

Teaching English through Literature as part of the Israeli English Curriculum

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Abstract: The teaching of English through literature has become a central component and source of the language curriculum as well as a crucial aim of English instruction. As times change, pedagogies improve and the Israeli educational system, as an integral part of the society, has progressed. Israel has refined the English curriculum every decade since 1973, enabling learners to embrace the challenges of each century. The curriculum has always emphasized the importance of English teaching in addition to recently highlighting and stressing the use of literature as a tool in teaching English as a second or foreign language in Israeli classroom.

Keywords: Israel, Curriculum, Bagrut Exams, Literature, Second Language, Foreign language

1. Introduction

Teaching English through literature has become a basic component and source of the language curriculum as well as an ultimate aim of English instruction (Keshavarzi, 2012). A school curriculum is important and required in order to develop new ways of instructional programs, assessment plans, and keep the standards up to date, with national and international changes and improvements in education. The state of Israel has published four main English curricula since 1973 and until 2013, each addressing the teaching of literature and emphasizing the importance of its use in the English second/foreign language (ES/FL) classroom (Israeli Ministry of Education, 1973 & 2013). The insight on school curriculum and literature emphasis suggests that schools consider the evolving trends in the world

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and take into consideration the effects of the economic, social, technological progress and cultural trends of daily life when teaching in the EFL classroom.

1.1 What is a Curriculum?

The Origin and the idea of Curriculum came from the Latin word "Currere" which means *to run/to proceed*, referring to the course of deeds and practices through which children grow to become mature adults (Smith 1996, 2000). This process usually takes place at school and, therefore, school curricula were required in the educational systems.

A curriculum is a “plan that consists of learning opportunities for a specific time frame and place, a tool that aims to bring about behavior changes in students as a result of planned activities and includes all learning experiences received by students with the guidance of the school” as Goodlad and Su (1992) defined it. A school curriculum is important and required in order to develop new ways of instructional programs, assessment plans, and keep the standards up to date, with national and international changes and improvements in education.

In the various Curriculum Guidelines for English as a Second Language used in different parts of the world, including Israel, many similar considerations and sufficient purposes are taken into account on the reason why schools consider using a curriculum, demonstrating that the school’s level, teachers and students’ benefits are the main consideration in curriculum development. The insight on school curriculum suggests that schools consider the evolving trends in the world as well as the effects of the economic, social, technological progress and cultural trends of daily life.

1.2 Incorporating Literature in a Curriculum

Language educators have debated as to how, when, where, and why literature should be incorporated in ESL / EFL curriculum (Hişmanoğlu, 2005). Vital discussions, research and studies have been conducted about how literature and EFL instruction can work together and interact for the benefit of educators and students. Many have led to the innovation of interesting ideas, learning programs, and improved instruction and teaching tools. Sage (1987) points out that “many teachers consider the use of literature in language teaching as an interesting and worthy concern” (cited in Hişmanoğlu, 2005). The use of literature as a tool in teaching English as a second/foreign language in the classroom has been a significant matter for many Israeli teachers for the past decade.

2. Integrating Literature in the Israeli English Curriculum

The Ministry of Education (MoE) and the English Inspectorate developed a national English curriculum over the years to set standards for English as a FL. The curriculum has gone through many changes in the last decade and great emphasis was put on literature. The aims of teaching English became more focused and goals were

set to reach the highest achievable standards of excellence for the teaching of English as a foreign language in Israeli schools. Because English is generally associated with international trade and tourism, with higher education and research, and with the electronic media it was important to conduct a reform in the Israeli educational system which would boost English as a SL/FL and literature was the main domain of emphasis (Israeli MoE, 2001).

Literature was always an important asset in the English curriculum in Israel ever since the first issued curriculum in 1973. Literature was incorporated in the “Intensive reading program” and students had to learn a number of texts selected by the English syllabus committee of the MoE. The aim was “to develop pupil’s ability to understand in detail, master, enjoy and discuss materials that were culturally and educationally valuable” (Israeli MoE,1973:5).

