THE ROLE OF CURRICULUM DESIGN AND TEACHING MATERIALS IN PRONUNCIATION LEARNING

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Abstract
This paper aims to provide insights into the role of curriculum design and teaching materials in the development of English pronunciation skills in EFL contexts. One of the main contextual factors negatively affecting the development of pronunciation abilities of EFL learners relates to the 'often-unchanging' curriculum design and the 'blind' choice of teaching materials without regard to students' needs and goals. This study utilises structured interviews and focus group discussions (*N=2* sessions) to elicit the views of a group (*N=71*) of third- and fourth-year English-major students at a university college in Saudi Arabia on the appropriateness of the curriculum design and teaching materials to their learning expectations in the area of English pronunciation. The results show that the great majority of students spoke unfavourably about the overall curriculum and teaching materials and considered those to be among the obstacles that they encounter in their learning of English pronunciation. This finding raises the question of curriculum design of English language teaching programs and the extent to which these curricula meet the needs of learners. The study suggests that a reformation of the structure of the curriculum in the study context is urgently needed and that more involvement of students' perspectives on the design of curricula is of major importance.

Key words: pronunciation learning, curriculum design, pronunciation teaching

1. Introduction

The development of second language (L2) pronunciation is one of the most important linchpins of successful communication. The mastery of other language skills, although similarly important, does not usually lead to successful mutual interaction with other interlocutors without mastering pronunciation. This is so because, as argued by many scholars (e.g., Derwing & Munro, 2015; Levis, 2005; Setter & Jenkins, 2005), the inability to produce intelligible pronunciation of words and utterances can lead to both misunderstanding and frustration on the part of listeners. Therefore, pronunciation is regarded as complementary to other language skills that determine the overall proficiency of speakers which ultimately affect successful communication. These scholarly attitudes towards the significance of pronunciation have also been widely supported by both learner and teacher views. Derwing (2003), for example, reports the attitudes of 100 ESL learners towards their pronunciation problems, and notes that nearly all participants (97%) considered pronunciation to be a pillar of successful communication. Similar positive learner perspectives were also reported by other studies in various contexts such as

Breitkreutz, Derwing and Rossiter (2001) in Canada and Waniek-Klimczak (2011) in Poland, to mention just a few. In regard to teacher views on the importance of pronunciation, many studies have also reported positive attitudes. Baker (2011), for example, found that all five teacher participants in her study considered pronunciation to be integral in their classes. Positive views of teachers were also reported by Sifakis and Sougari (2005) in Greece.

Despite this unanimous consensus among scholars, teachers, and learners on the significance of L2 pronunciation in language classrooms, their views tend not to reflect their practices in class. Thus, we often find reluctance among teachers to teach pronunciation (see, for example, MacDonald, 2002). We also find learners providing negative attitudes towards and dissatisfaction with the teaching of English pronunciation (see Alghazo, 2015). Therefore, it is tempting to trace this issue and to understand reasons of this apparent conflict between practitioners' views and practices. In regard to teachers, several studies have explored reasons of teacher reluctance to approach pronunciation and found that this reluctance can be attributed to many factors such as a commonly-held scepticism about the teachability of pronunciation (Barrera-Pardo, 2004), lack of training in this area (Foote, Holtby & Derwing, 2011), or absence of pronunciation in teaching curricula and materials (MacDonald, 2002). However, reasons of students' dissatisfaction with pronunciation teaching have not yet been widely explored. To this end, this study aims to explore students' views on the role of curriculum design and teaching materials in the development of their English pronunciation in order to provide ground for educators and curriculum designers to consult in their treatment of pronunciation within the overall language curriculum.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Role of Curriculum Design in Language Learning

Richards (2001, p. 2) defines 'curriculum design' as the process of deciding on *what* students learn in a program in terms of "knowledge, skills, and values" as well as *how* this learning should take place in terms of planning, measuring and evaluating. This procedural description of curriculum design is reminiscent of Nation and Macalister's (2010) metaphor of seeing it as a "writing activity" (p. 1) in which many steps are taken to fulfil this task. Successful learning, thus, partially relies on how the curriculum of the instructional program is designed to meet the learning objectives.

