Teacher Perceptions of Working Within a Strongly Unified Curriculum
Peter Brereton

ABSTRACT

Unified curricula offer a number of benefits, such as ensuring consistent learning outcomes and assessment standards for students, improving institutional organization and accountability, and offering structure and support to teachers. However, teaching within a unified curriculum can also present a number of challenges which can adversely affect teacher satisfaction and their motivation to do their job to the best of their ability. Based on qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews carried out with thirteen current and seven former instructors of Rikkyo University's Center for English Discussion Class (EDC) program, this study reveals that the majority of participants valued the reduced workload and the culture of support and collaboration associated with working within this strongly unified curriculum. Furthermore, despite struggles with the relative lack of autonomy and the repetitive nature of the role, participants tended to prioritize the learning experience of their students over their own independence and creativity.

INTRODUCTION

With the growing demands for quality standards and the modern high-stakes accountability in modern English language teaching programs (Myers, 1999; Ylimaki, 2012), it is perhaps unsurprising that Richards (2001) references a growing trend towards the use of unified curricula, whereby multiple teachers on the same course adhere to aspects of the same curriculum. The extent of unification within a curriculum can differ greatly (see Figure 1), ranging from "loosely" unified, with only unified course aims and learning outcomes, to "strongly" unified, whereby all teachers follow prescribed lesson aims, lesson structure, course content, teaching methodology, and assessment methods (Lesley, Livingston, Schaefer, & Young, 2016).
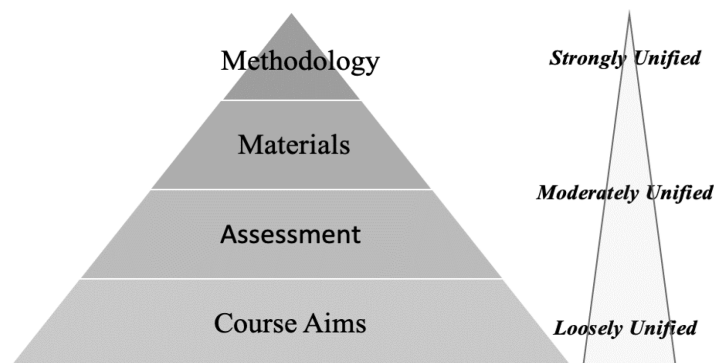

Figure 1. Extent of curriculum unification (Lesley, Livingston, Schaefer, & Young, 2016).

Irrespective of the strength of unification, this approach to curriculum design offers numerous benefits to the three key stakeholders whose needs are "both reflected in and affected by" the curriculum: the students, the institutions, and the teachers themselves (Pennington & Brown, 1987, p. 81).

For students, unified curricula can offer increased equality and consistency (Brown, 2001). Regardless of the class they attend, students can expect the learning outcomes, course content and, importantly, their means and standards of assessment, to be the same. This course validity is a

major benefit for all parties but especially for students; the greater fairness in assignments and assessment can help assure them that their grade is not dependent on any individual teacher's subjectivity. Unified curricula can also facilitate cross-class collaboration amongst students, as they are better able to discuss their learning with a wider group of peers (Gossman & Cisar, 1997).

For institutions, unified curricula would appear to form part of a *mechanistic* organization model, which emphasizes "a need for authority, hierarchies of control, and an explicit chain of command" (Davidson & Tesh, 1997, p. 178). Given that control is fundamental to accountability (English, 2010), it follows that the central coordinating and standardizing of a curriculum would also enable increased accountability. This in turn can facilitate more effective curriculum development, implementation and evaluation, as well as helping to guarantee quality teaching standards (Ylimazi, 2012). This approach is of particular benefit for administrators both of large-scale programs and in contexts where teachers are relatively inexperienced (Davidson & Tesh, 1997; Richards, 2001) as inconsistencies in teaching quality between individual teachers can effectively be eliminated (Davidson & Tesh, 1997). This is pertinent to the Japanese academic context, where concerns have been raised with regard to the quality of teaching due to the lack of oversight and accountability that university teachers are often subject to (Bailey, 2004; Stapleton, 2011). Further, the use of a unified curriculum has been shown to boost teachers' understanding of the role of their course in the wider institutional context (Pennington & Brown, 1987). This can help minimize the risks associated with universities' frequent reliance on adjunct lecturers, who often lack awareness of the wider program context (Pettigrew & Fenton, in Prichard & Moore, 2016).

Finally, unified curricula provide teachers with clear expectations with regard to course structure. Brown (1995) suggests that teachers who lack this guidance can spend a disproportionate amount of time planning their courses. Alongside the clearly negative repercussions this can have for teachers in terms of workload and stress, this is also a symptom of *program inefficiency*, whereby a program is wasteful with the "energy of those who make it work" (Brown, 1995, p. 192). A unified curriculum, in contrast, can work to lighten the collective workload considerably, and creates a ratio which favors in-class teaching and teachers' professional development. over other time-consuming tasks such as writing curricula, designing teaching and testing materials, and deciding upon assessment methods. The relationship between teacher and unified curriculum is often mutually beneficial: while teachers profit from a reduction in their workload, the program benefits from encouraging teacher collaboration (Pennington & Brown, 1987): the collective nature of a unified curriculum means teachers are more likely to discuss teaching matters with their colleagues. This is vital both in fostering a community of learning, whereby a positive interactive environment is developed amongst colleagues (Wenger, 1998), and in helping to minimize any issues regarding teaching quality (Pennington & Brown, 1987).

