaching of reading and critical thinking skills at tertiary level. The report reviews the benchmarks and the goals for reading skills, set in the curriculum, in relation with an independent research study conducted to evaluate one of the textbooks being taught to achieve the same goals in Pakistani mainstream state colleges. The report highlights that the curriculum, despite setting appropriate goals for the level, does not provide guidance on the teaching methodologies and teaching materials, which resulted in failure to achieve these goals in classroom. The report also proposes critical pedagogy as a potential approach to be used to fill the gap between the learning goals in the curriculum and the teaching as well as learning straggles.

Keywords: Reading skills, teaching methodology, critical pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

The National Curriculum for English Language (2006 – henceforth the NCEL) was created in 2006 by the Ministry of Education, Government of Pakistan in order to devise a strategic planning for teaching of English from grade 1 to 12. The purpose behind the document was to develop a step by step guidance for teaching of English based on the learning from the previous grade. For this reason, the NCEL claims “to provide holistic opportunities to the students for language development and to equip them with competencies in using the English language for communication in academic and social contexts, while enabling them to be autonomous and lifelong learners to better adapt to the ever changing local and world society, and to knowledge advancement” (p. 1). This paper reviews one aspect of the document which deals with the reading and critical thinking skills, and comments on various aspect of setting goals for reading skills in relation to their implication and achievement in classroom. Since this paper aims to focus on the reading skills in the NCEL, the discussion will mainly confine to Asghar’s (2013) evaluation of one of the prescribed textbooks i.e. English book I for Intermediate (2006 – henceforth the textbook) to evaluate the learning goals for reading in the NCEL as well as to highlight the potential of the textbook for critical reading and critical thinking. The discussion aims to highlight the gap between the ambitious goals set in the NCEL and cluelessness of strategies to achieve those goals from teachers’ perspectives in real life classroom. Towards the end, the paper also suggests a shift in pedagogical philosophy which could be used for effective outcome.

OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

The NCEL describes the expected learning outcome (Pp. 121 – 42) to have achieved at the end of completion of the prescribed textbooks, followed by the overall goals and objectives set for learners at intermediate level (Pp. 145 – 9). The syllabus prescribed to achieve the targets is comprised of three books on short stories, English poetry and English prose &

drama. In addition to these books, there is a paper on English grammar and composition. Compilation of all the three textbooks is based on texts selected from a variety of English poets, short story writers and dramatists along with some translated work from non-English literature. Regarding the methodologies of teaching these textbooks, Asghar (2013) points out that in a typical Pakistani English language classroom of a state college, the texts in the textbooks are read aloud, usually first by teachers, in the class with Urdu translation and important points are explained by the teacher, followed by completing the activities given at the end of each text. In this process, learners have limited participation to contribute with their own perception and understanding, and teacher has the most authoritative role in class to impart knowledge to the learners.

READING AND THINKING SKILLS

Though the NCEL specifies criteria for the achievement of skills in reading, writing, speaking, listening and English grammar, this paper particularly focuses on the reading skills and critical thinking for two reasons. First, reading skills are hugely emphasized in Pakistani main stream educational system. Students are encouraged to read and produce writing based on their reading experience. Therefore, reading becomes a vital skill in the learning process and students hugely depend on this skill to grasp the learning materials. Secondly, though situation has changed in private educational institutes, Pakistani mainstream educational system still severely lacks critical thinking because of conservative teaching and learning methodologies in classroom. Asghar and Al-Bargi (2014) highlight that in order to bring a sense of learning ownership and to encourage autonomous learning, critical thinking skills are essential at tertiary level. Therefore, I find it particularly significant to evaluate the skills of reading which seems to have a pivotal role in the learning process in the context of Pakistani educational system.

The NCEL under the category of “Reading and Thinking Skills” gives two standards, and each standard is explained through benchmarking and further illustrated through specific examples to measure the targeted skills.

Standard 1

All students will search for, discover and understand a variety of text types through tasks which require multiple reading and thinking strategies for comprehension, fluency and enjoyment.

Benchmark I: Evaluate patterns of text organization, and function of various devices used within and beyond a paragraph in a text.

Benchmark II: Analyze, synthesize and evaluate events, issues, ideas and viewpoints, applying reading comprehension and thinking strategies.

Benchmark III: Analyze and synthesize information from a visual cue or a graphic organizer to summarize, highlighting the key areas and main trends.

Benchmark IV: Gather, analyze, evaluate and synthesize information to use for variety of purposes including a research project using various aids and study skills.

Standard 2

All students will read and analyze literary text to seek information, ideas, enjoyment, and to relate their own experiences to those of common humanity as depicted in literature.

Benchmark 1: Analyze and evaluate short stories, poems, essays and one-act plays; relate how texts affect their lives and connect the texts to contemporary / historical ideas and issues across cultures. (Pp. 120 – 26)

The Standard 1 involves linguistic and conceptual purposes that might be interpreted as what Wallace (2003) calls critical purposes of reading, whereas Standard 2 is more related to the cultural purpose of the texts. Within each standard, these purposes are mingled and cannot be neatly distinguished from each other which might not be possible even in a purely critically designed course either.