The process of curriculum design then goes through a number of steps in order to make learning productive. Nation and Macalister (2010) put forward a comprehensive set of factors that should be taken into account when designing a language curriculum. They group these factors into three major areas: environment analysis; needs analysis; and principles (or research application). Each of these is achieved through a number of sub-processes. First, environment analysis refers to studying various factors affecting the situation or setting of the learning process. Secondly, needs analysis involves the investigation of students' expectations, objectives, and needs from the language program. Finally, research findings in the area of language instruction represent the principles that

underpin the process of curriculum design. It is obvious now that productive language learning is achieved when such factors are accounted for in language programs.

Of significance to this study is the second area involved in the process of curriculum design: needs analysis. Richards (2001) defines *needs analysis* as "Procedures used to collect information about learners' needs" (p. 51). Thus, as argued by Wharton and Race (1999), it is important to find out learners' reasons for learning as well as their future plans and aims of learning in order to reach better curriculum design. Basturkmen (2013) makes a distinction between *target situation analysis* which refers to "what learners need to know or be able to do in the target language in order for them to function effectively in their chosen profession, work, or study area" (p. 1) and *present situation analysis* which refers to learners' current abilities to achieve their goals. Curriculum designers should consider both types of needs analysis in order to achieve better outcomes. This raises the questions of whether a needs analysis is actually conducted when designing curricula and if it is done, how often is a needs analysis conducted in language programs? This paper aims to shed light on this issue within its context and provide a first step into exploring Saudi EFL students' views on the language curriculum in their BA program.

2.2 The Role of Teaching Materials in Language Learning

Teaching materials refer to a wide array of instructional resources that are used in language classrooms such as textbooks, software, computers, projects, visual aids, and homework sheets. Tomlinson (2012, p. 143) speaks of five features of teaching materials arguing that effective materials should encompass all five characteristics in order to act properly as the guide for both teachers and learners. He notes that materials can be informative (informing the learner about the target language), instructional (guiding the learner in practising the language), experiential (providing the learner with experience of the language in use), eliciting (encouraging the learner to use the language) and exploratory (helping the learner to make discoveries about the language).

In most contexts, however, the main teaching material is the textbook, particularly in those contexts where the target language is not the mother tongue of teachers. In such situations, the textbook plays a paramount role and represents the framework within which both teachers and learners proceed in language classrooms (Ur, 1999). The textbook is regarded as an essential mainstay in the teaching and learning process, one that is as effective as teachers themselves. As Akbari (2008, p. 646) puts it, textbooks provide teachers with "a working plan" that outlines the most appropriate approaches to teaching and learning various tasks. For learners, textbooks represent a primary source of input and contact with the language, particularly in EFL contexts where the target language is not heard outside the confines of the classroom (Richards, 2001).

2.3 Curriculum Design and Teaching Materials in Pronunciation Learning

The term 'curriculum' here refers to the overall study plan and sequence of subjects offered in a particular program. In relation to language programs, the curriculum includes subjects offered on different areas of language and the distribution of those subjects over

linguistic branches. Language programs in many contexts are designed to address a whole range of areas relating to the language in question. Thus, we find courses offered in literature, translation, and language within the same program. Within the language strand, we also find variation among programs in the distribution of subjects over various linguistic areas such as grammar, writing, reading, vocabulary, semantics, and pronunciation. This variation stems, in the main, from practitioners' heavy reliance on intuition in their decisions regarding the curriculum design of language programs.

The role curricula play in the development of language proficiency is undoubtedly crucial. They determine the amount of attention and focus given to each language area in a program. In the specific area of pronunciation, the curriculum reflects the extent to which the skill is integrated into other language classes – by considering the number of subjects devoted to pronunciation – and the extent to which the area is addressed in accordance with the advancements of theories and research findings – by looking at the aspects covered. As Derwing and Munro (2005) convincingly argue, it is essential that curricula of language programs "be grounded in research findings" (p. 391) and that critical evaluation of such curricula on the basis of research developments be frequently required in order to improve the level of instruction and ultimately gain better outcomes.