Despite these benefits, the constraints imposed upon those teaching within a unified curriculum can pose a number of challenges to teachers' success. Of the 11 factors which can negatively impact upon teachers' satisfaction cited by Dörnyei & Ushioda (2011) (see Table 1) it is clear that a number of them could be pertinent in a unified curriculum, depending on the extent of unification.

Table 1. List of negative factors affecting teacher satisfaction.

1	Unfavorable school climate
2	Stress
3	Low pay
4	Lack of training
5	Inadequate career structure
6	Rigid curricula
7	Imposed teaching methods
8	Standardized testing
9	Restricted autonomy
10	Content repetitiveness
11	Lack of intellectual challenge

(Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 168)

For educators working within a strongly unified curriculum, at least six of these factors could theoretically apply. Dealing with a *rigid curriculum* (factor 6) with *imposed teaching methods* (factor 7) and *standardized assessment* (factor 8) obviously carries with it a certain level of *restricted autonomy* (factor 9). In addition, as unified curricula offer the same content to a number of classes, teachers are often required to teach the same lesson multiple times. This *content repetitiveness* (factor 10) could lead to teachers becoming over-routinized which, according to Mann (2005), increases teacher detachment and decreases teacher reflection. Over-routinization, coupled with the fact that teachers are primarily responsible for delivering the lessons, and not for actively designing the course, can also lead to teachers facing *a lack of intellectual challenge* (factor 11). Parallels can be drawn here with Roberts' (1998) *operative* teaching model, where the role of the teacher is limited to following the requirements set out by a centralized system, such as delivering prescribed lessons on a prescribed timescale.

To be at their most effective, teachers require a certain amount of autonomy and flexibility (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). As a result, any restriction on their autonomy can have a number of implications for their success as teachers. This includes a negative impact on teachers' morale (Keiser & Shen, 2000), productivity (Vavrus, 1989), and professionalism (Browder & Singer, 1993, in Carl, 2009). It is arguable that these three consequences could also lead to increased *stress* among teachers (factor 2) which in turn could potentially breed an *unfavorable school climate* (factor 1).

Further, limitations on teachers' *curriculum autonomy*, which involves selecting course materials and developing activities (Pearson & Hall, 1993) can also have serious implications. This diminishes their authority to optimally manage their students' learning and adapt their courses to the student needs, thus de-skilling the teacher (Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1990), and impacting negatively on student learning (Brezicha, Bergmar, & Mitra, 2014).

In contrast, teacher empowerment over what they teach and how they teach has a number of benefits. These include reducing the risk of teacher burnout (Soppelsa, 1997) and producing more positive and supportive teachers who, in turn, foster more supportive learning environments (Louis & Marks, 1998). As this has been shown to have a direct impact on both student motivation and achievement (Keiser & Shen, 2000), it is clear that a lack of teacher empowerment is potentially a major issue for program administrators to consider.

Despite this, Prichard and Moore (2016) argue that teachers are not necessarily against

top-down organization and management. For this relationship to function successfully, however, an appropriate balance must be struck between teacher autonomy and curriculum coordination (March, 1999), ideally with sufficient flexibility for teachers to adapt their materials and approach to the needs of their students (Pennington & Brown, 1987). Given the number of potential drawbacks associated with working within a unified curriculum, particularly one that is strongly unified, it is not hard to understand why English (2010) describes a constant "state of tension" between the concepts of curriculum unification and teacher autonomy (p. 35). This current study was therefore carried out to investigate how teachers perceive working within a strongly unified curriculum, with two main research questions (RQs) posed:

1. What are the perceived benefits of working as a teacher within a strongly unified curriculum?
2. What are the perceived drawbacks of working as a teacher within a strongly unified curriculum?

CONTEXT

The unified curriculum in this study is that of the Center for English Discussion Class (EDC), which delivers compulsory English discussion lessons to all of the approximately 4,500 first-year students each year at Rikkyo University, a private university in Tokyo, Japan. Approximately 550 EDC lessons are taught each week, which requires the 42 full-time instructors on the program to each deliver the same lesson 12 to 14 times over their six-day working week. For the five years of their fixed-term contracts, instructors teach exclusively on the discussion program, which runs for two 14-week semesters each academic year. The curriculum employed on the program is strongly unified (see Figure 1) and, as such, all teachers are required to follow prescribed course aims, use the same assessment and lesson materials, and follow a communicative language teaching (CLT) approach in lessons.

The main objectives of the course are to enable students to better participate in academic discussions and to build their speaking fluency (Hurling, 2012). In order to offer students "a genuine opportunity to develop communicative competence" (Hurling, 2012, p. 1), class size is restricted to between seven and nine students, with an ideal of eight students in every class. In these classes, which meet once a week, the strong emphasis placed on communicative pair- and group-work means EDC students typically spend between 45 to 60 minutes interacting with each other over the duration of each 90-minute lesson. The role of the instructor primarily involves presenting target functional phrases for use in academic discussions (e.g. asking for and giving opinions), facilitating student discussions, and providing formative feedback at regular intervals.

