Continuing change after the innovation

R. Watson Todd *

King Mongkut’s University of Technology Thonburi, Department of Applied Linguistics, Bangmod, Tung Khru, Bangkok 10140, Thailand

Received 2 June 2005; received in revised form 23 August 2005; accepted 6 September 2005

Abstract

Focusing on the implementation of a task-based curriculum at a Thai university, this paper examines the continuation stage of the innovation by looking at how and why the curriculum has changed in its first four years. Based on course documentation and teacher interviews, the major changes to the curriculum were a reduction in the number of tasks, a greater emphasis on the explicit teaching of language, and an increase in the importance of examinations. The teachers were most concerned with methodological issues and the process of curriculum revision, and teachers’ beliefs were very influential in decisions to change the curriculum. The findings highlight the need to consider context-specific issues when judging the effectiveness of immanent innovations and to set up appropriate systems to guide curriculum revisions.
© 2005 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Innovation; Task-based learning; Curriculum; Process of change

1. Introduction

The management of educational innovation can be divided into three main stages: planning, implementation, and continuation (DeLano et al., 1994). While most previous work on innovation has focused on the first two of these stages, the third stage of continuing and consolidating change is as important as initiating change (Seong, 2004) but has received little attention in the literature. This paper, then, examines the continuation of an innovation by investigating how and why a task-based curriculum has continued to change after its initial implementation.

* Tel.: +66 2470 8727; fax: +66 2428 3375.
E-mail address: irictodd@kmutt.ac.th.
2. The nature of effective innovation

If language teaching is to develop, effective management of innovation is crucial. There are several different approaches to managing educational innovation that can be conceptualised as falling onto a continuum running from top-down innovation at one end to immanent change at the other. Examining these two extremes helps to illustrate the range of approaches available.

The traditional approaches to innovation have involved top-down imposition of change. In these approaches, a heavy emphasis is placed on behavioural objectives and the product of curriculum development (Reid et al., 1987), and the implementers of the innovation are expected to follow the new curriculum faithfully. Within English language teaching, these traditional approaches have often taken the form of ELT experts from core countries imposing a curriculum reflective of ELT developments in the core countries on a local situation (Holliday, 1994). Perhaps unsurprisingly, these traditional approaches to innovation have been largely unsuccessful.

The main set of approaches standing in contrast to these traditional approaches involves immanent innovation. Immanent change occurs where both the recognition of the need for change and the origins of the ideas for innovation are internal to the local situation (Markee, 1997). Such teacher-based approaches emphasise local factors and the process of curriculum development, and the implementers are expected to adapt the curriculum as they see fit (Reid et al., 1987). Because immanent change gives teachers a sense of ownership and commitment to the innovation (Fullan, 1987; Rudduck, 1991), these teacher-based approaches are more likely to lead to successful innovation.

Previous case studies have examined different levels of education and different aspects of change, including materials, methodology and curriculum. However, most of these previous case studies have concerned imposed innovation (e.g., Adamson and Davison, 2003; Carless, 1998, 1999, 2003; Doyle, 1999; Waters and Vilches, 2001). The evaluation of the effectiveness of innovation in situations of top-down innovation is largely based on the extent to which the imposed idea is implemented in practice (Beretta, 1992; Markee, 1993), and the issue of slippage (Adamson and Davison, 2003), whereby the original idea for innovation is weakened or changed in practice, may be seen as a cause for concern. The result is that reports of top-down innovation often have a flavour of damage limitation, with the implications of such case studies often being guidelines for how such innovations could be managed more effectively.

A key guideline for increasing the effectiveness of top-down innovation, and as we saw a frequent feature of teacher-based innovation, is the need to create a sense of ownership of the innovation among the implementers (Buchanan and Boddy, 1992; Carless, 1999; Forsyth et al., 1999; Goh, 1999; Markee, 1997), since such ownership is likely to counteract any resistance to change. To create a sense of ownership, the implementers (in most educational innovations, the teachers) need to participate actively at all stages of the change (DeLano et al., 1994; Pinar, 1999). Thus teachers should be involved in the decision making at the planning stage, should be central to the implementation stage, and should be in control during the continuation stage of the innovation.