In literature on pronunciation, we find manifold arguments against the way pronunciation is treated in curricula of language programs. Most studies show a lack of attention to pronunciation within language curricula. MacDonald (2002), for example, found that pronunciation did not have a position within the overall curricula examined in his study, a result that was interpreted to have contributed to teachers' lack of training and avoidance of teaching pronunciation. Similar findings were also reported in other contexts such as Breitkreutz, Derwing, and Rossiter (2001) in Canada and Nair, Krishnasamy and de Mello (2006) in Malaysia. In the context of the present study, Alghazo (2015) elsewhere shows that the language curriculum did not give pronunciation the attention it deserves as a primal indicator of language proficiency.

In relation to the role of teaching materials in pronunciation instruction, research has shown that there are relatively few textbooks devoted to pronunciation as compared to other language areas such as grammar and writing (Derwing, 2008). What seems to complicate the matter further is the fact that many of those exiting textbooks address phonetics and phonology without regard to the pedagogical part that teachers of pronunciation adhere to (an exception is Celce-Murcia, Brinton, Goodwin, & Griner, 2010 which is devoted to pronunciation teaching and forms a significant resource for language teachers worldwide). Additionally, Derwing and Munro (2015) assert that most existing teaching materials are, for the most part, based on materials developers' intuition which is in opposition to scholars' assertions that teaching materials, particularly textbooks, should conform to the results of current research in order to be effective for pronunciation learners. For example, most available pronunciation textbooks still view segments as the primary area that needs more focus than suprasegments and, therefore, place more attention to exploring phonemic descriptions of sounds in an attempt to account for the difficulties L2 learners may have in the production and perception of isolated sounds (see, for example, Tergujeff, 2010). However, the teaching of suprasegmentals was found by recent research to be more important for successful communication (Derwing, 2008; Field, 2005; Hahn, 2004). Consequently, materials writers have to incorporate suprasegments in their discussions of pronunciation features.

3. The Study

This study aims to look at the role of both curriculum design and teaching materials in the development of L2 pronunciation from the perspective of learners. It will consider the place of pronunciation in the overall curriculum of the language program, and will shed light on existing teaching materials available for the teaching of pronunciation to examine the extent to which those resources address pronunciation appropriately. To this end, the study seeks to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What are Saudi EFL university students' perspectives on the role of curriculum design in their learning of L2 pronunciation?
2. How do students perceive the efficacy of existing teaching materials in accounting for their improvement in pronunciation?
3. What are students' suggestions in relation to the curriculum design and teaching resources?

3.1. Participants

A group of 71 EFL university students took part in this study. They were all enrolled in a four-year BA language program at a university college in Saudi Arabia. They were all males because the setting is a male-only institution. All were aged between 21-25 years. Almost 83% of the participants were in the fourth year (i.e., expecting graduation) of their degree while the rest were in the third year (see Table 1). The reason this level of students was chosen is because they would be more knowledgeable about the curriculum given that they have completed most subjects and are more able to 'gauge' (or at least give a wise view on) the curriculum and materials they studied during their four years of study. The proficiency levels of students in English were elicited through a self-evaluating scale ranging from 1 to 5 where 1 refers to *very good*, 3 to *average*, and 5 to *poor* (see Table 2). The mean for students' proficiency level was 2.39% which shows that they are just under the intermediate level of proficiency.

Year of Study	No. of Students (%)	Age
3rd Year	12 (16.9%)	21-25
4th Year	59 (83.1%)	21-25

Table 1. Demographic information about participants

How would you rate your own English pronunciation ability?					
1 (very good)	2 (good)	3 (average)	4 (fair)	5 (poor)	Mean
7 (9.86%)	38 (53.5%)	18 (25.35%)	7 (9.86%)	1 (1.4%)	2.39%

Table 2. Self-evaluation of students' proficiency levels

3.2 Instruments

Two primary methods of data collection were used in this study: structured interviews and focus group discussions. The structured interview was in two parts: the first aimed to collect demographic information about the participants, their backgrounds, and their language proficiency levels; the second part was intended to preliminarily survey their views on the curriculum and teaching materials used in their program. Focus group discussions were conducted in class and run by the researcher to allow students to elaborate on their written responses to the structured interview questions, particularly to elicit their suggestions for improvement. The students were put into two sessions and key points resulting from the discussions were written and transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. The structured interview questions and the group discussions were in Arabic – the first language of participants – to allow for more freedom and confidence in presenting students' views. The transcripts were later translated into English by the researcher for analysis. Documents related to the curriculum were obtained by the researcher from the department of English at the study context.