Even when the curriculum was revised in 1977, it was not substantively different from the earlier one. The intention of the revised edition was to update particulars in the previous edition and to emphasize various aspects of the curriculum which were not sufficiently emphasized in the earlier curriculum. Furthermore, it aimed to change a number of items in the language and in the literature reading program as a result of the feedback taken from the experience in schools. It was clearly stated that teaching English as a SL was to provide pupils with a means of communication with the world at large. The curriculum emphasized the importance of English as the main foreign language learned throughout the world and it was and still is an international means of communication used by speakers of almost every mother-tongue.

Moreover, there was a great stress on communication as the major criterion in selecting, grading and presenting study material, methodological principles didactic techniques and classroom activities by teacher and pupil. The 1977 curriculum put more emphasis on the English lesson to further aim “to foster educational values and integrate with other subjects and school activities discussing current events” (Israeli MoE, 1977:88). It required teachers to endeavor to arouse in their pupils an interest and feeling for the language and English literature, by means of incidental teaching, illustrations and analogies, as well as through the reading of articles and literary pieces.

Eleven years later in 1988, a new curriculum was established and there was more elaboration on the study of English as a second/foreign language. Teaching English in Israeli schools was stated to be the principal means of international communication; ‘English as a World Language’ was the main focus in teaching English. An integral part of the educational system of Israel was teaching via the foreign language cultural and educational values (Israeli MoE, 2013). Teaching cultural values meant learning the literature and cultural background which many professional conferences and journals focused on. The MoE considered cultural learning a teaching objective equally as important and significant as communication (Moore, 2006:4). Studies show that “language teachers have recognized the need to incorporate more cultural activities in order to promote students’ cultural and

intercultural understanding” (Dema & Moeller, 2012:76) of the world around and to prohibit racism or create stereotypes among the learners. The question “remains as to how such cultural teaching should and could most effectively occur at the classroom level” (Dema & Moeller, 2012:76).

2.1 The National English Curriculum, 2001

The Ministry of Education and the English Inspectorate developed a national English curriculum in 2001 to set additional standards for English as a foreign language (Israeli MoE, 2011). The 2001 curriculum stated that the aim in English teaching is to “reach the highest achievable standards of excellence for the teaching of English” (p.1) as a FL in Israeli schools.

“For Israelis, whatever other languages they may use, English is the customary language for international communication and for overcoming barriers to the flow of information, goods and people across national boundaries. English is the language most generally associated with international trade and tourism, with higher education and research, and with the electronic media. It is the language that, after Hebrew and Arabic, is considered the most valuable asset of a plurilingual Israeli citizen” (Israeli MoE, 2001:9).

In the 2001 curriculum, there was an emphasis on something innovated and new. It affirms the national need to set standards in order to equip pupils with the knowledge of English that the modern world demands. It sets standards for four domains of language learning. The first is *Social Interaction*, this concept was added to the curriculum of 1988 when it recognized that English is a language for communication (Israeli MoE, 2001). The second is *Access to Information*, which focuses on the ability of the pupils to obtain and make use of information.

“Access may be through a spoken medium like radio or a lecture, or a written medium like a book or an article, or a combined medium like television or computers. Here, the standard at its highest level aims to prepare pupils for the demands of tertiary education in Israel” (Israeli MoE, 2001;8).

The third domain is Presentation, which emphasizes the ability of the students to present information and ideas in speech and in writing in a systematized structured manner (Israeli MoE, 2001). The last standard is the domain of Appreciation which consists of two components: Literature and Culture, and Language. These components are intertwined and the learning of one contributes to and enhances the learning of the other. The standard for appreciation of literature and culture addresses the importance of “promoting an understanding and developing sensitivity to people of various cultural backgrounds” (Israeli MoE, 2001:8). The component of appreciation of language is based on the principle that learning a new language offers and provides an ideal opportunity for the learner to become aware of the nature of language, how the language is structured and the differences between languages (Israeli MoE, 2001;8).