Although some of the previous case studies of educational innovation have examined how to increase teachers’ participation in the processes of change, most case studies have focused largely on the planning and implementation of change (e.g., Goh, 1999; Karavas-Doukas, 1998; Markee, 1997; Pinar, 1999), while the crucial continuation stage has received very little attention in the literature. This emphasis on planning and implementa-
tion in the literature may have resulted in a somewhat limited view of the effects of innovation. In one of the few major longitudinal studies of innovation, Carless (2004) showed that in continuing an innovation, teachers reinterpret the innovation in light of their own knowledge and experience, resulting in change which may not be immediately recognisable as the change originally intended. Such a shift in the nature of an innovation can occur in cases of both top-down and immanent innovation, although it may take a few years for the innovation to change in nature, and so any shift would not be apparent in studies focusing only on the planning and implementation of the change.

There is a need to investigate how and why changes in innovations occur in the continuation stage, and such an investigation is likely to be more productive in a situation of immanent innovation where the implementers feel in control of and free to change the innovation. This paper, therefore, examines such a situation by focusing on the implementation of a task-based curriculum at a Thai university and by following how and why the curriculum has changed over the first four years after its initial implementation.

3. The situation

The innovation under investigation in this paper is a task-based curriculum implemented at King Mongkut’s University of Technology Thonburi, a respected government university in Thailand. The curriculum consists of four 60-h EAP courses for undergraduate students of science and technology.

Prior to the innovation, EAP provision at the university consisted of a core course based on units taken from Interface (Hutchinson and Waters, 1984) followed by a selection of skills-based courses. In the mid-1990s, the teachers expressed dissatisfaction with this curriculum. They believed that the core course based on discourse functions was not meeting the students’ needs and also felt restricted in having to follow what they perceived as a dry coursebook lacking variety. Furthermore, in the 10 years that the previous curriculum had existed, the student profile had changed and the intake was more heterogeneous than before. Throughout the department then, there was a general desire for change.

The process of planning and implementing the new curriculum started in 1997 with meetings to identify directions for the new curriculum. It was decided that the key aims of the new curriculum would be to change students’ attitudes to English, to encourage maximal purposeful use of English, and to address students’ apparent real-world needs. Furthermore, the curriculum should fit with the progressive plans set by the Ministry of Education and should allow the university to distinguish itself from its competitors, most of whom were using skills-based syllabi. From these criteria, it appeared that a process-type syllabus would be appropriate, and it was decided to examine the possibility of implementing task-based learning.

There then followed a series of input sessions run by outside and inside experts on topics that the teachers identified as ones where they needed to know more, reading clubs where the teachers read key theoretical texts and shared their understandings, and piloting of an 8-h task-based unit to allow the teachers to see the implementation of task-based learning in practice (for full details of the process of implementing the innovation, see Watson Todd, 2000, 2001). After setting the objectives of the new curriculum, a series of workshops in which the teachers designed the courses, units, tasks and activities were arranged. At the same time, the teachers conducted small-scale action research projects to find possible solutions to aspects identified as potentially problematic in the new curriculum.
Throughout this whole process, administrative support was essential. Although the costs involved were not substantial, the time required meant that the administration had to ensure that other aspects of teacher workload were reduced for the period when the new curriculum was being set up. Fortunately, the Dean of the Faculty was an active supporter of the curriculum design process and ensured that time and facilities were made available.

Through the processes of curriculum design, all of the teachers involved gained a reasonable understanding of task-based learning and felt a sense of ownership over the new curriculum. These feelings of ownership are illustrated by one of the teachers who wrote, “we realize that our work must be further improved, but because we have been the prime designers, we are prepared and confident to make these improvements as necessary” (Kongchan, 2001, p. 111).

By 2001, the new task-based curriculum was ready for implementation. The curriculum consisted of four courses referred to, in time-honoured fashion, as LNG101, LNG102, LNG103 and LNG104. Before studying, students took a placement test and, based on the results, were required to take either LNG101 to LNG103 or LNG102 to LNG104. In other words, each student took three of the four courses. LNG101 was designed to gradually introduce weaker students to task-based learning and includes a series of lessons on strategy training before the tasks in the course. Each of the main tasks in LNG101 to LNG103 takes two to six weeks (of a 15-week semester) to complete, making the tasks somewhat akin to projects. These tasks include making a class newspaper, conducting a survey, and designing, conducting and reporting a small-scale experiment. In addition, each of these three courses has an adjunct project (Brinton et al., 1989), such as a self-access portfolio, running throughout the whole semester. In contrast, LNG104 consists of a semester-length project to create an e-zine. In this paper, I will focus on the task-based courses, LNG101 to LNG103.