3.3. Procedure

The researcher discussed with the students the possibility of taking part in a study to explore their views on the role of the curriculum and teaching materials in improving their pronunciation abilities in the L2. 71 students in the pronunciation classes offered in the first semester of the academic year 2014/2015 agreed to participate in this study. The researcher, who was also a lecturer of English at the time of data collection at the setting, assured his students that their participation will not affect their achievements in the subjects and that they can leave the study at any time without notice. The structured interviews were distributed in class by the researcher and students were given the time to respond. A focus group discussion was held afterwards with the students in each group. The discussion in each session lasted for 15 minutes and was conducted in Arabic, as noted earlier. Notes from the discussion were written by the researcher that reflected students' views and possible suggestions for improvement.

4. Results

The first research question asked *what are Saudi EFL university students' perspectives on the role of curriculum design in their learning of L2 pronunciation?* Exploring students' perspectives on this issue involved their views on several aspects of the curriculum. These included their general degree of satisfaction with the areas covered in the curriculum as well as with the distribution of subjects over those areas. Results obtained from the structured interviews showed that almost 80% of students agreed that the curriculum as a whole does not meet their expectations, 16% thought that it is in line with their needs, and 4% were neutral; and that 85% spoke in favour of restructuring the curriculum accordingly. In regard to the status of pronunciation within

the curriculum, students maligned the curriculum given that there is only one pronunciation subject in the whole curriculum, with all but two students agreeing that the curriculum does not pay enough attention to pronunciation (see Table 3).

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
The curriculum (to some extent) meets my expectations	16%*	4%	80%
I think the curriculum needs to be restructured	85%	3%	12%
The curriculum pays enough attention to pronunciation	3%	0%	97%

* Percentages above are rounded.

Table 3. Students' views on the curriculum as a whole

Prior to presenting students' written responses to the open-ended question asking about their reasons for their answers, it is noteworthy explicating the structure of the BA program at the study context. Results obtained from analysing documents related to the study plan show that the program is divided into eight levels. The first four levels are designed to 'develop' students' linguistic skills, with each level having a subject in reading, writing, speaking and listening, and grammar in addition to some general subjects in religion and social sciences. The other four levels are designed to provide students with theoretical knowledge of linguistic branches, literature, and translation in addition to more advanced general subjects in religion and social sciences. As for the timing of lecturers, each subject is given three hours per week (the first two hours for theory and the last one for practice). Given the lack of classrooms and facilities in the institution, students are sometimes required to study late in the evening – after 9 p.m. – for most days.

As we can notice, students spend two years of their degree studying subjects in skills of reading, writing, language structure, and speaking and listening. While undoubtedly there is value in developing linguistic and communicative skills such as these, it may be more important to give extra attention to other linguistic branches than spending half the program on those areas. This was also the view of most students in the structured interviews which reflected their experiences studying in accordance with this structure. One student expressed his view as follows:

(1) As for the skills subjects, we have studied reading, writing, grammar, and listening for the first two years, but we have not had enough time to study other subjects such as phonetics and pronunciation.

It is obvious that this student disagrees with dividing the curriculum into levels with the first four being concerned with skills subjects because they would not have the time to learn about other areas.

Another student opposed the issue of including general subjects into the language curriculum. He said:

(2) The curriculum includes too many general subjects such as Arabic 1 & 2, subjects in religion and social sciences. But when it comes to subjects in language, we barely find one subject on each area.

A third student criticised the current structure of having the first four levels exclusively for skills and spoke of distributing the subjects over the eight levels evenly. He commented:

(3) The curriculum is supposed to have a pronunciation subject in each of the first four levels similar to reading, writing and grammar. It should be four levels only with each level having one subject in all language areas.