2.2 The New Literature Program Reform in 2010

The New Literature Program Reform emphasized the teaching of literature as a mean to affirm the national necessity to set standards in order to provide and equip pupils with the knowledge of English that the modern world demands. The program launched in 2008 and teachers were required to implement the Literature program in all high schools across the country by 2010. After almost a decade of implementing the program in high schools in Israel, some changes and adjustments were made to the program as a result of the feedback taken from the field, from teachers, literature counselors and from the analysis of the exam results (Israel MoE English Inspectorate, 2013:1).

The innovative MoE policy of The Literature Module Program came to address the changes within the society and on an international level and literature was the main focus in the new reform. There was a great and wide emphasis through the program to implement Higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) at all levels and all domains among students across the country (MoE English Inspectorate, 2013:6). The Literature Module Program and teaching the HOTS aimed at encouraging the enhancement of learners' comprehension, understanding and critical thinking. Information and communications through technology (ICT) was highly being considered as well and was taken into consideration as it too was incorporated into the new reform. As times change, pedagogies improve and the educational system as an integral part of society progresses, therefore, the new English literature Program in Israel was launched to accompany learners and enable them to embrace the challenges of the 21st century.

3. Literature in the Bagrut Exams

The changes in the 2001 curriculum which occurred in the year 2010 concerned the Matriculation exam known better as the Bagrut Exams. Bagrut examinations assess knowledge on subjects studied during high school. They are commonly compared to the New York State Regents' Tests and ETS Advanced Placement (AP) exams. The Bagrut scores are one of the standards and principals examined in the applications to Israeli academic institutions.

All the components of the curriculum, aside from the Bagrut exams, remained the same. The change in the Bagrut came due to the "innovative MoE policy to teach and assess HOTS via literature" (Israel MoE English Inspectorate, 2011:2). Two exam modules (out of seven Modules) in the English Bagrut exams were converted into literature Modules. Israeli students applying for a Bagrut Certificate must apply to an English Barut exam at one of three levels; 3, 4 or 5 according to the student' language capacity and knowledge. Each level requires the passing of four exam Modules; three written and one oral.

3.1 English Bagrut Modules

3-points: The three-points level (for weak learners) includes the Modules A, B, C and an oral exam. Module A consisted of two short unseen passages (up to 380 words both texts together) and a listening passage. Module B consisted of an unseen passage (290 words) and a written presentation (35-40 words). Module C consisted of an unseen passage (360 words). The oral exam consisted of an interview.

4-points: The four-point level (for intermediate learners) includes the Modules C, D, E and an oral exam. Module C consisted of an unseen passage (360 words). Module D consisted of an unseen passage (360 words) and a written presentation (100-120 words). Module E consisted of an unseen passage (380 words) and a listening passage. The oral exam consisted of an interview.

5-points: The five-point level (for stronger learners) includes the Modules E, F, G and an oral exam. Module E consisted of an unseen passage (380 words) and a listening passage. Module F consisted of an unseen passage (450 words) and a written presentation (120-140 words). Module G consisted of an unseen passage (500 words) and a written presentation (120-140 words). The oral exam consisted of an interview.

3.2 The Changes in the Bagrut

The Module B exam for 3-point students, the Module D exam for the 4-point students and the Module F exam for 5-point students were transformed into literature exams. Schools were given the choice to choose the assessment of the literature exam, either by a Bagrut exam given by the MoE or a school-based examination assessment (a Log).

This literature Module required teachers to teach students different literary pieces. The process of learning the literary texts is the same for both the Log and the Bagrut exam. The difference between the two programs is the final assessment of the teaching process. The will to change came from the need to teach students higher order thinking skills because not only does it enhance and develop students' ability to analyze literature, but also gives them the ability to better answer reading comprehension questions in expository texts, and improves their writing skills as well as their thinking skills.

