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**ENGLISH TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM FOR BASIC SCHOOL IN VILJANDIMAA**

MA Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum implementation does not only depend on the government and its reforms but rather on teachers' beliefs, understanding of the curriculum and their values. Therefore the aim of the present thesis is to explore English teachers' perceptions and opinions about the implementation of the National Curriculum for Basic School. Ten English teachers of Viljandimaa were interviewed in order to explore their aims of teaching, ways of achieving the learning outcomes, their teaching methods and curriculum approach. In addition, aspects supporting curriculum implementation and aspects impeding curriculum implementation were studied from the teachers' perspective.

The first chapter gives a theoretical overview of the classification of curriculum, teachers' approaches to curriculum, and pedagogical approaches. Besides, the issues of curriculum implementation and factors to impede and support curriculum implementation are analysed.

The second chapter introduces the methodology of the empirical study as well as presents its results followed by a discussion.

The conclusion summarises the main findings of the thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

The present master's thesis comes from practical need. We have the National Curriculum for Basic School and by the end of the basic school all the students should achieve the English language outcomes. However, many students do not achieve them for some reason. According to the claims of upper secondary school teachers, students have not acquired the minimum programme for basic schools. An analysis of the year 9 final examination shows that in 2013 in Viljandimaa the average exam result was low (62.4 points) and the standard deviation the highest in Estonia (10.05) which indicates a big difference between the highest and the lowest results (Kriisa 2013: 3). In addition, the reality is that the year 9 final exam is mostly taken by the students who feel confident in English. The result would be much lower if all the students had to take the final exam in English, nevertheless all the students must achieve the outcomes of the National Curriculum for Basic School.

According to Orafi (2013: 14-16) curriculum implementation is a very complex process. Teachers are not just implementers of policies but they modify, interpret and implement the curriculum according to their beliefs. A number of researchers have identified factors which have an impact on the implementation of curriculum and curriculum innovations. Teachers' beliefs, socio-cultural context, teacher training and the examination system have a profound influence on curriculum implementation. Kausar et al (2013: 154) add lack of authority and liberty in the classroom. Teachers want to follow the course book precisely; however, they feel that they do not have enough time to work out their methodology and teachers do not have enough liberty to work as they want in the classes. Park et al (2013: 14-31) explain that there are not enough professional trainings that support curriculum implementation. In addition, teachers need more time to work

through implementation difficulties with peer teachers and there are a lot of administrative duties which makes it difficult for teachers do to curricular work. (Park et al 2013: 14-31)

The aim of the thesis is to explore the perceptions and opinions of English teachers about the implementation of the National Curriculum for Basic School. The research questions posed in this thesis are as follows: What supports English teachers to implement the national curriculum, according to their opinion? What impedes English teachers to implement the national curriculum, according to their opinion? How do English teachers implement it in their practice?

The present thesis has two main chapters. In the first chapter the author gives a theoretical overview of the different classifications of curriculum and the ways in which teachers approach curriculum, in terms of being curriculum-developers, curriculum-makers and curriculum-transmitters. In the first chapter there is also included a discussion of pedagogical approaches, an overview of curriculum implementation and the main factors that impede to implement curriculum and factors that support to implement the curriculum. Finally, there is a section devoted to curriculum implementation in Estonia and it is focused specifically on the results of a study conducted among Estonian teachers of English. The second chapter presents the findings of an empirical study based on the data collected by qualitative semi-structured interviews with 10 English teachers in Viljandimaa.

1. THEORETICAL PART: CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION AND FACTORS THAT SUPPORT AND IMPEDE IT

1.1 Classification of Curriculum

As the term “curriculum” has a very important part in the present thesis, it is necessary to define the term and concentrate on its classifications.

The curriculum is a term used for a long time, ever since the 16th and 17th centuries (Chis 2011: 3-15). Engdahl (2004: 4) says that curriculum sets out the fundamental values, goals and guidelines for the activities. The curriculum does not prescribe how the goals are to be attained. The actual education and the methodological questions are decided at the level of individual schools, by the teachers and head teachers in co-operation with children and parents. (Engdahl 2004: 4) Chis adds that curriculum represents a class, a category of educational components very varied and structured according to many criteria, thus, the curriculum is a very vast conceptual network. Chis describes a model of tridimensional analysis of the curriculum:

- intentional dimension, program or study plan;
- applicative dimension, action, implementation of the curriculum;
- experiential dimension, going through, learning.

Most of the contemporary studies stop at two of these dimensions above: a) indicated curriculum, proposed curriculum and b) completed curriculum, accomplished curriculum. The indicated or proposed curriculum is a completed document, outlined and ready to use. National curriculum, local or regional curriculum, frameworks, syllabi etc. are documents that unite the indicated curriculum. The experts indicate a curriculum but the teachers decide what to implement in reality. In addition, he categorizes curriculum as follows: 1) Core curriculum that covers the learning experiences that all the students are expected to

acquire in a certain period. Usually, the core curriculum is established by the national authorities in education. 2) Local or regional curriculum is composed of learning contents and experiences specific to the community (social and economic environment) where the school is located. The learning experiences in curriculum facilitate for the students the knowledge of the existing places, values, traditions, practices in the community and thus the integration as well as belonging to the community. 3) Individual curriculum is a personalized curriculum based on student's educational needs and possibilities. (Chis 2011: 3- 15) According to the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act (2010, §17) school curriculum is the fundamental document in schools and it is based on the national curriculum. Therefore, in the present thesis, the term "curriculum" is meant as core curriculum, the national curriculum in Estonia.