In relation to the main question about the appropriateness of the curriculum in developing their pronunciation in English, students showed great dissatisfaction given that there is only one subject on pronunciation that students take in the sixth level. Most participants considered this to be unfair and a main cause for their weaknesses in speaking the language in communicative situations. This is borne out in some of their comments as follows:

(4) A main reason for my weakness in speaking English is the low attention given to pronunciation.

(5) There exist repetitions in some subjects such as reading 1 & 2; we do not have much new information in the second reading subject. Why do not we have a pronunciation subject instead of reading 2? And this way we develop our speaking and accent.

(6) I do not understand why we need to study literature in a language program. We have eight subjects on literature as compared to one subject on pronunciation. This is unfair.

(7) I think that most graduates fail the 'Qiyas' exam because they are weak in areas such as pronunciation.

The comments above provided a clear view on the inappropriateness of the curriculum in developing students' pronunciation and fluency in English because of the low number of subjects offered in this area. Students provided their perspectives on the current situation and hoped to improve it in the future. They showed a high level of seriousness and tact in presenting the curriculum weaknesses, in their views, and possible solutions to overcome the shortcomings such as replacing some of the skills subjects by pronunciation subjects, or offering a pronunciation course in each of the levels of study. Students went further in considering the low attention given to pronunciation in the curriculum to be a major cause for their weaknesses and failure in national exams for teachers such as 'Qiyas' (Qiyas exam is a national exam in Saudi Arabia that is designed to measure the linguistic abilities of graduates).

The second research question asked *how do students perceive the efficacy of existing teaching materials in accounting for their improvement in pronunciation?* In their responses to this question in the structured interview, students showed a high level of understanding as for the choice of teaching materials in the pronunciation subject. In the whole, they criticised the institutional policy of giving teachers an absolute right to choose the material regardless of whether or not the chosen material reflects the teaching policy, approach, and students' expectations. They raised the issue of English standard accents and models, a point that reflects their realisation of the existence of such varieties of English and the role of English as an international language (for a discussion of

appropriate models of English pronunciation in language programs, the reader is referred to Murphy, 2014). They spoke in favour of choosing materials that are consistent with the 'standard' accent that they are learning. One student, for example, commented:

(8) There should be a national strategy in determining teaching materials that takes into account the accent that we want to learn.

The student speaks of having an agreed-upon 'strategy' all over the country to decide on the appropriate teaching materials and textbooks to be used at the university level.

Another spoke of his awareness that students in previous semesters followed a textbook that discusses American pronunciation while the textbook they were following at the time of the study was on British pronunciation. He said:

(9) The teachers choose textbooks in a random way. I have colleagues who studied this subject last year and they followed a different textbook to the one we are following here. Theirs was on American phonology.

A third student supported the notion of introducing institutionally-prepared teaching materials written by a committee of experienced teachers and not following resources written for different types and levels of students in different parts of the world. He noted:

(10) I find the language of the textbook difficult to understand and I suggest that teachers write materials in an easy language that suits our level. Some excellent teachers can write a 'simplified' textbook on pronunciation.

Two other students raised the issue of the need for other teaching materials and aids such as computer labs, headsets, and other technological tools that can be used in accompany with a textbook. They said:

(11) As it is a subject on pronunciation, we need to listen to 'perfect' pronunciation from native speakers. Therefore, I suggest having computer labs to help us listen to the appropriate way of pronouncing words.

(12) The textbook is not enough in accounting for developing our pronunciation. We only listen to our teachers' production of sounds and words and we cannot be sure if this is the 'right' pronunciation.

The comments by most students were supportive to the existence of one textbook that focuses on one accent of English, an accent that is widely followed throughout the whole country. Students also showed a preference towards having other teaching materials to assist in the development of their pronunciation. Such views and responses are indicative of a good level of understanding of the various issues related to the learning of L2 pronunciation. Students' responses reflected their probably 'bad' experiences learning pronunciation and their willingness and eagerness to improve the situation by providing suggestions which seems, for the most part, realistic and achievable. Students' voices are important variables that should be considered fully in designing language programs, curricula, and teaching materials.