In order to raise awareness about globalization and multiculturalism, the NCEL describes the learning objective that “all students will develop ethical and social or attributes and values relevant in a multicultural, civilized society” (p. 10). The NCEL emphasizes that the syllabus should allow learners to “analyse and evaluate short stories, poems, essays and one-act plays; relate how texts affect their lives and connect the texts to contemporary and historical ideas /issues across cultures” (p. 12).

However, Asghar (2013) notes that due to a number of reasons ranging from the classroom situations to the development of the curriculum, teachers and learners could not achieve the goals set by the NCEL. There might be a number of reasons for this failure. According to the overview of one of the textbooks taught to achieve these goals at this level (see Asghar 2013: p. 405), the texts included in the textbook (2006) do not relate to the immediate situations of learners. Secondly, the language or themes of the certain texts might be above or below the learners’ level which means that the teaching and learning strategies need to allow learners to explore the material at a level appropriate to their learning needs as well as to the achievement of the goals set in the NCEL.

In term of developing specific competence as learning outcome of this textbook, the document enlists five levels of competence in addition to benchmarking the objectives and specifying the goals for each of these competencies:

Competency 1: Reading and Thinking Skills

Standard 1: All students will search for, discover and understand a variety of text types through tasks which require multiple reading and thinking strategies for comprehension, fluency and enjoyments.

Standard 2: All students will read and analyze literary text to seek information, ideas, enjoyment, and to relate their own experiences to those of common humanity as depicted in literature.

Competency 2: Writing Skills

Standard 1: All students will produce with developing fluency and accuracy, academic, transactional and creative writing, which is focused, purposeful and shows an insight into the writing process.

Competency 3: Oral Communication Skills

Standard 1: All students will use appropriate social and academic conventions of spoken discourse for effective oral communication with individuals and in groups, in both informal and formal settings.

Competency 4: Formal and Lexical Aspects of Language

Standard 1: Pronunciation: All students will understand and articulate widely acceptable pronunciation, stress and intonation patterns of the English language for improved communication.

Competency 5: Appropriate Ethical and Social Development

All students will develop ethical and social attributes and values relevant in a multicultural, civilized society.

(National Curriculum for English Language: pp 120 – 142)

It can be argued that these are the objectives for the whole syllabus, and so one should not assume that they would be achieved through working with a particular textbook. However, it is worth considering that the national curriculum does not divide these objectives among various textbooks. It rather seems to suggest that all the textbooks are equally potent to teach the set goals to learners. On the other hand, since the rest of the two textbooks also consist of foreign texts (English Dramas, prose and poetry) with same type of follow up activities, it can be anticipated that they may not contribute to teaching such skills as targeted in the document either.

Competencies 1-4 are more ‘technical’, and so in principal they might be easier to deal with. However, Asghar (2013) explores that this is not the case with these competencies. He highlight that the reduced proficiency in the areas 1-4 above is clearly reflected in learners’ language use and their comprehension level of the texts while they gave their opinions in questionnaire and in the interview. He refers that only 11 out of 93 participants could claim to have attempted the comprehension questions at the end of each text on their own whereas the rest of the participants acknowledged not having the ability to understand and write answers to simple comprehension questions. Apparently it seems the teachers’ “fault” which is not the only fact. At micro level, designing of activities to achieve the set targets is not effective which does not allow teachers or learners to work flexibly. The NCEL is quiet regarding the quality of textbooks and the potential consequences of the same on achieving the goals set in the NCEL. There is no or little alignment between various stages from policy making to classroom implementation which denotes that the document follows “the specialist approach” to curriculum design (Graves, 2008). One of the major drawbacks of such an approach is that instead of finding the root cause of failure, it superficially holds teachers’ inability as a major cause. However, as Grave (2008) observed, the inability appears to be on teachers’ part due to a drawback in the specialist approach. The approach does not have room for any coordination between various stages. This lack of coordination might bring good performance at isolated stages, but does not aim at achieving the main targets.

Regarding competency 5, Asghar (2013) observes that after studying the world literature the learners do not demonstrate awareness to foreign as well as to their own cultures the way they are supposed to do. The learners do not relate with the various cultural scenarios reflected in these literary works which, as NCEL claims, should enable students “develop ethical and social attributes and values relevant in a multicultural, civilized society” (The NCEL 2006: p. 16). Another reason for students’ not identifying themselves with these texts could be lack of cultural knowledge on the part of these learners. While reading and comprehending a text written in a foreign cultural context, it is inevitable that readers have cultural, legal, religious and social knowledge of the context (Honey 1991) to avoid cultural inaccessibility to the texts and hence inaccurate information about the outer world readers are exposed in a language classroom.