Segovia et al (2009: 154) say that curriculum in education includes all the relevant decision-making processes of all the participants. The curriculum is coherent if the decisions made in various stages are consistent and adoptable. Decision making process involves three constraints: policy, pragmatic considerations and participants and their interaction. The level of policy consists of decisions involving curriculum planning, objectives and the means to accomplish them, program implementation, teacher training, materials development, and classroom implementation. Pragmatic constraint encompasses time and resource, to reconcile policy and pragmatics is the task of participants. (Segovia et al 2009: 154)

1.2 Different Approaches to Curriculum

The following subchapter provides a brief discussion of the history of Estonian National curriculum and teachers' approaches to curriculum as the latter affects the implementation of curriculum in various ways.

Erss (n.d, 1-6) has analysed the development of Estonian National Curriculum. During the Soviet time curricula had been strongly centralized in Estonia. Although the curriculum reform in 1996 was a very big change for Estonian teachers, some said that it happened only on paper first but there were not any changes in real life. Teachers had been used to prescribed curricular content and in 1996 they had to take the responsibility for making independent decisions. According to the curriculum of 1996, teachers can choose their assessment and instruction form and criteria, methods and integration of subjects. In 2011 an opportunity to choose materials and projects was added, some schools included the evaluation system, form of study, and elective courses since 2002. “Creative work” was introduced in 2011 to the curriculum for basic school and the word “may” appears 31 times in the basic school curriculum which indicates a freedom to choose materials, methods, and assessment. (Erss n.d, 1-6)

“Language curriculum differs from other subject curriculums because learning a language requires integration and fluent application between the explicit learning of vocabulary and language rules.” (Abdullah et al 2014: 151-152). Oder (2014: 483) agrees that language learning does not only depend on good teaching. Language teaching needs to be adapted to students’ individual and collective needs. It depends on understanding different learning styles, motivations, backgrounds and purposes of learning (Oder, 2014: 483). The language learners need to master both grammatical knowledge and fluency. It is possible to acquire knowledge of grammar in formal classroom but it is not always possible for fluency. It is often difficult to find enough time and space in the classroom for every student to develop fluency especially with a few hours of lessons per week. Besides, most language teaching is still based on drills and grammar exercises and speaking and fluency are not developed so much. (Abdullah et al 2014: 151-152)

According to Shaver (2010: 173) it is necessary to understand how teachers approach curriculum. He describes three different types of teachers and their approaches. For example, some teachers focus on content transmission, the second type of teachers adapt curriculum through undertaking curriculum adjustments and some teachers create curriculum based on their students' knowledge and experiences. Each approach that teachers use affects curriculum implementation. Some teachers prefer stability and believe that uncertainty must be avoided, while others are comfortable with unpredictability and are willing to try new approaches. Student learning and motivation are affected by teachers' curriculum approaches and their professional development. Despite using one curriculum, students' achievements are various; in addition, some teachers are motivated to develop, while others do not improve their professional skills. (Shaver 2010: 173)

According to Shaver (2010: 177-181), there are three kinds of teachers: curriculum-developers, curriculum-makers and curriculum-transmitters. Curriculum developers change curriculum, develop, supplement, adapt, plan, experiment, and design. Curriculum-makers start with a needs assessment to generate curriculum topics, then they organize and sequence. They also use curriculum-bound topics by introducing pedagogical topics around a topic in the prescribed curriculum and curriculum-free topics when adding a list of topics which is not written in the curriculum. Curriculum-transmission approach involves curriculum stabilization strategies, including static-lesson plans, single-source of the student's book, and teacher's instructions (Shaver 2010: 173-184).

On the other hand, a study conducted by Oder (2014: 482-494) divides teachers' conceptual beliefs into three groups: 1) traditional concepts 2) constructivist concepts 3) humanistic concepts of teaching. The traditional view of teaching is teacher-centred teaching which, according to this study, includes a quiet classroom, knowing grammar rules is valued, and teachers want to achieve native-speaker pronunciation. 44% of

Estonian teachers considered teacher-centred approach important. More than a third did not have (or did not want to express) an opinion about the teacher's role in decision-making, language accuracy and the importance of native-speaker pronunciation. Students' reasoning and deductive processes are important for the teachers with constructivist view and they consider themselves to be rather facilitators. They thought that making mistakes is a normal part in activity-based learning processes. (Oder 2014: 482-494)

1.3 Pedagogical Approaches

There are different pedagogical approaches that teachers choose to influence curriculum implementation. In this subchapter mostly teacher centered and student centered approach are described and their influence on curriculum implementation is analysed.

Zhang et al (2013: 189) distinguish three different perspectives through which teachers conceptualized teaching: a teacher-centred perspective, a learner-centred perspective, and a curriculum-centred perspective. The teachers conceptualized teaching through more than one of these perspectives, but one perspective often dominated a teachers' view of a successful lesson (Zhang et al 2013: 189). Mak and Chik (2011: 195-218) identify two pedagogical approaches: teacher-focused approach / information transmission and student-focused / conceptual change (Mak and Chik 2011: 195-218). Teacher-based pedagogical approach is one of the traditional approaches. Learning is derived from the teacher, in a lecture setting, imparting what is known about a subject and hopefully resulting in knowledge transfer (Shreeve et al 2008: 24-25). Mak and Chik report that teachers using a teacher-focused / information transmission approach focus on their own teaching acts and knowledge structure in delivering the content of a syllabus or textbooks. What students may experience in learning is rarely a concern in their teaching.