The last research question asked *what are students' suggestions in relation to the curriculum design and teaching resources?* Answers to this question were obtained mainly from the focus group discussions held with the students in two sessions, as noted earlier. The students were asked to speak openly and freely about their expectations and suggestions for improvement in the curriculum and teaching materials with a focus on the pronunciation subject. Three main issues were prevalent in the two sessions: reformation of the curriculum structure, changes to lectures' times, and the call for materials development committees.

4.1 Reformation of the curriculum structure

Students' concerns regarding the curriculum structure, as presented above, were, in the main, related to having a maximum of four levels instead of eight; this, in their view, would more likely result in reducing the amount of tuition given to teaching and learning linguistic skills. As noted above, the existing structure places more attention on reading, writing, grammar, and listening and speaking as compared to other linguistic areas such as phonology and pronunciation. Students' suggestions, in this regard, were in favour of reducing the number of subjects on language skills and increasing the subjects on other areas such as semantics and phonology. This was apparent in students' words as follows:

(13) I suggest minimising the number of subjects on reading and writing because they are redundant in the sense that they give very similar information.

(14) I suggest deleting or at least reducing the number of subjects on literature and novels because, frankly speaking, there is no use of having these in the language curriculum.

(15) I feel that in order to deal with our weakness in speaking English appropriately, there should be more pronunciation subjects in the curriculum.

(16) We come from schools with very minimum knowledge on phonology, semantics, and syntax. We come to university and we find one subject on pronunciation, for example. What can we learn in one subject about phonology? This is not enough and there should be more subjects.

(17) I see that a solution to this issue is for the university to offer additional training courses in areas such as pronunciation that students can take in their free time because one subject is not enough.

As we can see, students' voices were critical of the current structure of the curriculum in that they see a value of having more subjects on pronunciation as compared to 'the useless repetition' of subjects on reading, writing, and grammar. Other students did not see value in learning about literature and novels, and thus suggested replacing these by language subjects. The last comment above focuses on an important issue which is related to the role of school education in the preparation of students for the upper levels at university. The student spoke of his experience at school where there was, if any, very little attention to linguistic areas such as phonology. This is a point that is worth discussing in further research.

4.2 Changes to lectures' times

Some students raised the issue of the timing of lectures and were, for the most part, supportive of studying in the morning rather than later in the evening. As noted above, some lectures were held at 9 p.m. in the night and this time, in the view of most students, is not suitable for comprehension and concentration. Some of their comments were as follows:

(18) First, I suggest paying attention to the timing of lectures for subjects that need more concentration such as phonology. We study after 'Isha' [this is the time of the last prayer during the day and is usually after 9 p.m.] and this is not suitable.

(19) 'Scientific' subjects [the student means subjects of theoretical linguistics such as semantics and phonology] should be studied in the morning because our concentration is high.

This is a point that is worth discussing with curriculum designers in the study context. The students' concerns are understandable and realistic in terms of the pressure placed on them attending lectures from early morning until late in the evening. This leads students to lose control and their comprehension abilities would decrease with time.

4.3 Calling for materials developers

In relation to the students' concerns about the instructional materials available for the teaching of L2 pronunciation, students showed opposition to the 'random' selection of textbooks as well as to the scarcity of additional teaching aids. Their suggestions in this regard were that a call for materials developing committee be urgently needed and the incorporation of other instructional aids be of high relevance. Those suggestions were uttered by most students as follows:

(20) I suggest that the university should establish a strategy for developing materials to be used in the teaching of pronunciation. There should be a group of teachers who can work on this.

(21) Sometimes, we are not able to understand an aspect of phonology when we read it from the textbook and we need a simplified version written by our teachers so that we can understand it. Textbooks should be suitable to students' levels.

(22) There should be only one textbook that teachers follow in their teaching. Suppose I failed the subject in one semester following a particular textbook and I had to repeat the subject following a totally different textbook, sometimes on a different accent, it will be hard for me.

The above comments by students clearly show the need to change the policy that gives the teacher the right to choose their own textbooks and call for more understanding of the variables that should be taken into account when choosing materials. Of these, as uttered by students, is the need to adapt one accent and choose textbooks that address the accent comprehensively; and another is the need to probably write additional resources that 'simplify' the content of available textbooks.