Task-based learning, which underpins the three courses under investigation, is difficult to define. There are, however, some key features associated with task-based learning (Richards and Rodgers, 2001; Skehan, 1998; Willis, 1996):

- Meaning is given primacy over form.
- Learning is experiential.
- There are no prespecified linguistic objectives.
- Any explicit language teaching occurs post-task.
- The focus is on the process rather than the product.
- Evaluation is conducted through formative continuous assessment.

The extent to which these features are manifested in any task-based curriculum varies, so a curriculum which emphasises all six features could be termed a ‘strong’ version of task-based learning. In their original forms, the three courses under consideration did manifest all six features.

Since its inception in 2001, the new task-based curriculum has undergone constant informal evaluation and multiple revisions. Each year, there are lengthy meetings of all teachers who have taught a particular course. At these meetings, students’ feedback on the course is considered and teachers discuss problematic points needing revision. Following consensus on the revisions to be made, two or three teachers are appointed coordinators with responsibility for seeing that the revisions are implemented. In the continuation stage of the inno-
vation of the task-based curriculum, therefore, the courses are in a constant state of change, and this paper focuses on the nature of and reasons behind these changes.

4. Data collection

The data in this study come from two sources: documentation concerning the courses under investigation and interviews with teachers who have taught the courses regularly.

For documentation, the course outlines for LNG101, LNG102 and LNG103 were collected for each of the years from 2001 to 2004. These course outlines gave details of the content of each lesson of the course and of evaluation procedures. These allow a comparison of content and evaluation between the different years to be made, and thus show what revisions were made each year. The data from these course outlines were summarised into single-page tables, such as the one for LNG102 shown in Table 1.

From Table 1, it can be seen that, in 2001, LNG102 started with a few introductory lessons on strategies and skills. There were then three main tasks, concerning resourcing, concordancing and dictionary work, and problem solving. There was also a portfolio adjunct project running through the course and several lessons devoted to giving feedback on linguistic errors that students had made in working on the tasks and the portfolio. It can also be seen that the proportion of marks given for the final exam increased from 25% in 2001 to 40% in 2004.

In addition to the course outlines, the somewhat brief minutes of the yearly meetings to consider course revisions were also collected to provide information concerning the teachers’ reasoning behind any changes made to the courses.

The second source of data is interviews with teachers who had taught at least one of the three courses at least three times between 2001 and 2004. Eleven teachers (10 female) were interviewed with each interview lasting around half an hour. These 11 teachers are called subjects A to K (Subject H was male). The interview with each subject focused on the course(s) they had taught at least three times.

Given that a relationship with the subjects had already been established (since I have been working at the university for 12 years), an informal semi-structured format, effective in such situations, was used (Lynch, 1996) to stimulate the subjects to talk freely (Weir and Roberts, 1994). Each interview covered six main areas:

- Overall perceptions of task-based learning.
- Perceptions of the course under consideration.
- Reasons for changes to the course content.
- Perceptions of the evaluation procedures for the course.
- Reasons for changes to the evaluation procedures.
- Perceptions of the procedures used to revise the course.

For each interview, after explaining the purpose of the research, an open-ended question concerning task-based learning in general was asked. After that, where possible, an active listening approach was taken whereby interviewer stimuli took the form of paraphrasing or asking for more details. For example, with Subject B:

B: ...when we change it a little bit, and I'm happy.
Int.: So you like the procedure of changing the curriculum every year.
B: Yes, even though it is very difficult when we have meetings because...
In addition, when talk about one of the six main areas covered in the interview was clearly complete, a direct question introducing another of the areas was asked. Overall, the proportion of interviewee to interviewer talk was 3:1. Written stimuli concerning the course under consideration in the form of summaries, such as Table 1, were provided to help subjects remember the content of the courses in previous years.