Almost all EDC lessons follow broadly the same lesson structure and include the same stages from week to week. Every lesson (excluding the first and last lesson of the semester) begins with a quiz to test students' comprehension of a required homework reading assignment done in preparation for the lesson followed by a 3/2/1 fluency development activity based on Maurice's 4/3/2 activity (1983). Each non-test lesson, (lessons 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 12) then involve either the presentation or the reviewing of a functional *discussion skill* or *communication skill*, used within EDC to develop students' discoursal and communicative competences (see Hurling, 2012). These are introduced through the use of "clear and teachable phrases" which can help to "maintain unity in terms of target student behavior" (Schaefer, 2018, p. 275). These phrases are then practiced in a controlled activity, typically conducted in pairs, to build automaticity, before students participate in two extended group discussions (of ten minutes and sixteen minutes respectively). Each discussion is prefaced by a preparation activity which aims to help students generate and develop ideas for the discussion itself and is concluded with a formative feedback stage, which can be teacher-led but often involves peer-feedback and/or self-reflection. Test

lessons (lessons 5, 9, and 13) differ slightly in that the fluency development activity is optional, there is no presentation of any target skill required, and student discussions take place under test conditions, but the emphasis on student-to-student interaction and the use of target functional skills remains the same.

For a unified curriculum to succeed, all those involved must understand the aims of the course and how to go about achieving them (Brown, 1995). As Lesley (2018) states, this is as true of EDC as of any other unified curriculum:

> A successful application of lesson methodology and unified curriculum conducted on a scale as large as the EDC program clearly relies on instructors having a shared understanding of all goals, assessments, materials, and methodologies at both a program and lesson level. (p. 263)

It is also recognized that this continued success and uniformity of the EDC curriculum is contingent upon instructors being given the necessary support and training, and opportunities for professional development (Livingston & Moroi, 2015).

As Livingston and Moroi (2015) go on to explain, the EDC instructor development program was actually created in order to ensure continued teacher support for the strongly unified curriculum, illustrating again the importance of the mutually beneficial relationship between the success of the unified curriculum and that of the teacher. Livingston and Moroi (2015) also lay out the three main principles which govern EDC instructor development:

1. There are systematic / regular opportunities to reflect on own teaching practice in support of student learning
2. There are opportunities to work with colleagues for better teaching and learning.
3. There are opportunities to engage in continuous and purposeful professional growth and development (Doe & Hurling, 2010) (pg. 334)

In practice, the EDC instructor development program involves an intensive five-day orientation period for instructors joining the program followed by weekly training and reflective sessions and observations throughout the first academic year. These observations, carried out by program managers, are designed to be formative for the instructor while also ensuring that lessons are being taught according to the requirements of the unified curriculum. As instructors gain experience within the program, they become more autonomous in their development, carrying out peer observations, practitioner research, and other self-directed reflective tasks based on suggestions from Farrell (2016). As such, the EDC faculty development program is designed to encourage critical reflection within teachers, both of their own classroom practices and of the curriculum itself (Livingston & Moroi, 2015). All instructors are also required to take part in inter-rater reliability training to ensure uniformity in assessment practices (Doe, 2012).

In addition to the formalized instructor development program, the value of providing teachers with the time and resources needed to collaborate and communicate with each other is also recognized (Diaz Maggioli, 2017). Inter-instructor communication and collaboration is first promoted through weekly instructor-led lesson-planning sessions. The use of team rooms, each with 10 to 11 instructors, also facilitates instructor communication and the sharing of supplementary materials. On a program level, the sharing of teaching resources is also made possible by the use of an online Google Drive, through which all instructors have access to shared resources and to which they are encouraged to upload supplementary materials they create.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

As qualitative research methods can help facilitate the exploration of participants' views (Dörnyei, 2007), this approach was deemed most appropriate for this study. This took the form of semi-structured interviews, which began with broader questions before more specific questions were selected in response to interviewees' responses, as recommended by Arksey and Knight (1999). While not all questions were asked to all interviewees in the study, unscripted follow-up questions were employed to probe deeper into participants' responses (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1989). In drafting the actual questions, an *item pool* of possible aspects to explore was first drawn up before the questions were edited down to a manageable number (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010). Prior to data collection, the questions were piloted on a volunteer colleague to ensure unambiguity and feasibility of procedures (Gilham, 2011). Feedback from this pilot led to minor changes to the wording of suggested questions. A final version of the entire list of questions can be seen in the Appendix.

Participants

With the aim of strengthening data validity and providing additional insights, the decision was made to attempt to collect data from both current and former instructors. An email outlining the study and requesting participants was first sent to all 42 current full-time instructors. From former instructors, participation was elicited through *word-of-mouth*, *convenience*, and *snowball sampling* - in which participants identify further potential candidates (Dörnyei, 2007) - based on potential interviewees' location and availability.

Face-to-face interviews were ultimately carried out with a total of thirteen self-selected current instructors in June 2018, and seven former instructors, all of whom had left the program within the previous 18 months. All interviews, with both current and former instructors, lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were documented through audio recordings and extensive interviewer notes during the interview. These were later transcribed more fully and copies were emailed to interviewees to ensure an accurate record of data. Each participant was allocated an individual code to ensure anonymity: current instructors were referred to as CI and allocated a random number from one to thirteen, while former instructors were referred to as FI plus a random number from one to six.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, transcripts were first annotated with *holistic codes*, used to identify possible emergent themes and "to capture a sense of the overall contents" (Miles, Hubermann, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 76). An example of these codes in this study is the term *workload*, and these were counted both when mentioned explicitly and when alluded to indirectly by respondents. These codes were then developed into *evaluative codes* by adding a + or a **-** where relevant to denote positive or negative evaluations (Miles, Hubermann, & Saldaña, 2014). This was chosen due to the positive/negative nature of the RQs.