Rather, teachers concentrate on forward planning, classroom management, and techniques that can facilitate their transmission of knowledge or information to the students. The aim of the teachers who use a student-focused approach is to change students' ways of thinking or experiencing the subject matter and they often make use of student-focused strategies, such as questioning, and student group discussion and presentation. (Mak and Chik 2011: 195-218)

Rather a student-centred than a teacher-centred method is problem-based learning in small groups. With a problem-based approach, key issues are explored through group discussion and exploration. Learners take the initiative to diagnose the problem, identify appropriate resources, perform relevant research, and formulate explanations or appropriate courses of action. Experiential-learning theory is learner-centred rather than teacher-centred. Experiential-learning includes the view of learning as a process rather than a focus on outcomes, with an emphasis on the experience as the learning method, with knowledge being gained from experiences. (Shreeve et al 2008: 24-25)

Research conducted in China by Ouyang (2012: 247) explains the background that the traditional methods practiced in the Chinese classroom, which are based on conservative ideologies, have been found inadequate to fulfil curriculum goals. Communicative language teaching can bring learner autonomy and creativity. The education authorities have carried out a national campaign of reforming the curriculum towards a more Western-style liberal pedagogy, which advocates humanistic approach and practical learning. (Ouyang 2012: 247)

Zhang (2013:189) describes the traditional perspective and the progressive perspective which also influence curriculum implementation. Teachers with the traditional perspective stress subject matter knowledge, teacher-centred instruction, discipline, and memorization. It refers to behaviourist approaches to teaching and learning. The

progressive perspective is more student-centred, including task-based approaches that concentrate on individual students' needs, interests and self-expression. Traditional and progressive dimensions may coexist in teachers' belief systems (Zhang et al 2013: 189).

1.4 Curriculum Implementation

There are factors that support curriculum implementation and some factors that impede it. According to a study conducted in Australia, the teachers mentioned the following factors that influence curriculum implementation: special needs of students, socio-economic disadvantage of students, high proportion of indigenous students, language background of students, cultural diversity of students, rural / regional / remote school location, range of student capabilities, community expectations, aspirations of students. The reported factors that influence teachers and curriculum implementation are strongly related to their students' individual qualities. More than 80% of the teachers said that developing and assessing students' fluency in speaking, listening, reading and writing is very important. (Albright et al 2013: 111-119)

1.4.1 Factors that Impede Curriculum Implementation

This subchapter discusses the factors that teachers feel impedes their curriculum implementation. Fevre (2014: 56-64) says that one of the reasons why teachers are not willing to change their teaching is because they have to reduce their pedagogical dependence on textbooks. Teachers are afraid that if they use different materials and let students read texts from different books then the teachers are not able to follow who learned what and the learning outcomes are uncertain. The other concern was assessment-how to assess students if there are not any tests at the back of the textbook. Using a textbook is safe for teachers and the responsibility is shared, it is easy to blame the

textbook if the students have not acquired the learning outcomes. Fevre suggests that it is important to share the concerns about the process of acquiring the learning outcomes. (Fevre, 2014: 56-64)

After the curriculum reforms in China teachers were receptive to the curriculum goals, they endorsed the new approaches like student-centred classroom, and they tried to exploit the textbook creatively. However, because of the teachers' prior beliefs and lack of professional expertise and the students' inadequate English proficiency and study ability, the new approaches did not succeed in practice. The teachers' reluctance to use the new approaches partly resulted from the school not supporting the teachers enough. The dominant method in the classroom was still grammar-translation method, English was used occasionally and translation was provided to ensure students' understanding of the meaning. Teachers mainly focused on language use and grammar. Translation exercise was the main activity of language practice after detailed explanations of words, with little opportunity for students to produce their own sentences. The teacher talked to the whole class most of the time, and if any interactions occurred, they were generally between the teacher and one student. "Listening activities were more like a listening test and speaking like the teacher's monologue." In the reading lessons, before reading out loud, there was the teacher's explanation of the structure and meaning of a paragraph. (Yan, 2012: 8)

Kırkgöz (2008: 1860) explains that teachers' understanding of innovation and their background training has an important role in implementation of a curriculum innovation. Teachers do not implement the curriculum if they do not understand the theoretical principles and classroom applications of the proposed change. The latter tends to be more important, especially in contexts where teachers lack thorough understanding of innovation and / or are not trained enough. A change in teachers' beliefs and understandings is a crucial part of any educational innovation. If the philosophy of an innovation and teachers'

theories are out of balance, teachers will tend to interpret innovative ideas which means that new ideas will not be implemented, as intended by the curriculum planners. An innovation is enacted if teachers are given opportunities to learn new concepts, new ways of presenting content, and new ways of interacting with students. (Kırkgöz, 2008: 1860) Hardman and Rahman (2014: 270) claim that teachers have such challenges like managing large classes of students with mixed abilities, misunderstandings about curriculum and not enough training. (2014: 270-273) Çimer and Günay (2012: 54-58) claim that reflection is a very essential part of implementing curriculum, especially critical reflection that is reflection at a higher level. Teachers agree that reflection is needed in their work in order to better implement curriculum, however they admitted that they do not have enough time to do that, they have had inadequate training and collaboration among colleagues and they have a huge workload. (Çimer and Günay, 2012: 54-58)

1.4.2 Factors that Support Curriculum Implementation

Chacon (2005: 257-259) states that teachers' sense of efficacy has a very important influence on curriculum implementation. Students' outcomes and motivation are affected by teachers' adaptations of innovations, commitment to teaching, teachers' classroom management, control strategies and teachers' personal characteristics. In addition, those teachers who feel confident about their abilities are more likely to implement different curriculum innovations in the classroom. (Chacon, 2005: 257-259) Hardman and Rahman (2014: 261) say that if the teachers are not supported enough or they are not provided with efficient resources then the implementation of curriculum fails. (Hardman and Rahman, 2014: 261)