5. Data analysis

The course outlines and minutes of meetings were analysed to identify how the tasks and other lessons and the evaluation in each course had changed each year. For example, from Table 1 it can be seen that the problem solving task used in 2001 was not used again
and that the resourcing task expanded from 6 lessons in 2001 to 9 lessons in 2004. The minutes of the meetings were also analysed to identify any changes in the content of a single task, such as changes in the number of pieces of work to be included in a portfolio, and any stated reasons behind the revisions.

The interviews were transcribed by myself to more fully immerse myself in the data. In making the transcriptions, backchannel cues and single-word repetitions were ignored. The transcripts were then cross-checked against the documentation to see if there were any inconsistencies. The interview transcripts are the primary source of data in the study.

The qualitative interview data were analysed following the methodology of Lynch (1992). To begin with, a thematic framework listing the major aspects in the data was developed. This framework was then applied to the data as a coding scheme and adaptations made to it. Through an iterative process, the new framework was applied again to code the data, and specific issues were identified from the data. These issues became the basis for data interpretation.

To set up the thematic framework, two sources of input were used. Firstly, from the documentation, four themes potentially applicable to the interview data were identified: the actual changes made to the curriculum, especially in terms of reductions in the number of tasks; the need to place more emphasis on linguistic objectives, especially grammar, in the curriculum; the need to change evaluation procedures, especially in terms of increasing the proportions of marks for examinations; and practical constraints, such as class sizes, forcing curriculum changes.

The second source of input for the thematic framework was a corpus consisting of the subjects’ turns in the interviews. This 20,000-word corpus was analysed for word frequency, and frequent keywords grouped according to areas of concern. Several keywords form the basic vocabulary for discussing changes to the task-based curriculum (e.g., task occurred 109 times, and change occurred 55 times), but other keywords highlighted areas of concern to be included in the thematic framework. Some of these areas of concern matched the themes from the documentation. For example, grammar as a teaching objective occurred 19 times, supporting the existence of a theme emphasising linguistic objectives; and exam occurred 22 times supporting the existence of the theme focusing on evaluation procedures. In addition, two new themes emerged from the word frequency data: the methodology of teaching (e.g., feedback occurred 15 times and consultation 13 times); and the process of revising the curriculum (e.g., meeting occurred 26 times and coordinator 11 times).

Initially, then, six themes were identified as the basis for coding the interview data:

1. Changes made to the curriculum.
2. Emphasis on linguistic objectives.
3. Evaluation procedures.
4. Practical constraints.
5. Teaching methodology.

Having coded the data using this thematic framework, it became clear that one of the themes was of a different nature to the others. While for five of the themes stretches of discourse covering several turns were often coded within the same theme, this was rarely the case for the theme of practical constraints. This suggests that the other five themes could
be considered topics of the discourse, whereas the theme of practical constraints represented a different dimension. Given that the purpose of this paper is to investigate how and why the curriculum has changed since its original implementation, the five topic-themes appear to concern the ‘how’, whereas the theme of practical constraints concerns the ‘why’. It was therefore decided to code the data twice using these two separate dimensions of ‘how’ and ‘why’.

For coding the ‘how’ of curriculum change or the aspects of change, the five topic-themes from the original thematic framework proved applicable to the data, with some sub-themes emerging from the iterative application of these themes. The final codes used to analyse the ‘how’ of curriculum change, therefore, were:

1. Curriculum changes (not including evaluation), e.g., deletion of tasks, reduction in requirements for student work.
2. Objectives.
   2.1 Linguistic objectives, e.g., grammar, organisation of writing, discourse functions.
   2.2 Non-linguistic objectives, e.g., confidence, thinking skills, cooperation.
3. Evaluation procedures, e.g., marking criteria for continuous assessment, proportion of marks for exams.
4. Teaching and learning methodology, e.g., autonomous learning, focus on process.
5. Process of revising the curriculum, e.g., running curriculum revision meetings.

For coding the ‘why’ of curriculum change, in addition to practical constraints, several other major reasons for changes to the curriculum emerged as the codes were applied to the data iteratively. The final codes used to analyse the ‘why’ of curriculum change were:

1. Level and needs of students, e.g., lack of background knowledge of weaker students, relevance of learning to real-life needs.
2. Lack of reliability, e.g., subjective marking by some teachers.
3. Teacher attitudes, perceptions and beliefs, e.g., teacher insecurity, teacher concern for written accuracy.
4. Time spent on tasks and teacher workload, e.g., lack of time for consultations.
5. Other issues, e.g., student copying, links between tasks.