In analyzing the dataset, Brown's (2014) seven steps for qualitative analysis were followed. Firstly, a summary of evaluative codes from each participant was organized into a usable form using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to more easily identify patterns and themes. To assist in analysis, each code was followed with a summary including direct quotes or paraphrases from the participant as well as shorthand notes on their responses, for example:

Workload +.

UC [Unified Curriculum] "reduces teacher workload A LOT". Ts [Teachers] "modify to make things better, not to make things work." "You never feel you're struggling against the course" (contrasts with previous context), "your role is to enhance materials rather than rewrite."

Codes were first organized by participant then arranged by RQ (i.e. whether they referred to benefits or drawbacks) before being reorganized to group together emergent trends. These trends were then discussed with a colleague to clarify areas already identified and to gain fresh insights and perspectives. This led to a closer analysis of any potential differences between responses from current instructors and former instructors. Finally, a *negative case analysis* was carried out, whereby the data was once more analyzed for comments which directly contradict the trends already identified.

RESULTS

RQ1) Perceived Benefits

The first RQ asked what the perceived benefits of teaching within this strongly unified curriculum were. The emotion codes for this research question are displayed in Figure 2, alongside their frequency.
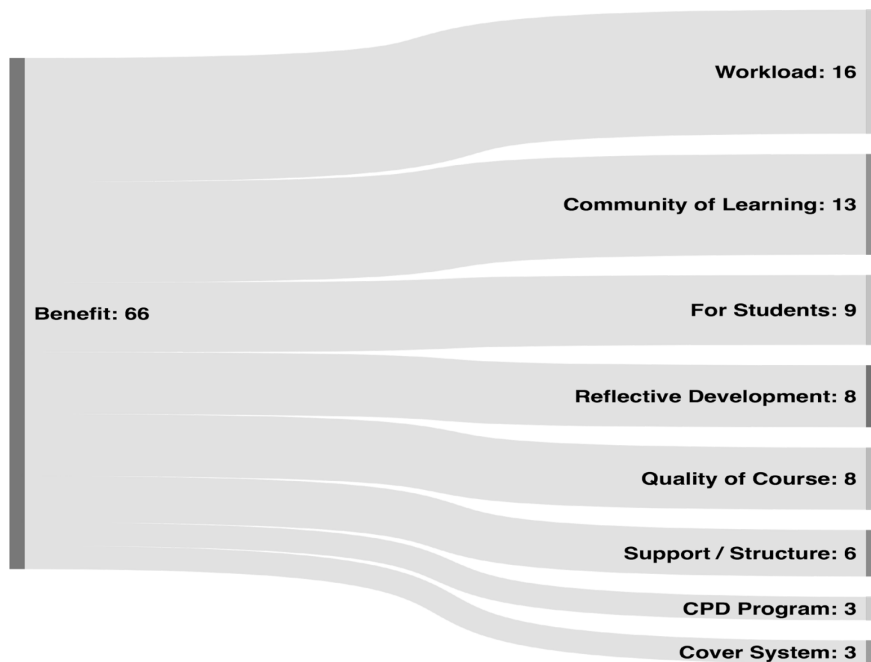

Figure 2. Teachers' perceived benefits of working within a unified curriculum

In total, 66 benefits were referenced in the interviews, with the relatively light workload referenced by most participants ($n = 16$). Most respondents shared CI7's view that having "much less lesson planning [than in other teaching contexts] frees up time to focus on teaching". CI2 contrasted working within the EDC curriculum with conditions in previous teaching contexts, saying: "You find yourself with much more time to focus on developing aspects of your teaching, such as developing thinking on your feet, and ways of giving feedback."

Seven participants also mentioned that this free time was beneficial for professional development purposes, be that "reflecting on [their] teaching" (CI1) and "working on honing lessons" (CI9), or working on research projects such as classroom research (C18 and FI2). Two participants (CI10 and CI6) also mentioned that, despite the six-day working week, the perceived lighter workload allowed time to work towards more formal teaching qualifications, such as a Delta or a PhD.

The majority of participants (n = 13) also agreed that the supportive community and collaboration engendered by the unified curricula was a major benefit. The role of fellow instructors was cited most frequently, mainly in terms of lesson preparation and materials design, as in this example:

> It's great that we have the [online shared Google] drive where we all share materials and ideas…we're all doing the same job so it just makes so much sense…but this culture of sharing certainly hasn't been the case in other jobs I've worked [in]. (CI9)

The fact that all instructors are familiar with the course was also mentioned by three current instructors as being beneficial for professional development purposes: "Because we're all familiar with the learning context, it's easy to get feedback and bounce ideas off peer teachers on classroom research or other studies that I want to pursue. (CI3).

The support from the community of teachers was referenced most by former instructors, all of whom contrasted their time in the unified curriculum with their new context. FI2, 4, and 5 respectively described the learning curve after leaving the unified curriculum as "a massive shock", "incredibly tough", and "brutal" due to the lack of collegial or institutional support available: "It was very much a case of 'here's your schedule, see you next year'", according to FI4. This expectation that teachers write and design their own curricula, teaching materials, and assessment methods for their courses was in sharp contrast with the unified curriculum context:

> [Within the unified curriculum] there was a plan for every lesson, we always had some sort of guidance and there were always people discussing their lessons. But [in my new context], there's absolutely nothing; I'm literally writing everything from scratch! (FI3)

The support provided by the course structure was also referenced by several participants (n = 4), including FI1 who stated that "from day one, I liked the order [at EDC]; it made me feel very comfortable. It was my first university job and everything was so new, but there were no surprises."