Students also suggested that additional instructional tools may contribute to the development of the teaching process if used appropriately alongside the textbook. They commented:

(23) I suggest that teachers can use extra teaching aids such as technological tools that help to develop our listening and pronunciation.

(24) It is preferred to have language labs, headsets and computers to get students to practise listening to native speakers.

It should be noted that this university lacks any technological tools or language labs that students can use to train on pronunciation. The only existing additional tool is a cassette recorder with some samples of native speaker talk that students can listen to. This is an issue that should be raised and taken into account for curriculum developers in this and other similar contexts.

5. Discussion

The principal aim of this study was to explore the role of curriculum design and choice of teaching materials in developing EFL learners' pronunciation at a university setting in Saudi Arabia. Various variables play a role in the learning and teaching of L2 pronunciation in EFL and ESL contexts. Some are related to the teaching process such as teachers' expertise and training in this area, instructional tools and strategies, and teaching approaches. Other variables are related to the learning process such as individual differences of learners, their linguistic and educational backgrounds, their expectations, their use of language learning strategies, and above all their motivation to learn, to mention just a few. Contextual factors such as institutional constraints and policies also play a great role in this regard. Institutional variables include the curriculum structure and design, the choice of teaching materials, the timing of lectures and the availability of instructional aids and facilities that teachers can make use of in their teaching. This study, as noted above, is concerned with the last type of variables (i.e., institutional variables) that affect the teaching and learning of L2 pronunciation in an EFL setting.

Three major themes can be inferred from the results presented in the previous section and these shall be discussed here. The first relates to the impact of curriculum design on EFL learners' improvement in L2 pronunciation. As noted earlier, L2 pronunciation is an area that is often given very minimal attention in language curricula. Breitkreutz, Derwing, and Rossiter (2001), for example, concluded that there was an urgent need to reconsider the status of pronunciation in curricula of language programs in Canada. A similar urgency was called for in Australia by MacDonald (2002). Similarly, in this study, learners voice the need to rethink the state of pronunciation in the overall curriculum of their language program. They provided concerns about the structure of the curriculum, the distribution of subjects that cover linguistic branches, and the timing of lecturers, as noted above. They considered the curriculum design (in its present form) to be a great obstacle that hinders their development of L2 pronunciation, a cogent view that is supported by Derwing (2010) who argues that appropriate curriculum designs represent one of the features of effective pronunciation teaching and learning. Breitkreutz, Derwing, and Rossiter's (2001) call was

fully considered by curriculum designers in Canada and this was evident in the follow-up study by Foote, Holtby, and Derwing (2011) who confessed that the number of pronunciation subjects has increased in the curricula of language programs since the earlier study in 2001. This study hopes to attract similar attention and stimulate educators and curriculum designers in Saudi Arabia to revise current curricula of language programs in the light of such findings.

The choice of teaching materials is another issue that was highlighted in the results of this study. In many contexts, as pointed out above, teaching materials refer to the textbook as the only source of information and guide for teaching. Undoubtedly, the textbook represents a valuable keystone for many teachers in different language programs. Textbooks, as McGrath (2013) notes, support both teachers and learners in language courses in various ways. However, teaching materials – as part of the process of curriculum design (see Richards, 2001) – should be developed carefully by materials writers to achieve the goals mentioned earlier; that is, the benefit of learners has to be the central objective of producing materials. As Cunningsworth (1995, p. 7) puts it, teaching materials should be "seen as a resource in achieving aims and objectives that have already been set in terms of *learner needs*" (emphasis S. A.). But as Tomlinson (2008) argues, current teaching materials are designed to meet the needs of *teachers* and *administrators* without regards to considering *learners'* wishes and expectations to design materials that benefit them accordingly. Similarly, teaching materials should be chosen by language teachers with diligent care catering for the wide array of variables that are in play such as learners' backgrounds, linguistic abilities, level of communicative proficiency, and above all learners' needs and wishes.