To check the reliability of these codes, a 3000-word sample was coded by a colleague and compared against the researcher’s assignation of codes with reliability ratings of 0.75 for the codes concerning ‘how’ and 0.72 for the codes concerning ‘why’, both acceptably high values.

With two major dimensions of codes, the aspects of change could be compared against the reasons for changes, suggesting the use of a matrix to present the findings (Lynch, 1992).

6. The changes made to the curriculum

From the course documentation, checked against the teacher interviews, three key patterns of change made to the curriculum in the four years of operation could be identified.
1. The number of tasks in each course was reduced either by completely removing tasks from the curriculum or by combining two tasks into one. For example, from Table 1 the problem solving task in the 2001 course outline disappeared as it was combined with the resourcing task.

2. A greater emphasis was placed on the explicit teaching of linguistic objectives, both in specific lessons separate from any tasks (as in the listening and speaking lessons shown in Table 1) and by providing more pre-task language preparation.

3. The proportions of assessment changed with greater weighting given to examinations rather than continuous assessment. For example, from Table 1 we can see that the percentages given to exams rose from 25% to 40% from 2001 to 2004.

These changes can be viewed as a move away from a ‘pure’ version of task-based learning towards a more mixed methodology. Of the six key features of task-based learning identified earlier, it appears that the curriculum has lost the features of no prespecified linguistic objectives and an emphasis on continuous assessment. This perhaps opens the revised curriculum to criticism. However, it should be stressed that the curriculum is owned by the teachers and changes should not be evaluated on the basis of any matches with external theoretical models. Rather, we need to examine the teachers’ own reasoning for the changes.

7. Aspects of change and reasons

There are two sets of codes to analyse the data: aspects of change and reasons. From the interviews with the different teachers, there was little difference in the frequencies of either set of codes between teachers. Although this may be an artifact of the interview procedures, it does suggest that generally the teachers share the same general concerns regarding the aspects of change and the reasons, even where their specific opinions conflict.

A key issue in this study concerns the teachers’ reasoning for the changes made to the curriculum. To see what broad reasons are behind each of the major aspects of change, we can examine the interview data for points where aspects of change coincide with reasons. The frequency of the various reasons for each aspect of change can then be counted to identify which reasons are paramount in the teachers’ thinking for each aspect. These frequencies are presented as percentages in Table 2. To provide a deeper perspective on these frequencies, illustrative quotations from the interviews for those points showing a 20% or greater match between aspects and reasons are given in Table 3.