Another common perceived benefit (n = 9) was that the equal treatment students receive within a unified curriculum is "ethically right". (CI10) As CI1 put it:

> The fact it's unified means it's fair for students. I've heard of other programs and worked on other courses where they're told they have to test students three times a semester but everyone is using a different test…it's completely unfair on students. Your entire grade is based on who your teacher is.

This view was shared by FI2 who claimed that "if I was a student [in my current context], I'd be outraged that so much is dependent on the teacher you are assigned". CI12 echoed this sentiment, saying that in previous workplaces they had heard of students complaining due to the differences in instruction quality and assessment standards from teacher to teacher, and that they highly valued the integrity of the course and that "students don't feel they are being cheated" (CI7).

The final major benefit ($n = 8$) of the unified curriculum was that it was perceived to have a very principled approach. Three of these participants suggested directly that they felt this was due either to the number of teachers and administrators involved as key stakeholders or the fact that a lot of collective time is invested in the program, for example:

> [It's] very important that a lot of thought has gone into every aspect of the [EDC] course, which is not always possible if one teacher is deciding everything. There's always a rationale here, and it's always based on solid research, teaching principles and theory. (C14)

FI4 echoed this view, first referencing the principled approach at EDC, both in teaching and in the professional development program ("Everything is referenced or based on some theory…") before contrasting this with other contexts: "In other programs, I don't think that's the case…Can teachers [on other courses] defend every aspect of their [own] syllabus?"

The quality of the course had positive washback on CI1, FI1, and CI5, who claimed respectively that: "I have learned a lot about principled curriculum design"; "I now speak in an informed way about what I do and how and why I do it, and that "especially for a new teacher like me, it's useful because I'm applying principles and theories that I've learned about in grad school." In addition, CI8 said they felt "proud teaching such a quality course" while CI4 and CI11 both admitted their own limitations, suggesting they "wouldn't be able to design a course as good as [EDC]" (CI11).

RQ2) Perceived Drawbacks

The second RQ explored the perceived drawbacks of teaching within the EDC strongly unified curriculum, the results of which are illustrated in Figure 3.
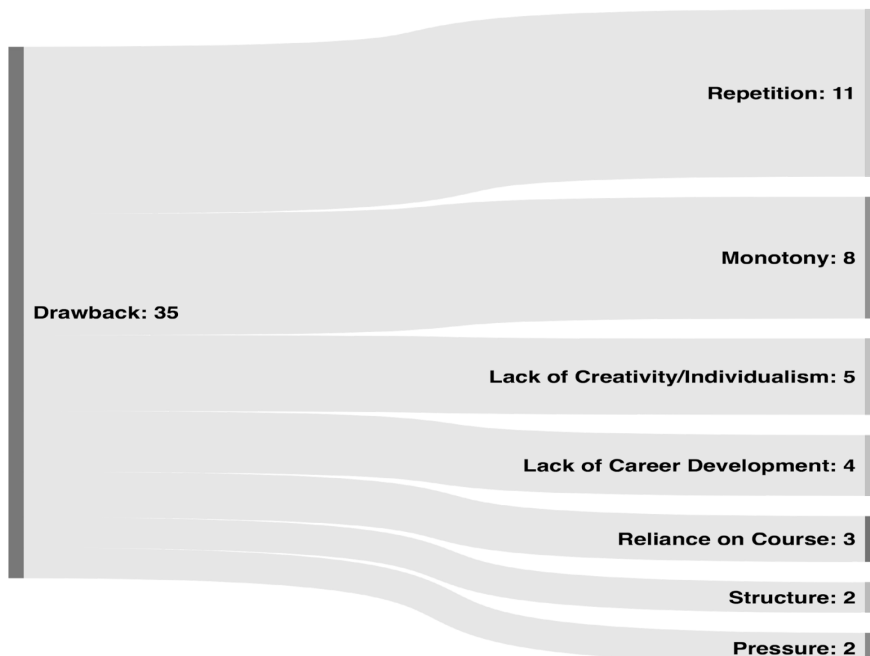

Figure 3. Teachers' perceived drawbacks of working within a unified curriculum

Of the 35 issues raised in total, the main difficulty cited by participants was remaining engaged or interested after listening to similar responses repeated by different students from classes throughout the week (n = 11). Given that instructors teach the same lesson up to 14 times a week, it is perhaps unsurprising that many found it "frustrating to hear the same student ideas over and over again" (CI2), which made it hard to differentiate between the classes (CI1 and CI3). This appears to have had an impact on motivation for some respondents, with CI13 suggesting that it was difficult to feign enthusiasm for students' ideas "hav[ing] heard the same idea a dozen times already", and CI11 claiming to "already know what the students are going to say before they do".

On a similar theme, a number of participants (n = 8) referenced the monotony inherent in teaching the same lesson multiple times in a row. CI10 claimed it "becomes a bit of a grind" to present the same language and provide similar feedback "over and over again" while CI7 described how "[their] brain sometimes feels numb after getting to the end of a week's worth of lessons". CI12 shared this sentiment, saying that a spontaneous joke made in the first or second lesson of the week quickly loses its humor after "being trotted out six or seven times".