Using curriculum materials is one factor that supports curriculum implementation. According to Lee (2007: 352-353) using textbooks as a basis does not have only negative

influence on curriculum implementation. Lee reports that textbook follows the curriculum well. Textbooks realize the curriculum outcomes and reflect the goals. In addition, they set frames and provide guidance for the teacher. It is said that particularly experienced teachers tend to adapt textbooks more because they are more confident in their teaching and knowledge. Studies show that there are many teachers who think that using a textbook helps them to teach efficiently, however, teachers did not use the textbook for entire lesson. Furthermore, they looked at the textbook critically and made their own decisions. (Lee, 2007: 352-353)

1.5 National Curriculum Implementation in Estonia

In this subchapter opinions and perceptions of Estonian teachers of English are analysed on the basis of previous studies. Russian as a foreign language had a special status in curricula when Estonia belonged to the Soviet Union (1940–91). Today all foreign languages are equally important in the curriculum, although most of the students study English as a foreign language in Estonian schools. A typical Estonian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lesson lasts 45 minutes. Teachers are not controlled which methodology to use or how to plan their lessons. At the national level there are no prescribed teaching materials; the choice of course book is usually made at the school level. Students are given homework, which is common practice and they also receive grades for their performance. Students are encouraged to be active participants in the lesson and their initiative is appreciated, however, disruptive behaviour is discouraged. EFL teachers are expected to be qualified professionals, who are responsible and involved leaders (Oder 2014: 482-494). Foreign language education in Estonia has undergone reforms, recently in 2011. According to the National Curriculum for Basic School there are 6 main aims that the students must achieve by the end of basic school:

1. Students have achieved the level of independent language user that gives them opportunity to communicate in everyday situations, read and understand texts in foreign language that are suitable for their age.
2. Students are interested in learning foreign languages and broaden their mind through foreign languages.
3. Students have acquired the skill to notice and value different cultures
4. Students have acquired the skill to learn foreign language and continuously complement their language skills
5. Students are interested in target countries and their cultures.
6. Students are able to use appropriately reference resources (reference books, dictionaries, Internet) in order to find necessary information also about other subjects. (Põhikooli Riiklik Õppekava, 2011)

Opinions about the curriculum

In 2012 a study was conducted by Ene Paks and Margit Kirss about the implementation of the National Curriculum. 147 English teachers in Estonia participated in the study. According to the results, 20% of the teachers do not know what they like about the new curriculum which shows that they do not have their own opinion, they had not read it or it was too soon to say something. The majority of the teachers do not want to make any changes in the new curriculum and 28% suggest changes: increase or decrease the number of courses, and more integration. 82% of the teachers think that the outcomes are achievable and 68% of these teachers explained that the curriculum is achievable if the students have average learning abilities and are motivated. 18% think that the outcomes are not achievable and 27% of these teachers say that some outcomes are not achievable. 5% do not like the new curriculum at all because it is not concrete enough. (Paks and Kirss 2012: 2-21)

Opinions about curriculum implementation

Most teachers of English in Estonia (88%) agreed that teaching rules and language structure is necessary. All respondents agreed that making mistakes is a normal part of learning. Practically all the teachers (95%) thought that various activities support acquiring English best. More than half of the teachers (67%) supported the practical approach to learning language rules and 65% considered thinking and reasoning processes more important than specific content. 60% believed that students should be given opportunities to deduce grammar rules themselves and no teachers were against an activity-based learning approach. 92% of the teachers agreed that students' learning styles differ. A third of the teachers considered it necessary to correct all the mistakes made by students, at the same time 37% did not support this idea and almost a third (28%) did not have an opinion. 65% of the teachers did not agree that every word needs to be understood while reading and 10% agreed with the statement. 15% thought that grammar is the most important element of language while 55% of the teachers thought that vocabulary is the most important. Being fluent was considered important by 59%; at the same time 12% did not agree. Integrative teaching of the four skills was generally supported by 76% and half of the teachers (52%) thought that the message is more important than its accuracy. 81% believed that integration of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar was necessary, and no teachers disagreed with this opinion. Group and pair work were highly rated by 92%, games and songs were considered important by 89% of the teachers. Singing and using role-plays were valued by 84%. The use of various multimedia in teaching English was supported by 78%. (Oder 2014: 482-494)

Useful aspects about the curriculum

Teachers consider liberty, possibility to use interesting methods, non-compulsory subjects, cooperation and flexibility important. 11% say that project based learning is

beneficial and practical and 7% mention possibility to approach individually every student and 6% consider the formative assessment positive. The teachers prioritize integration between subjects; they understand that it is important to motivate students and foster them to use English outside the classroom as well (Paks and Kirss 2012: 2-21)

Factors to impede the curriculum implementation

Teachers mentioned that the topics in the curriculum are impractical, there are no changes compared to the previous curriculum, it is confusing and more paper work needs to be done. 12% of the teachers said that they need newer materials. The teachers feel that they do not have enough materials (CDs, DVDs, course book sets, technical equipment, books, newspapers). The teachers admit that in order to implement the curriculum completely the full-time teachers should not have more than 20 contact lessons per week, they have too much paper work and they should have more time to work with students. The cooperation with psychologist and social-pedagogue is essential. Partly the new curriculum is not motivating because of new duties (creative work). (Paks and Kirss 2012: 2-21)

2. RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA ANALYSIS

In the present thesis a qualitative approach is used. According to Laherand (2008: 20), in qualitative research personal and social experience is studied through descriptions and interpretations, and it is important to understand thoroughly the views of just a few people rather than check a hypothesis on a large sample. (Laherand, 2008:16) The aim of the research is to explore the perceptions and opinions of English teachers in Viljandimaa about the implementation of the National Curriculum for Basic School. The results of the study are presented in order to analyse and discuss how teachers implement the curriculum, what impedes them and what supports them to implement the curriculum.