Table 2
Percentage frequencies of aspects of change and reasons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Student needs</th>
<th>Lack of reliability</th>
<th>Teacher beliefs</th>
<th>Time and workload</th>
<th>Other issues</th>
<th>% of total concerns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum changes</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic objectives</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-linguistic objectives</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process of change</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of total reasons</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3  
Illustrative interview quotations for coincidences of aspects and reasons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of change</th>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Illustrative quotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>Student needs</td>
<td>[Concerning the removal of the written communication task] they said that it doesn’t match with the curriculum, I mean with the students’ life... In real life they hardly do that things. So they think that it should be changed to something else. (Subject J)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>Time and workload</td>
<td>[Concerning the portfolio task] it can work very well in the first semester, but in the second we have more courses and then we know that it’s quite tight for our schedule. And then we need more time to spend for the feedback or consultations. Then we reduce the task. (Subject C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>Student needs</td>
<td>After teaching for a while we realise that our students are weak, very weak in terms of grammatical points... They get confused. They have ideas, but the main problem is their idea is not organised. Number two is their grammar is very very weak. These two points we have to focus on and control. (Subject D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>Teacher beliefs</td>
<td>I think we should teach students to write, to learn how to write a good paragraph. I think it’s important but it’s not necessary to separate it in another task. (Subject K)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-linguistic</td>
<td>Student needs</td>
<td>It’s [the biggest challenge] to let the students think by themselves, we train them to think by themselves, because that’s the main problem for Thai students. They don’t know how to think by themselves, to become, to be themselves. We train them to express, we accept their opinions. (Subject C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-linguistic</td>
<td>Teacher beliefs</td>
<td>[Concerning the portfolio task] I disagree with other teachers, and I try to explain that the purpose is not to check the accuracy of the language. I think the purpose is to let students read or listen to English as much as possible. (Subject C)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Lack of reliability</td>
<td>We are very subjective in marking all of the tasks, so we found that some of the groups have got a very high mark, because of the subjectivity of the teacher. Some groups have got a very low mark, not because of the students’ level... And we try to increase the objectivity by increasing the marks for the quiz. (Subject G)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Student needs</td>
<td>Task-based curriculum? I think it’s good for moderate up to advanced students. It’s not OK for very weak students, because I think that weak students are not ready to acquire knowledge by themselves. Weak students still need teachers a lot. (Subject I)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Teacher beliefs</td>
<td>I think it [task-based learning] is very useful for them because you know they can use their, I mean they can go on with the task by themselves. We just provide some resources for them. I think it’s a good way for them to find some knowledge by themselves. (Subject J)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Time and workload</td>
<td>[Concerning consultations] They [the students] need some support, and it’s not easy for us, I mean a teacher, to cope with every student’s difficulty. So we need to work a lot after class. And sometimes we have to, I mean for myself I try to work with small groups instead of individually. And I try to get the students of the same difficulty to work together. (Subject B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process of change</td>
<td>Teacher beliefs</td>
<td>But the revisions were not based on how students think about the course, but from what the teachers think should be for the course. So what we did is just listen to the presentation about the, there’ll be a person who reports about the evaluation for each course. But when we make a decision, we don’t use that information... The decision was based by only from the, by the teachers’ attitudes only, not from other people, other stakeholders, like students. They just think that they want to teach what they want. (Subject K)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 shows that the most frequently mentioned aspects of change are the teaching and learning methodology and the process of revising the curriculum, rather than the actual changes made to the courses. It should be remembered that the curriculum changes come out of meetings of all teachers, and, in the interviews, teachers generally talk about the decisions for changes being made using the third-person they rather than the first-person we, suggesting that the teachers may not have a feeling of personal control over the changes. In implementing the changes, and indeed task-based learning in general, in their classrooms, on the other hand, individual teachers do have control and the high frequency of mention of methodological issues in the interviews may reflect this personal locus of control.

While the changes to the curriculum are accepted by most of the teachers, even if grudgingly (see Subject I’s quotation on non-linguistic objectives in Table 3), dissatisfaction concerning the process of revising the curriculum is common. In other words, rather than criticise the changes made, the teachers prefer to criticise the way the decisions concerning changes were reached. As explained in the situation, it was originally intended that student feedback on courses would be the main input into the curriculum revision meetings from which the decisions regarding changes would emerge. From Subject K’s quotation concerning the process of change in Table 3, it is clear that teachers’ beliefs and preferences play a larger role in directing curriculum revision than students’ feedback.

Other teachers also showed concern about the emphasis on the teachers in the process of curriculum revision. For example:

“We ask that, as a teacher, are you happy with this and this. Not the students happy, but the teachers are happy or not, mostly from the teachers. OK, they consider from the students’ evaluation, but mostly from the teachers’ side.” (Subject H)

“And for the evidence for changing the course, we try to, at the beginning we try to focus on the course evaluation form which is not well-designed, so it cannot help us see what the students really think about our courses. So when we revise the curriculum based on this thing, it’s like talking over the same thing again and again, and it doesn’t help us to see the real problems that occur. I think we need more information from the students.” (Subject G)

These issues are, in fact, symptomatic of the broader issue of a lack of systematicity in the curriculum revision process:

“There is no system I think... We change and change, and we don’t know what’s the basis for this change. But they say we have to change, we have to change, we have to change. But change for what?... Revising, revision is good, I think we should, but it should be on some basis, not just because I think, we think, we feel that.” (Subject J)

These problems of the lack of any underlying system guiding change and the directionless nature of the change present a major challenge to the effective continuation of the innovation.