Five participants cited frustration with the inability to be more creative with the lessons which, for some (n = 3), was associated with "putting [their] own stamp on the lesson" (CI9). CI1 expressed a similar desire for more individuality in the classroom, wondering: "Does it make a difference that it's actually *me* teaching?" This constraint on creativity was also referenced in tandem with a reliance on the availability of ready-made teaching materials (n = 3). The relative lack of opportunity for teachers to develop their own course materials led to the onset of "laziness" (FI2), "complacency" (CI5), and "loss of passion" (CI12) with regard to materials development, and a potential "rustiness" (CI9) of these skills in the future.

CI13 and CI7 respectively suggested that the EDC unified curriculum may not be ideal for all teachers "if you're the type of teacher who likes to get really creative" or if "you have fundamentally different beliefs [from the approach prescribed on the EDC curriculum], like you don't agree with CLT or believe that teaching functional language is useful." Four participants used the term "coping strategies" to describe methods they employ in order to offset the potential risk of these perceived issues. CI1 said they "use different materials and constantly tweak the approach from lesson to lesson in order to minimize monotony", while CI6 advised teachers in this situation not to feel "too restricted [because] you can try new things within the lesson stages; there's plenty of flexibility, you just need to find it." Three further participants expressed the view that issues within the unified curriculum only arise when teachers attempt to "buck the system" (FI5), "go against the flow" (CI3), or "mess with things" (CI11).

Nevertheless, the lack of intellectual challenge, referenced in Table 1, was again mentioned in connection with a stagnation in terms of career development. Concerns were raised primarily about the extent to which participants were developing their teaching repertoire, given that "on paper, [EDC instructors] only teach one course" (CI4). This same concern was echoed by CI3, who claimed it "may be challenging to find work in the future" due to the narrow scope of their current teaching duties. This is evidenced by the fact that four of the 13 current instructors who participated in the study mentioned that they also do part-time work alongside their full-time EDC roles. Two reasons were cited for this: firstly, to "design and customize lessons based on students' interests" (CI1) which helps to "stave off stagnation" (CI8) and secondly, to "gain further teaching experience", "increase future employability" (CI3) and "help resume-building" (CI13).

DISCUSSION

Despite the number of potential issues inherent in working within a strongly unified curriculum, 85% (n = 17) of participants said that their overall experience had been either "positive" or

"mostly positive" when asked directly to describe their time on the program. A further participant described their experience as "positive with a few caveats", while the remaining two said it had been "mixed". That the vast majority of participants perceived the unified curriculum to be beneficial is supported by the quantifying of the qualitative evaluative codes; the 66 benefits cited by the 20 participants are almost double the 35 drawbacks mentioned.

It is interesting to note that, of these drawbacks, three of the four most frequently mentioned issues (repetition, monotony, and lack of career development) stem primarily from the content repetition associated with only teaching one lesson multiple times a week rather than from the prescribed nature of the EDC unified curriculum. That is not to say that the unified curriculum itself was not perceived to pose any challenges: the lack of creativity and individualism cited ($n =$ 5) as well as a reliance on course materials ($n = 3$) suggests that the constraints associated with unification are certainly an issue for some.

This study also seems to suggest that some participants desired more freedom to make a greater individual impression on the lesson. Richards (2001) argued that, "even though two teachers work towards identical goals, they may choose different ways of getting there" (p. 217), yet the findings from this study pose interesting questions as to how much creativity or flexibility teachers feel is necessary or desirable within a course. CI6's suggestion that sufficient flexibility does exist if teachers search for it is supported by Kasparek (2018), writing as a fifth-year EDC instructor, who reflects that:

> Freed from the work of the paradox of choice stemming from the infinite possibilities of course design, involving all the combinations of elements such as content, methodology, underlying theory, and assessment, EDC instructors can focus on mastering technical skills while also playing with developing their own style and meaningful goals within the existing framework. (p. 249).

The contrasting views on this issue implies either that some participants are unaware of how to adequately exploit this flexibility and find areas for creativity which exist within a strongly unified curriculum, or that some instructors feel the need for more autonomy than CI6 does.

All participants were able to identify the risks that they felt hindered their motivation, satisfaction, or teaching potential at EDC, and many of these also referenced specific "coping strategies" which they employ in order to minimize the risks. Of the strategies raised in the interviews, it was most interesting that a number of participants felt it necessary to take on part-time teaching work to offset perceived issues with their full-time roles in the unified curriculum and their long-term employability, yet it is ironic that this was likely only made possible due to working within the unified curriculum, and the associated reduced workload.

The fact that the EDC strongly unified curriculum was perceived to be such a principled and high-quality course did much to ensure a positive overall perception of this program, although it would seem a fair assumption that instructors would not be as complimentary if there were doubts about the quality of program. The collaborative and supportive nature of the EDC community was referenced by many and is likely to be vital to the success of any unified curriculum, regardless of the extent of unification. This aspect of the EDC unified curriculum was mentioned by every former instructor interviewed, suggesting that it may only be after instructors leave the course that they fully appreciate the support fostered by this type of community. Course administrators have a key role to play in establishing an atmosphere in which all teachers feel their roles and their views are valued, which can help foster a sense of loyalty to the group and a sense of pride in their contribution to the program. Studies have shown that teachers are even willing to accept top-down coordination and forfeit a degree of their autonomy on the understanding that

they are involved in the decision-making process (Prichard & Moore, 2016) and that this is for the greater good of the program (Pennington & Brown, 1987).