2.1 Research Questions, Sample, Research Ethics, Data Collection and Analysis

The research questions formulated on the basis of previous research are as follows:

- 1.** What supports English teachers to implement the National Curriculum for Basic School, according to the opinions of teachers of English in Viljandimaa?

With this research question it is aimed to find out what factors support teachers to implement the curriculum. According to Lee (2007), Hardman and Rahman (2014) and Chacon (2005) curriculum materials, resources and teachers' efficacy support curriculum implementation. Therefore, it is necessary to understand if these factors support also teachers of English in Viljandimaa to implement the curriculum.

- 2.** What impedes English teachers to implement the National Curriculum for Basic School, according to the teachers of English in Viljandimaa?

This research question serves to help to identify the impediments to implement the curriculum according to the teachers, because based on the studies by several authors there are impediments, such as a huge workload, lack of time, managing large classes of

students with mixed abilities (Çimer and Günay, 2012), administrative duties and not enough professional trainings (Park et al, 2013). It is important to know if these are the impediment to teachers of English in Viljandimaa as well.

3. How do English teachers implement it in their practice?

This research question should clarify how teachers understand the curriculum and how they implement it in their practice. Paks and Kirss (2012: 2) emphasize that their survey was conducted at an early stage of implementing the new national curriculum to address the problems that had already emerged, to prevent further problems, and they suggest that further research is needed in a few years after the full scale implementation of the curriculum.

Convenience sample was used to conduct the study. It is a sample where it is quite easy to find people under the specific circumstances (Laherand, 2008:71). The choice of the respondents was based on the availability of the teachers. The author chose 10 teachers from basic schools in Viljandimaa who could or were willing to do the interview. The interviewee could choose the interview language as well.

The 10 interviews were conducted with teachers of English regardless of their experience, age, gender etc. The teachers teach in primary and basic school. 3 teachers teach only in basic school and 7 teachers both- in primary and basic school. 9 teachers are females and 1 is a male teacher. There is 1 teacher who is between 20-30 years old, 7 teachers between 31-40, 1 teacher between 51- 60 and 1 teacher between 61-70 years old. 3 teachers are from basic schools in the country where the teachers have 1-9 students in the classroom and 7 teachers from the schools in Viljandi town where the teachers have 10-17 students in the classroom. 2 teachers teach in composite classes and 8 teachers in regular classes. 3 teachers have working experience 1-5 years, 4 teachers 10-15 years, 1 teacher 15-20 years, 1 teacher 20-25 years and 1 teacher 25-30 years. With such variation the

sample allows to capture a diversity of experiences and an analysis of the results of the study is expected to provide a valuable insight into these teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the new national curriculum.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with basic school teachers of English in Viljandimaa. Hannan et al (2007) explain that semi-structured interviews are suitable to use because of flexibility. While there are certain topics and questions, it is possible to vary them according to the teachers' responses. Laherand (2008: 177-178) agrees that the advantage of the interview is flexibility, and the interviewer can adapt the questions according to the interviewee's answers. Interview is usually chosen because the interviewee can express oneself freely and without restraints, and can create meanings. The semi-structured interviews were chosen because it was expected to have many different opinions and it was possible to specify interviewee's thoughts immediately. In addition, the author expected to have thorough data. (Laherand, 2008; 177-178)

The questions were divided into 6 sections, and the aim of the questions in the sections was to find out what supports English teachers to implement the curriculum, what impedes English teacher to implement the curriculum, and how English teachers implement it as well as how teachers approach the curriculum. The questions of the interview (see Appendix 1) were divided into the following sections:

1. Introductory question

The aim of the introductory question was to find out teachers' background, their teaching experience and qualifications, and serve as an introduction to the interview.

2. Aim of teaching, achievement of learning outcomes, and teaching methods.

The aim of the second set of questions was to find out how teachers implement the curriculum, what their opinion is about the aim of teaching English and what methods they use in order to achieve the learning outcomes.

3. Teacher curriculum approach

The aim of the third set of questions was to find out how teachers approach the curriculum, how they use curriculum materials and how they plan their work.

4. Aspects supporting curriculum implementation

The aim of the fourth set of questions was to find out the aspects that support teachers to implement the curriculum, as well as what teaching experience teachers share and what questions about the curriculum they discuss.

5. Aspects impeding curriculum implementation

The aim of the fifth set of questions was to find out the aspects that impede teachers to implement the curriculum and understand how teachers interpret the curriculum.

6. Concluding question

The aim of the last question was to sum up the interview and give the interviewee an opportunity to add something to the previous topics. After the interview the respondent filled in a short survey concerning specific statistical data (name, age, teaching experience, school, the classes that they teach, the type of the class / group and students in the group).

The individual interviews were conducted in March 2015 in schools where the interviewee works. The interview took 40-60 minutes. It was explained that the answers are used only in the present MA thesis anonymously. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed very soon after the interview and the transcription program VoiceWalker was used.

Based on Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis was used for data analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen because it is relatively easy to conduct and it is basic method in qualitative analysis. The data was analysed in 5 stages.

