



# Why curriculum developments in ELT often fail

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considers this important issue.

I recently had a conversation with someone from a national ministry of education about why their latest curriculum development project hadn't resulted in the improvements in educational standards that had been anticipated. The conversation was a real eye-opener as they themselves had identified most of the issues that had led to the failure. Here it is worth pointing out that despite the best intentions and considerable resources invested in curriculum reform, many initiatives either fail to meet their objectives or produce results that fall short of expectations. The reasons for these failures are complex and multifaceted, involving factors related to policy, pedagogy and human behaviour. This article will explore the common causes of failure in ELT curriculum developments and suggest ways to improve the process for more effective and sustainable reforms.

One of the most significant reasons why curriculum developments fail is the top-down approach often employed by educational authorities. In many cases, policy makers and administrators design and impose new curricula without adequately involving teachers – the people who are expected to implement these changes in the classroom. Teachers are frontline practitioners with a deep understanding of their students' needs, the

challenges they face and the practicalities of classroom instruction. When reforms are introduced without meaningful teacher input, they risk being impractical, irrelevant or misaligned with actual classroom realities.

For example, new methodologies, such as Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) or Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), may be introduced into a curriculum based on theoretical benefits. However, if teachers are not consulted on how to integrate these approaches or are not provided with the necessary training and support, they may struggle to implement the reforms effectively. In some cases, teachers may resist the changes entirely, seeing them as an additional burden rather than an opportunity to improve student outcomes. Ultimately, if teachers are not invested in the new curriculum, they may revert to familiar methods, and the reform will fail (Fullan, 2007).

Even when teachers are open to new curriculum developments, their success depends on adequate training and professional development. Many ELT curriculum reforms fail because teachers are not given the resources or time to fully understand and adopt new approaches. For example, shifting from a grammar-translation method to a

more communicative or student-centred approach requires teachers to develop new skills in lesson planning, classroom management and assessment.

In many contexts, particularly in developing countries or under-resourced schools, there is a significant gap between the training teachers receive and the demands of the new curriculum. Training workshops may be too brief, superficial or disconnected from the realities of the classroom. Moreover, ongoing professional development opportunities are often limited, leaving teachers without the necessary support to adapt to new expectations. Without proper training, teachers may feel overwhelmed, leading to half-hearted or inconsistent implementation, and the curriculum reforms ultimately fail (Lamb, 1995).

Another critical reason why ELT curriculum developments fail is the misalignment between the curriculum design and the local context in which it is being implemented (Wedell, 2009). Curriculum designers often work with idealised models of language teaching that do not take into account the cultural, social and institutional realities of the educational settings they are targeting. For instance, a curriculum designed for an affluent, urban school system with

abundant resources and small class sizes may not be suitable for rural schools in developing countries, where resources are scarce, class sizes are large and students may have little exposure to English outside the classroom. In such cases, ambitious curriculum reforms that emphasise interactive, technology-driven or communicative methods may fail because teachers lack the tools and conditions necessary to implement them. Cultural factors can also play a significant role in the success or failure of ELT curriculum reforms. Some educational contexts may emphasise rote learning and respect for authority over interactive and student-centred approaches. If a new curriculum promotes a teaching philosophy that conflicts with deeply held cultural values or traditions, it may face resistance from both teachers and students. In such cases, curriculum reforms must be adapted to fit the local context or risk being rejected.

For any curriculum development to succeed, it must have clear, measurable objectives and effective assessment tools to track progress and outcomes. Unfortunately, many ELT curriculum reforms fail because they lack these crucial components. Vague or overly ambitious objectives make it difficult for teachers to know what is expected of them and for administrators to assess whether the reforms are working. For example, a curriculum reform that aims to improve students' 'communicative competence' may fail if it does not clearly define what communicative competence means in practical terms or how it will be measured. Without clear guidelines and assessment tools, teachers may struggle to design appropriate lessons, and students may not receive the feedback they need to improve. Additionally, if the assessments used to measure student progress are not aligned with the curriculum's goals (e.g., if exams continue to focus on grammar and vocabulary rather than communicative skills), the reform will likely fail to achieve its intended outcomes.

Change is inherently difficult, and curriculum reforms often encounter resistance from multiple stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, students and even parents. This resistance can stem from a variety of sources, such as a fear of the unknown, attachment to

familiar methods or scepticism about the benefits of the proposed changes. Teachers, in particular, may be resistant to curriculum developments if they feel that the changes are being imposed on them without sufficient justification or if they believe that the new approaches will make their jobs more difficult without providing clear benefits. This resistance is often compounded by the fact that teachers are already under significant pressure to meet existing demands, and the introduction of a new curriculum may be seen as an additional burden rather than a helpful innovation. In some cases, resistance to curriculum reforms may come from students and parents who are accustomed to traditional methods of teaching and learning. For example, parents who expect their children to memorise grammar rules and vocabulary lists may be sceptical of a curriculum that emphasises oral communication and fluency. If students are not performing well on traditional exams, even if they are making progress in other areas, parents may pressure schools to abandon the new curriculum in favour of more familiar approaches (Waters, 2009).

Curriculum reforms need to be accompanied by the necessary resources and support systems. For example, a curriculum that promotes the use of technology in the classroom may fail if schools lack the infrastructure (e.g., computers, reliable internet access) or if teachers are not trained in how to use the technology effectively. A friend of mine who is involved in technology in ELT once spoke to me about the lack of investment in 'wetware'. This might be a new concept to you, it certainly was to me at the time. He explained it in the following way: hardware are the actual computers, projectors etc. 'software' are the programs and 'wetware' are the people i.e. technicians (to install and fix things when they go wrong) and the training for teachers. He pointed out that in many contexts the majority of the budget goes on hardware and software leaving very little for the wetware. So, when computers break down, or if teachers aren't given adequate training, then everything fails.

Finally, many curriculum reforms fail because they are not designed with long-term sustainability in mind. Educational reforms are often introduced in response to short-term political or societal

pressures, and once the initial excitement or funding for the project fades, the reform is abandoned. Curriculum reforms that do not have a long-term plan for continued support, evaluation and adaptation are unlikely to succeed.

Sustainable curriculum development requires ongoing investment in teacher training, curriculum review and assessment. It also requires flexibility, as curricula must evolve over time to meet changing needs and circumstances. Without a long-term commitment to the reform process, even the most promising curriculum developments are likely to fail.

Curriculum developments in ELT fail for a variety of reasons, ranging from top-down imposition and lack of teacher involvement to inadequate training, misalignment with contextual realities and insufficient resources. To improve the success rate of ELT curriculum reforms, it is crucial to involve teachers in the development process, provide ongoing professional development and support, and ensure that the curriculum is tailored to the specific needs and conditions of the local context. By addressing these challenges, educational systems can create more effective and sustainable ELT curricula that truly benefit students (Kennedy, 2013).

## References

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