It was, however, perceived by a number of participants that the EDC strongly unified curriculum may not be suited to everyone: six participants cited having the correct mentality to be able to work with constraints on their autonomy and accept the prescribed features of the course. Interestingly, research suggests this suits relatively inexperienced teachers best (Davidson & Tesh, 1997; Richards, 2001), and while this study may support that hypothesis to an extent, two of the biggest proponents of the unified curriculum in interviews are anecdotally known to be experienced teachers with PhDs. It is unfortunate that more data was not collected on participants' experience and qualifications to test this hypothesis further.

CONCLUSION

While this is clearly a very contextualized and small-scale study into teacher perceptions of one strongly unified curriculum, the results suggest that, despite the inherent challenges faced by teachers, they perceive working within the EDC curriculum to be an overwhelmingly positive experience. The biggest issues appeared not to be due to the unified nature of the program, but rather with the issue of content repetition and the associated monotony. It was also interesting to note the steep learning curve that all former instructors referenced upon leaving the EDC program and the "brutal" adjustment to working in a context which lacks the institutional and collegial support that EDC offers its instructors.

For the EDC program, this study has some interesting implications. First of all, it would appear prudent to make instructors explicitly aware of the risks inherent in a strongly unified curriculum from the outset. It is also important to continue to provide the necessary time and resources to foster a community of collaboration and communication, as well as offering a supportive yet self-directed supportive professional development program to counter these risks. Further, it may be beneficial to raise current instructors' awareness of the struggles which face those in their post-EDC roles and perhaps introduce the idea of collaborative *transition workshops* with the aim of supporting teachers in their preparations for future roles in higher education in Japan. Given that one of the primary aims of the EDC instructor development program is to maintain teachers' motivation (Livingston & Moroi, 2015), the addition of this type of faculty development would surely work to meet the needs of those instructors coming toward the end of their EDC contract and who have one eye on their future roles outside of EDC. This could reduce stress and anxiety connected with the likely change to less-unified context where the challenges faced are markedly different. For the program, the reduction in anxiety would help their instructors continue to focus on their EDC duties, reassured that they are better prepared for their future roles. For teachers, this approach would also help raise awareness of how good practices and principles developed on the EDC program, such as the sharing of teaching materials, collaboration with colleagues, and ensuring "ethically fair" assessment, could be transferred to future contexts.

Avenues for future research in this realm could include exploring the transition experience for teachers moving out of a unified curriculum and into a more 'typical' role for university language teachers in Japan, and how they feel they adapt from one context to the other. On a wider scale, it would also be interesting to explore how much autonomy teachers desire in order to feel able to "put their stamp on a lesson" and why some teachers feel this is necessary for their own motivation. Finally, it must be remembered that the *raison d'être* of any language course is to serve its students. Although student feedback shows extremely high rates of satisfaction for the EDC program (Brereton, Schaefer, Bordilovskaya, & Reid, 2019), it would be insightful to discover how students perceive the unified aspect of the curriculum, particularly if contrasted with their perceptions of a non- or less-unified course.

Despite the positive results of this current study, it must be noted that the self-selection nature of the sample increased the risk of the sample not accurately reflecting the population (Dörnyei, 2007). This was inevitable due to the study being voluntary. However, given that just under a third (31%) of current instructors participated in the study, it may be that those who did volunteer were so-called *eager beavers* (Brown, 2001) and that the results are therefore not entirely representative of the wider population. A quantitative survey of all current instructors and the insights of a greater number of former instructors would have done much to increase the scale of data available for analysis. This is another area for further research.

What is clear, however, is that the challenges facing instructors on a unified curriculum differ from those working in non-unified contexts. Instead of the requirement to independently design syllabuses, develop one's own materials, and decide upon assessment criteria, those who succeed in working within the constraints of a unified curriculum are required to be aware of the challenges, actively take steps towards minimizing them, and be willing to work closely with their colleagues to develop a sense of community. Working within a unified curriculum requires teachers to have a greater awareness that, while it may feel restrictive, they are carrying out their role for the benefit of their learners; as CI11 said: "Ultimately we are here to help our students: they're the ones who actually matter."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Arksey, H., & Knight, P. (1999). *Interviewing for social scientists: An introductory resource with examples*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Bailey, A. A. (2004). Reforming English teaching in Japanese universities: Creating a language community. *Ritsumeikan Law Journal*, *3*, 235-263.

Brereton, P., Schaefer, M. Y., Bordilovskaya, A., & Reid, S. (2019). An analysis of student survey results on classroom experiences and learning outcomes within a large-scale English discussion program. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion*, *7*, 272-297.

Brown, J. D. (1995). *The elements of language curriculum: A systematic approach to programme development*. Boston, MA: Heinle, Cengage Learning.

Brown, J. D. (2001). *Using surveys in language programs*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Brown, J. D. (2014). *Mixed methods research for TESOL*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.

Brezicha, K. Bergmar, U., & Mitra, D.L. (2014). One size does not fit all: Differentiating leadership to support teachers in school reform. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 51*, 96-132.

Carl, A. E. (2009). *Teacher empowerment through curriculum development* (3rd ed.). Cape Town, South Africa: Juta & Company.