1) The interviews were transcribed word-by-word and the data were read several times.

- 2) The data was organized and the author applied paraphrase to each thought or passage (coding).
- 3) Based on the codes the author found themes, categories and subcategories and named them.
- 4) Reviewing themes, categories and subcategories. If some codes did not match to the categories, a new category was created or the previous ones were renamed.
- 5) Writing the report. The author provides sufficient overview that is logical, coherent and without repetitions.

In order to ensure validity the interview schedule was first piloted and the questions that did not give enough information were deleted. The data were analysed only based on the collected data. In order to ensure reliability, the interviews were transcribed word-by-word and the data were retained.

2.2 Results

In this subchapter the results of the research are described. The codes were grouped in 3 themes, 5 categories and 3-4 subcategories under each category.

1. CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION

1.1 Understanding the curriculum

1.1.1 Aim of teaching

1.1.2 Useful aspects from the curriculum for my work

1.1.3 Interpretation of the curriculum

1.2 Teaching

1.2.1 Planning

1.2.2 Using curriculum materials

1.2.3 Methods

1.2.4 Assessment

1.3 Cooperation

1.3.1 Personal ideas to share

1.3.2 Behaviour

1.3.3 Methods

1.3.4 Curriculum

2. SUPPORTIVE FACTORS TO CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION

2.1 Material and non-material support

2.1.1 Finances related support

2.1.2 Non-finances related support

3. IMPEDING FACTORS TO CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION

3.1 Material and Non-material Impediments

3.1.1 Finances

3.1.2 Workload, no time

3.1.3 Type of class

3.1.4 Personal factors

1. CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION

Understanding the curriculum

Aim of teaching. Teachers thought that there are mainly two aims in teaching English. The first aim is communication: teachers said that their students should be independent language users at the end of basic school and students must be able to communicate in different situations.

I want them to not to worry about the mistakes and to concentrate on communicating as freely as possible.

I think the main goal has to be teaching students to communicate with other people in English, that might be native speakers, that might be other Estonians who in some reason want to communicate in English or might be other people who have English as a second language /.../. Just to communicate with somebody, that's the big picture, goal, I'd say.

The second aim in teaching English was culture awareness. Teachers thought that students should know British culture and broaden their mind through culture awareness. "To give the children knowledge not just about the language but also to let them know more about the country because they mainly know about America but they actually don't know about the life in the UK."

Useful aspects for my work. Teachers admitted that there are many useful aspects for their work in the current curriculum. They mentioned that it is modern and practical, moreover they appreciate formative assessment. "Formative assessment is useful, I like it because there are some activities that are difficult to assess, and describing gives more objective feedback. It is good, in the sense that if I write the explanation or I explain the grade, then it gives future vision how the child should go on, what are the weak points and what the child should achieve."¹ Teachers said that the integration between different subjects is especially important and that in the language learning integration is very natural. "I really like the idea that the subjects should not be separated from each other. It is important the children understand why they are learning and how this knowledge that they get from one lesson from one subject can be used in some other subjects." Teachers consider important that the curriculum is competence-based. "I like this trend that we should not focus on the knowledge but we should focus on the competences. /.../. I kind of

¹ Kasulik on see, et kujundavat hindamist kasutatakse, see mulle meeldib, sellepärast, et on osa ülesandeid, mida ei saa hinnata, nii, et ma panen nüüd selle või selle hinde, et objektiivsemat tagasisidet annab just nimelt see kirjeldus. See on hea ja selles mõttes ka, et tähendab selle, kui ma kirjutan selle selgituse või hinde asemel nüüd selle mõtte lahti, siis see annab ju selle tuleviku nägemuse, mida see laps peab edasi tegema, et mis puudujäägid on ja mille poole püüelda.

a find support in these different list of competences that a teacher must also cover while teaching a subject /.../”. Teachers mentioned that teaching four skills is also something very valuable.

There were teachers who had not read the curriculum at all or they had done it a long time ago. “I’ll say honestly that I haven’t read the new curriculum. I really don’t know. I haven’t done it yet.”² “After completing the English syllabus, I don’t remember when was the last time when I read it.”³

Interpretation of the curriculum. The teachers were given the following section from the national curriculum and the teachers were asked to interpret the section.

6. klassi lõpetaja:

- 1) saab õpitud temaatika piires aru lauseist ja sageli kasutatavaist väljendeist;
 - 2) mõistab olulist õpitud temaatika piires;
 - 3) kirjutab lühikesi tekste õpitud temaatika piires;
 - 4) tuleb teda puudutavates igapäevastes suhtlusolukordades toime õpitavat keelt emakeelena kõnelejaga;
 - 5) teadvustab eakohaselt õpitava maa ning oma maa kultuuri sarnasusi ja erinevusi ning oskab neid arvestada;
 - 6) rakendab õpetaja juhendamisel varem omandatud õpioskusi ja -strateegiaid;
 - 7) töötab õpetaja juhendamisel iseseisvalt, paaris ja rühmas;
 - 8) seab endale õpieesmärke ning hindab koostöös kaaslaste ja õpetajaga oma saavutusi
- (Põhikooli Riiklik Õppekava, 2011)

Teachers said that this section of the curriculum is very general and not specific enough. Some terms are ambiguous for the teachers; especially the phrase “everyday

² Ma ütlen ausalt, ma ei ole lugenud seda uut õppekava. Ma tõesti ei tea... ma ei ole jõudnud sinnani veel.