Asghar (2013: pp. 406-7) gives a summary of the goals and objectives set as learning outcome of various themes taught in classroom:

1. Character building
2. Respect for Pakistani values and those of other nations
3. Tolerance, humanism, equity between groups and nations
4. Handling /sharing responsibilities
5. Accommodating family and work responsibilities
6. Understanding international cultural diversity
7. Understanding the World
8. Respect for all professions. (Valuing disparity and equality among professions)
9. Practicing adaptability

(The NCEL, 2006: pp. 145 – 149)

Asghar (2013) highlights that the texts in the textbook (2006) do seem to contribute to character building of learners in the limited sense that it gets their attention to the positive and negative sides and encourages having association with the positive. However, apart from this, Asghar (2013) claims not to discover any further elements contributing to the learners' character building. Despite having the potential, teaching and learning of the textbook does not encourage exploring multi-dimensional nature of the texts in line with multi-dimensionality of life

Asghar (2013) report that regarding the objectives 4 & 5, the participants of the research project have shown misunderstanding of family values and shared responsibilities which might be viewed the other way round in the particular context of respective texts. For example, they view one of female characters in the western context being vocal negatively and took her giving arguments and contradicting with her husband for lack of understanding and love between the spouses. On the other hand, they seem to appreciate the quiet and static roles of rural housewife and daughters in *God be Praised*. Looking at the contemporary Pakistani society and its close interaction with the rest of the world, such a static role of women in society might be debatable for educated people of Pakistani society. Furthermore, its being a debate able issue, this could be taken as an opportunity to debate on these issues to help learners to develop their own opinion. It would be beneficial not only in term of academic learning but it would also contribute to establishing more acceptable and justifiable social norms in real life.

Respect for all profession is not observed by the compilers of the book when in the “theme” of *God be Praised* they refer to Abdul as “Maulwi” which is a derogatory term in Pakistani society when used without any respectful suffix such as “Sahib” (Mr). In the context of Pakistani society the use of word “Maulwi”, instead of “Maulwi Sahib”, is derogatory to be used in a textbook which may mean that it is not used consciously. Even if this choice is unintentional, certain lexical choices are significant to carry and convey the hidden ideologies of the writer. The same might be the case in this instance.

Regarding the objectives 6 & 7, Asghar (2013) reports that the participants could not even indicate which country, nation or geographical situation these texts have been taken from. All their information in this regard is confined to American/British texts. On exploring further regarding this, they were not familiar with what differences are in American and British culture, or in American or English language. Furthermore, their total rejection of *Dark they were and Golden eyed* indicates how the treatment of the textbook failed to make the learners realize the significance of global environment and its relation to the whole humanity. In term of world knowledge, the textbook does not seem to add any cultural, geographical, political

or religious knowledge, though potentially the texts could be exploited very well in these directions.

CONCLUSION

In the light of the above discussion, it can be inferred that the NCEL presents an organized and well linked set of learning goals from grade 1-12 in theory but it has majorly failed to link these goals with the type and quality of syllabus that would best suit to achieve the goals set by in the document. It might be arguable if going beyond policy making guidelines for educational setting could be the scope of curriculum developers, however, the policy making should take into account providing clear guidance on how these policies can be implemented successfully. If the latter task is assigned to another committee, it is mostly likely to have mislaid connections between the policies and strategies to implement the decisions, as seems to have happened in failure to achieve the goals and objectives set for learning skills in the NCEP. Textbook and learning materials are the tools teachers use to achieve the learning goals and hold vital significance. If these tools are not effective and appropriate, it is ambitious to expect desirable learning outcome. Therefore, making decision on the syllabus design and its contents is a part and parcel of policy makers' domain. Being policy makers, they must be aware of the strategies and methods to achieve the goals devised by them on paper, otherwise, the curriculum document would be a piece of paper with no potential of practical implementation. It is high time to support the NCEL with an appendix of syllable in line with objectives set in the document in order the NCEL could get rid of "the specialist approach" and bring forth some practical proposals for effective learning outcome.

In the perspective of geographical, political and social condition of Pakistani society, along with the goals and objectives set in the national curriculum, it is clear that the traditional approach to education is not likely to work effectively. The situation demands for social change at wider scale with a clear indication and reflection in the policy document, such as the NCEL. In the process of revising and incorporating strategies for language teaching in the national curriculum, the planners might find it useful to consider Canagarajah (2004) who believes that while learning a second language, learners' membership of their vernacular communities should addressed in order to "consider how learners negotiate competing subject positions in conflicting discourse communities and how these struggles shape their practices of language learning" (Pp. 117). Fairclough also (1992) maintains that "discursive practice is constitutive in both conventional and creative ways: it contributes to reproducing social society (social identity, social relationships, systems of knowledge and belief) as it is, yet also contributes to transforming society" (Pp. 65). Consideration of learners' social association with their immediate social context may more suitably and effectively occur by bringing critical approaches to pedagogy into focus to make learners independent with a sense of ownership of their learning and thus active agent of change. In this respect, showing sensitivity to students' cultural attachment by embracing critical approaches in education is likely to lead towards organizing curricula in ways that enable students to make decisions about how society is historically as well as socially constructed. Such a critical approach will not only inform on how existing social practices are implicated in relations of inequalities, racism, sexism and other forms of oppression, but will also offer students the possibilities for being able to make judgments about what society might be, and what possible or desirable outside existing configurations of power are.

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