Davidson, J., & Tesh, J. (1997). Theory and practice in language program organization design. In M.A. Christison & F. Stoller (Eds.). *A Handbook for Language Program Administrators* (pp. 177-198). Burlingame, CA: Alta Books.

Diaz Maggioli, G. (2017). Empowering teachers through continuous professional development: Frameworks, practices and promises. *IATEFL 2017: Glasgow Conference Selections*.

Doe, T. (2012). Assessment: Improving interrater reliability on the EDC discussion test. *New*

Directions In Teaching and Learning English Discussion, 1(1), 1-11-1-18.

Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford Applied Linguistics.

Dörnyei, Z., with Taguchi, T. (2010). *Questionnaires in second language research: Construction, administering, and processing* (2nd ed). New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2011). *Teaching and researching motivation* (2nd ed*.)*. Harlow, UK: Longman.

English, F. W. (2010). Deciding what to teach and test: Developing, aligning, and leading the curriculum. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Farrell, T. S. C. (2016). The practices of encouraging TESOL teachers to engage in reflective practice: An appraisal of recent research contributions. *Language Teaching Research, 20*(2).

Gossman, D., & Cisar, L. (1997). Renovating required English classes at Kanto Gakuen University. *The Language Teacher 21*(3). Retrieved from https://jalt-publications.org/tlt/articles/2115-renovating-required-english-classes-kanto-gakuen-university

Gilham, B. (2011). *Developing a questionnaire*. London, UK: Continuum International Publishing.

Hitchcock, G., & Hughes, D. (1989). *Research and the teacher.* London, UK: Routledge.

Hurling, S. (2012). Introduction to EDC. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion*, *1*(1), 1.2-1.10.

Kasparek, N. (2018). Teacher as auteur: A multi-year reflection on teacher motivation, creativity, constraints, and collaboration. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion, 6*, 247-253.

Keiser, N. M., & Shen, J. (2000). Principals' and teachers' perceptions of teacher empowerment. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, 7*(3), 115-121.

Lesley, J. (2018). Reflective teacher training: Uniting theory with practice. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion, 6*, 261-272.

Lesley, J., Livingston, M., Schaefer, M. Y., & Young, D. (2016, November). *Ongoing program evaluation of a unified curriculum*. Presented at JALT2016: Transformation in Language Education International Conference, 26th November 2016, Nagoya, Japan.

Livingston, M. & Moroi, T. (2015). Instructors' views on tasks outside the classroom. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion, 3*, 333-351.

Mann, S. (2005). The language teacher's development. *Language Teaching*, *38*(3).

March, J. G. (1999). *The pursuit of organizational intelligence.* Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Maurice, K. (1983). The fluency workshop. *TESOL Newsletter, 17*(4), 29.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A.M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook*. London, UK: Sage Publications.

Myers, C. (1999). Developing program standards for adult ESL. *TESL Canada Journal, 16*(2).

Pearson, L. C., & Hall, B. C. (1993). Initial construct validation of the teaching autonomy scale. *Journal of Educational Research, 86*(3), 172-177.

Pearson, L. C., & Moomaw, W. (2005). The relationship between teacher autonomy and stress, work satisfaction, empowerment, and professionalism. *Educational Research Quarterly, 29*(1), 38-54.

Pennington, M. C., & Brown, J. D. (1987). Excellence in language programs: A function of curriculum process. *University of Hawaii Working Papers in ESL, 6*(1), 81-105.

Prichard, C., & Moore, J. (2016). The balance of teacher autonomy and top-down coordination in ESOL programs. *TESOL Quarterly 50*(1).

Richards, J. C. (2001). *Curriculum development in language teaching*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Roberts, J. (1998). *Language teacher education*. London, UK: Arnold.

Rosenholtz, S. J., & Simpson, C. (1990). Workplace conditions and the rise and fall of teachers' commitment. *Sociology of Education, 63*(4), 241-257.

Schaefer, M. Y. (2018). Communication skills for strategic competence. *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion, 6*, 273-279.

Soppelsa, E. (1997). Empowerment of faculty. In M.A. Christison &, F. Stoller (Eds.) *A handbook for language program administrators* (pp. 177-197). Burlingame, CA: Alta Book Center.

Stapleton, P. (2011). Japanese universities: Change or risk marginalization. *The Language Teacher, 35*(5), 37-41.

Vavrus, M. (1989). Alienation as the conceptual foundation for incorporating teacher empowerment into the teacher education knowledge base. *Proceedings of the National Forum of the Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges for Teacher Education, June 1989,* Indianapolis, IN.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Ylimaki, R. M. (2012). Curriculum leadership in a conservative era. *Educational Administration Quarterly 48*(2), 304-346.

APPENDIX – Suggested Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. How would you describe this program's unified curriculum (UC) to teachers who were unfamiliar to working within it?

2. Please describe your time on this program so far.

3. (What do you feel you have learned in your time on this program?)

4. What aspects of working in the UC do you value/find beneficial? (Why?)

5. What aspects of working in the UC do you find a challenge/a drawback (if any)?

6. (What steps have you taken to deal with these challenges/drawbacks?)

7. How does working in the UC compare to your previous teaching contexts?

8. What do you think is important for new teachers coming into this context to know?

9. Overall, do you find working in the UC a positive or negative experience?

10. (If you could change anything, what might that be?)