³ Ja kui ma oma ainekava ära tegin, siis ma ei mäleta, millal ma viimati ausalt öeldes lugesin seda.

situations” was highlighted. “I’m thinking what’s the everyday situation for the 6th grader? Are we talking about school, hobbies, economics, shopping? Or so what’s the everyday situation for example?” It was also said that the curriculum should be written in such a way that everybody understand it, also parents but currently it is ambiguous even for the teachers. Another term that is ambiguous for the teachers is “important themes” in point 2. “What are these expressions that are used? Well, what expressions? Computer, Facebook, OMG abbreviation? What is meant here? Who considers what important?”⁴ At the same time, some teachers thought that “important themes” are the ones that are provided in textbooks. “If I know the topics that are in 6th grade, in the textbook that corresponds to the curriculum, then the basis is that textbook, the themes and vocabulary that is there.”⁵ However, teachers admitted that the curriculum cannot be explained in great detail and agreed that it should rather give guidelines; however, the terms should be clearer.

The teachers thought that the most difficult to achieve is point 8. They said that students in the 6th grade are not able to set their own learning goals. Some teachers hoped that the students may be able to do it together with the teacher. “About setting the learning goals, this is with a teacher assistance, because he/she can’t do it in the 6th grade, what I should know if I finish the 6th grade”.⁶ The teachers were more optimistic about assessing one’s own learning goals. “However, I think that they will have learned how to assess their own achievements by that time“.

⁴ Mis need väljendid on, mida kasutatakse. Noh, mis väljendid? Arvuti, Facebooki väljendid, OMG lühendi või... mida me siin silmas peame, kes mida peab oluliseks.

⁵ Et kui on teada, mis teemad, mis 6. klassis on, et õpikus, mis vastab õppekavale, siis ma ikka lähtun sellest õpikust, et need teemad ja sõnavara asjad, mis seal on olnud.

⁶ Vot selle kohta et seab endale õpi-eesmärke, see on ka ikka õpetaja abiga, sellepärast et, ta lihtsalt ei oska veel 6. klassis, et mis ma nüüd pean oskama, kui ma selle 6. klassi lõpetan.

The teachers had a very different opinion about the culture aspect, point 6. Some teachers thought that it is not possible to achieve that goal at all. “A student in the 6th grade won’t acknowledge, she/he doesn’t know anything about that. Acknowledge for their age, in what sense? Actually, I don’t understand it.”⁷ Some teachers thought that maybe it is possible and some thought that students are able to acknowledge minor cultural differences and similarities. “Target country and their own culture, to compare and contrast them... and here it is, applies with the teacher, so maybe...”⁸

The teachers were also positive about the outcome that students will write short texts, point 3. They thought that students will do it; however, again the term “short” is ambiguous. “Writes short texts on the basis of learned material. Yes, this I understand, they will write if everything goes well”.⁹ “Here a question arises, what is “short” for whom, but mostly it is said how long the texts should be.”¹⁰

The teachers had also quite opposing opinions on point 4 “Copes in everyday communication situations with the native speaker of the target language”. It was said that they can cope in some simple situations, maybe they can cope in this situation but they don’t have enough courage, and the third opinion was that coping depends on the native speaker and one’s accent.

Communication situations, well, if somebody asks directions, then they can say to the left, right, go straight on. In that sense, well, it comes step-by-step.¹¹

⁷ 6. klassi õpilane kindlasti ei teadvusta, ta ei saagi sellest ise aru, ei teagi nendest asjadest mitte midagi. Teadvustab eakohaselt, mis mõttes? Ma tegelikult ei saa aru sellest.

⁸ Õpitav maa ja oma kultuur, et osata võrrelda neid, et mis on teistmoodi või sama või... ja siin on nüüd et rakendab õpetaja juhendamisel, et võib-olla...

⁹ „Kirjutab lühikesi tekste õpitud temaatika piires“ jah, sellest saan aru, jah, kirjutab, kui hästi läheb

¹⁰ Siin tekib muidugi küsimus, et mis kellegi jaoks lühike tekst on, aga enamasti on seal ju sõnade arv antud, et kui pikad tekstid peavad olema.

¹¹ Suhtlusolukorrad, noh näiteks kui on tänaval keegi küsib et... teed näiteks, et ta oskab paremale, vasakule ja otse ütelda. Selles mõttes, et noh et see nagu tuleb kõik järk-järgult.

“Copes in everyday communication situations with the native speaker of the target language”. A little bit too long, I have to think about what is meant here. Maybe they will cope, but they don't have enough courage!¹²

I'm thinking that for 6th grader it is difficult to understand different accents of the speaker /.../. Listening English is one, Irish is different, Scottish is different, South-African is different. So, this is a very difficult thing to accomplish.

Point 6 “Applies previously acquired learning strategies with teacher assistance” is difficult for the teacher, because the teachers do not feel confident in teaching learning strategies. They would like to have more training. In addition, it presumes that previous teachers have guided them to acquire learning strategies.

I think it's a very difficult task of a teacher to teach the students to learn how to learn and to teach them strategies. I think that during the 6th grade the students still about are to learn learning strategies. I think that during the 6th form it is still a continuous process and we can't say that the students can apply the learning strategies already but I think they are on the way of applying the strategies. And I think that one point why this is so tricky for the teacher because we haven't had enough training in this field. Teachers haven't had enough training.

It is a bit more complicated that if you have been teaching this continuously from 3rd to 6th grade that we are talking about now that then you know what their learning skills and strategies are, but if I got the class for the first time, then I couldn't say anything about it.¹³

The teachers admitted that students are able to work independently, in pairs or in groups with teachers' assistance. Maybe some students need some guidelines but in general, students should be able to do that.