Learners in this study voiced concerns about the 'random' choice of textbooks by different teachers and maligned the institutional policy of giving rights to teachers to decide on this. They also called for introducing locally-designed teaching materials that suit their proficiency levels and abilities (for a fine discussion of the pros and cons of teacher-designed materials, see Block, 1991). Learners' concerns and calls are reminiscent of Nation and Macalister's (2010) argument that "The material in a course needs to be presented to learners in a form that will help learning" (p. 9), of Cunningsworth's (1995) warnings for teachers that using "dull and uninspiring material" (p. 1) may make learners lose interest and the learning process seem unpleasant, and of Tomlinson's (2012) observation that "In attempting to cater for all students at a particular age and level, global coursebooks often end up not meeting the needs and wants of any" (p. 158). Learners' concerns, therefore, seem to be convincing from a scholarly-driven point of view, but may be rather unwillingly taken up by teachers who generally prefer teaching materials that are internationally-designed by native speaking developers (see, for example, Zacharias, 2005). Learners in this study also call for the integration of other teaching aids such as technological tools that were found to provide invaluable assistance to teachers and learners in developing language fluency, particularly pronunciation (see, for example, AbuSeileek, 2007; Elimat & AbuSeileek, 2014; Luo, 2014; Neri, Mich, Gerosa, & Giuliani, 2008). In the light of such learner perspectives regarding the teaching materials, future efforts of educators and teachers in this study context are to be directed towards relooking at institutional policies and mandates regarding the choice of teaching materials and considering such learner views when deciding on, exploiting, or introducing teaching materials for pronunciation instruction.

Learner involvement in curriculum design is the third issue that emerged out of analysing the results of this study. Learners are regarded as the third main participant in the learning and teaching processes – the other two being the teachers and the context or institutional policies. Accordingly, as argued by many scholars, learners' concerns, needs, and expectations need to be accounted for when designing curricula for language programs (see, for example, Cunningsworth, 1995; Richards, 2001). However, despite the positive correlation between learner involvement in curricular development and improvement of learning, as found by Carini, Kuh, and Klein (2006) and by Abdelmalak (2015), we rarely find institutions that consider learners' voices and involve them in curriculum design (e.g., Jagersma & Parsons, 2011). Here the unsatisfactory views of the majority of learners on the different aspects of the curriculum – including its structure, timing of lectures, and the 'unfair' distribution of attention among subject areas – indicate that those learners have never been involved in any way in designing their curriculum. This indeed belies a wide spread consensus among scholars and researchers that in order to produce a fruitful curriculum for a language program, a comprehensive cognizance of learners' needs and beliefs should be obtained as a starting point (e.g., Cullen, Hill, & Reinhold, 2012). Learners should have the opportunity to participate in shaping and structuring the curriculum similar to teachers and curriculum designers. As Emes and Cleveland-Innes (2003) have put it, "the learner can no longer be viewed as a consumer of information … [but] as a developer of knowledge" (p. 49). Relevant to the previous argument is a crucial need to repeatedly revise curricula over the years given that learners' needs and expectations are constantly changing; this is in line with the changing views on language learning and ultimate attainments, particularly in relation to pronunciation learning where notions of learning models, aims and goals, approaches, and learning styles are prone to constant variation among scholars and learners themselves (see, for example, Derwing & Munro, 2015; Murphy, 2014).

6. Conclusion

This study has attempted to bring to light one of the marginalised issues in pronunciation instruction, that of the role of curriculum design and teaching materials. The study, through structured interviews and focus group discussions with a group of Saudi EFL students, has highlighted the need to rethink the place of pronunciation within general language program curricula. It has found that this skill – though widely argued to be highly important for learners' communication in the L2 – is not included   in the curriculum. The study has also provided insights into learners' perspectives regarding current teaching materials exploited by teachers of English pronunciation in this Saudi context and found a strong agreement among learners on the unsuitability of internationally-designed materials and textbooks. Last – but by no means least – the study has shown learners' dissatisfaction with the structure of the curriculum, in its present form, particularly in relation to the number of levels and the timing of lectures. In the light of those findings, the study sets out to call for un argent need to reconsider the curriculum of the BA program at the study context catering for students' views in this regard; thus, placing more emphasis on teaching pronunciation, producing materials that suit

students' abilities and proficiency levels, and frequently consult learners in processes of curriculum design and materials development. Through studies such as the present one, educators, teachers and curriculum designers can be apprised of learners' perspectives on aspects of language instruction in general and curriculum designs in particular

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