Turning to the reasons behind the changes, Table 2 shows that teacher beliefs and student needs are the dominant reasons. Given the sense of ownership over the curriculum felt by teachers, it is perhaps not surprising that teachers’ attitudes, perceptions and beliefs should be such an influential force behind the curriculum development. However, the problems with the process of curriculum revision suggest that the dominance of teacher beliefs as the reason for changes may need to be tempered.
While teacher beliefs are an influential reason in all facets of change (and particularly for the process of change), there are other coincidences of aspects of change and reasons that are of note. Two such coincidences that are to be expected are the matches between evaluation and the lack of reliability, and between objectives and student needs. Concerning the actual curriculum changes, however, the practical issues of time and workload come to the fore. The need to reduce the number of tasks in each course suggests that, during the curriculum design process, the teachers underestimated the amount of work that would be involved in teaching the new curriculum. Other practical issues were impossible to predict, such as the need to employ an increasing number of part-time teachers due to massive increases in the number of students. Such constraints are largely context-specific and highlight the importance of the particular situation in affecting how an innovation is implemented.

8. Discussion

In this case study of an innovation concerning task-based learning, we have seen that a long and complex planning stage for the innovation based on immanent change resulted in the teachers having a sense of ownership over the innovative curriculum. As planned and originally implemented, the innovation can be seen as a ‘strong’ version of a task-based curriculum. In the continuation stage of the innovation, however, the model of task-based learning has been weakened, especially through increased emphases on explicit teaching of linguistic objectives and assessment through exams. Given that these changes were largely associated with practical constraints, it may be that the initial implementation of the curriculum was too idealistic and ambitious.

If this innovation had occurred through a top-down approach, based on an evaluation of the extent to which the ideal of task-based learning is implemented in practice, the current curriculum could be viewed as a failure with slippage from the original ‘strong’ version a cause for concern. However, the task-based curriculum under consideration was not an imposed innovation; rather, it resulted from a process of immanent change. In situations of immanent change, judgments of the effectiveness of an innovation based on externally imposed criteria are problematic. It is clear that, after four years of curriculum revision, the innovation is no longer a ‘strong’ version of task-based learning, but this does not mean that it should be judged as a failure. Any evaluations of immanent innovation should be context-specific and should include consideration of the justifications for change, and these may lead to very different judgments.

As an example of how context-specific considerations can lead to different judgments, let us examine the increased emphasis on examinations in assessment. Task-based learning is often associated with continuous assessment, so the increased proportion of marks given to examinations could be considered an issue of slippage. If continuous assessment is an associated feature of task-based learning that should be retained, problems with reliability could be solved through clearer marking criteria (Kern, 2000) rather than an increased emphasis on examinations. However, from the teacher interviews, the problems of reliability largely stem from part-time teachers who have not been fully inducted in to task-based teaching and who do not follow the set criteria for marking assignments. Setting clearer criteria will not solve this problem. The teachers are therefore forced to increase the proportion of marks given to examinations to solve reliability problems. Without investigating the reasoning behind this change in assessment procedures and identifying the
context-specific causes for the change, false conclusions about the continuation of the innovation could be reached. In situations where teachers have control over an innovation, therefore, context-specific concerns and teachers’ reasoning behind changes need to be given a heavy emphasis in coming to judgments about the effectiveness of the innovation.

Although the curriculum planning and implementation can be considered to fall near the immanent end of the innovation management continuum, there is some evidence that the teachers do not have a feeling of control over the process of curriculum revision, and thus it is questionable whether the continuation stage of the innovation is truly immanent. Similarly, an initial sense of ownership over the curriculum, as reported in the teachers’ writings concerning the curriculum design process (Kongchan, 2001; Kongchan and Pichaipathanasopon, 2001), changed into the teachers’ distancing themselves from the curriculum revision process implying a loss of the sense of ownership. These problems probably stem from an initial lack of concern in the planning stage of the innovation for the process of curriculum revision, with the result that no clear system or procedures for revising the curriculum were set up. If we accept that innovations are likely to change during the continuation stage perhaps because of context-specific pressures, then attention must be paid to setting up and implementing an appropriate system to guide any changes. Designing clearly targeted methods of obtaining students’ and teachers’ reactions to a new curriculum should be considered an essential part of the curriculum design process, and procedures for putting these at the centre of any discussions to revise the curriculum need to be set up. If such procedures had been followed in the task-based curriculum which is the focus of this study, it is possible that the curriculum would have developed in at least some ways different from those that have happened, and with the implementation of an appropriate system it could have been ensured that the teachers would retain a feeling of control over the continuation stage of the innovation.

References