The new literature program required teachers to teach 3-8 pieces of literature through the three years of high school. Poems, stories and a play or novel were among the genera required. Teachers had to cover the teaching of at least 6 out of 13 HOTS suggested by the MoE, HOTS such as distinguishing different perspectives, explaining cause and effect, explaining patterns, inferring and problem-solving. In each literary piece the teacher had to cover seven components; a Pre-Reading Activity, Basic Understanding Activity, Analysis and Interpretation Activity, Bridging Text and Context Activity, Post-Reading Activity, a Reflection or personal response and a Summative Assessment. One of the unique aspects of the literature program is that it incorporates the explicit teaching of HOTS, in the component of analysis and interpretation, which was the intended aim in the Literature Program.

Changes should come gradually and lead teachers slowly into it by taking them step by step into the new change or reform. As in every new change of a curriculum, there are critics, educators and teachers in the field who object or refuse the change. There are those who welcome and approve the change, willing to sacrifice more time and effort if it accounts for the benefits of the pupils, whereas, there are those who do not welcome such change. The new literature program in Israel has been implemented for almost eight years since 2010 and teachers have their approvals and disapprovals to the policy of teaching the English language and the HOTS through literature in the Israeli classrooms.

The Literature program continued to develop, with changes and modifications in light of the feedback and responses given by teachers and literature counselors, as well as analysis and interpretation of the literature Bagrut exam results and the Random Sampling of the literature Logs. The Literature Handbook, which was initially written to introduce the different aspects of the literature program, have been adapted, taking these modifications and changes into account (Israel MoE English Inspectorate, 2013:2).

Therefore, as a response to teachers' echoes and feedback on the program, some changes have been considered by the Israeli MoE and an updated version of the Literature Handbook was released twice once in Sep. 2013 and once again in Oct. 2015. Both Handbooks came to reveal a reduction in the process and the literary pieces required for the teaching of literature during the three years of high school. An additional version of the Handbook was posted by the MoE in 2017 including more reduction and explanation of the pedagogy section as well as requirement section of the literature program (Israel Ministry of Education English Inspectorate, 2017a; 2017b). The innovation and updates have come to address the necessities of the society and the requirements of both teachers and students of the 21st Century.

4. Conclusion

A school curriculum is a program of selected content and learning experiences offered by a school and capable of either modifying or changing learner behavior. A school curriculum is essential in order to develop innovative means to keep the standards up to date, with national and international changes in the educational system. Therefore, there are critical design features of English curriculum principals and materials that should be taken into consideration to support effective teaching and student learning.

The Israeli Ministry of Education has refined and improved its English Curriculum five times since 1973. Each has revised and expanded the previous, resulting in a curriculum that will better address the needs of both teachers and students of the time. The last most recent curriculum in 2013, has extended on the issues incorporated in previous ones, addressing the changes within the society and the needs of the 21 Century. The supplementary Literature reforms included in the curriculum since 2008 till 2017 by the MoE were intended to focus on the learning of

literature and the implementation of Higher-order thinking skills at all levels and all domains in order to encourage the enhancement of learners' comprehension, cultural understanding and critical thinking.

The Israeli curriculum emphasized the importance of English as the main foreign language learned throughout the world. Furthermore, the teaching of English through literature has become a basic component and an ultimate aim of English instruction in Israel as Israeli English teachers have been occupied with the innovative literature reform for the past decade. The process within the Israeli English curriculum to teach literature and the HOTS has gone through a long process since 1973, to correspond to the qualifications and requirements of today's teachers and students, yet never leaving out the option of being updated and expanded once again.

We live in a dominant world with changes occurring momentarily affecting the development of pedagogies and the evolution of educational systems. Innovations in the Curriculum enhance the development of clear processes and distribution of responsibilities that make optimal use of teacher expertise and time. The Israeli revised English Curriculum and the new English Literature Program Reform have aimed to accompany learners and enable them to embrace the challenges of the 21st century while promoting excellence and equity in student learning outcomes.

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