Teaching

Planning. There were 3 main approaches how teachers plan their school year.

¹² Tuleb teda puudutavates suhtlusolukordades õpitavat keelt emakeele kõnelejaga“ natuke pikk, selle pean läbi mõtlema, mis siin öelda tahetakse. Võib-olla natuke tuleb toime, aga ta ei julge ju!

¹³ Sellega on natuke keerulisem, et kui sa oled seda järjepidevalt õpetanud 3.-6. välja, millest meil praegu jutt on, et siis sa tead, millised need tema õpioskused ja strateegiad on, aga noh, kui ma saaksin selle klassi esimest aastat, siis ma ei oskaks selle koha pealt midagi öelda.

1. Curriculum based approach. If teachers based their work plan on the curriculum, they read the curriculum and then they wrote their own work plan. “So, the basis is our national curriculum. It has to be like this for everybody.”¹⁴

2. Textbook based approach. Teachers who take the textbook that they use and they base their work plan on the textbook.

“I just take the book and divide the topics to the weeks and add some extra materials but what I actually use comes spontaneously mostly.”

3. Student and curriculum based approach. Teachers who write their work plan on the basis of the curriculum and they take into account the students as well.

“Of course I have to look at the, first of all the certain class, and what has the... like, the state has written what they has to go through, so the curriculum.”

4. Student and textbook based approach. Teachers who write their work plan on the basis of the textbook and they take into account the students as well.

“Actually I depart from the textbook, the textbook and the actual class”¹⁵

Some teachers thought that work plans are not needed and very often reality is something different from the work plans.

“I can make these plans, but life shows that these plans do not work.”¹⁶

“To be honest I just my work plans just for the headmaster, just for the school. I never use them.”

Using curriculum materials. There were 3 types of approaches how teachers use curriculum materials.

¹⁴ No aluseks on meie riiklik õppekava. Nii nagu kõigil peab olema.

¹⁵ Tegelt lähtun raamatust ausalt öeldes, raamatust ja konkreetsest klassist.

¹⁶ Ma võin neid plaane teha, aga elu näitab, et need plaanid jooksevad liiva

1. Textbook as a basis. Teacher who said that they use a textbook a lot and did not mention that they skip some parts or add some other materials. “Well, as a rule, if I have one textbook set, then I make the most of it. It means that the textbook and the workbook that I use the workbook anyway. Not that I use 100% of it, but let’s say that I do make use of 90% of the workbook.”¹⁷
2. Adapts textbook. Teachers who said that the textbook is a basis but they skip some parts and add other materials according to the students’ needs. Most of the interviewed teachers adapt the textbook. “I think I use them as a, it depends on a group of course, but I use them as a basis. /.../ I modify this material according to abilities of the group. For example, I leave something out, I add other materials from my own experience or from the Internet or from other textbooks.” The reason why teachers adapt the textbook is that there is no perfect book and students’ needs are different, and the book is not suitable for them.
3. Uses two textbooks in parallel. There was a teacher who said that she does not use just one textbook set but two or more in parallel.
 “Actually, I use side-by-side “Grammarway,” “Click,” “Enterprise.” I use them in parallel, sometimes Murphy and Small too”.¹⁸

Methods. Teachers use student centered methods, teacher centered methods and some teachers said that they use both. Teachers, who use student centered methods, mentioned group work, pair work, discussions, creative work, and different games.

Working with the partner is absolutely suitable. I want them to be active in the learning process so I usually, for example, the rules but I want them to discover them by themselves. And I try as much as possible to use different games, so it is also possible to play with older students but these games are

¹⁷ No reeglina, kui mul on üks õppekomplekt, siis ma kasutan ikka maksimaalselt ära seda, see tähendab, et õpik ja töövihik, et töövihikut ma ikka teen, mitte 100% just, aga no ütleme, et 90% töövihikust ma kasutan küll ära.

¹⁸ Tegelikult ma kasutan kõrvuti seda sama „Grammarway,” „Click,” „Enterprise.” Need kõik jooksevad niimoodi kõrvuti, vahepeal Murphy ja Small ka.

just different. I guess people learn the best when they think they are not learning, they are having fun in the process. I try to avoid standing in front of the classroom and just doing the frontal work. I want them to be active and I want just to guide them.

The teachers, who use rather teacher-centered methods, mentioned using textbooks and translation exercises.

I just tell in advance what I am going to do and I use everything, I don't know, everything that is at all possible. I like trying different reading activities – multiple choice answers, gap filling, whatever. I have searched and gathered a great deal of different kinds of things during these years. That I use as different ones as possible with one theme. I use not only Click on 3, but I use this Grammar alongside it and Enterprise alongside it, if there is a more interesting text in it, then I'll take this one in parallel. I have prepared many worksheets where there are sentences in Estonian about the use of articles, they try to translate.¹⁹

Most of the teachers mentioned that they use both student centered and teacher centered methods. According to their opinion, all the methods are good for different learners.

Assessment. It was mentioned many times that assessment is very difficult. One factor that makes it difficult is the very strict assessment criteria in the curriculum and the other factor that was mentioned is subjectivity: it is difficult to assess students' group work objectively because there are many factors that affect group work. In addition, it is difficult to assess individual progress, if the teacher has to follow the curriculum criteria.

There are certain percentage when putting out grades, and I think it is so strict there are so many times, that the work is really good, but the percentage I cannot put 5, I cannot put 4, it's... I have to put 3. And I am thinking this kid over... overcame themselves, they did more than I've seen them do before. So what should I do? Do I go with the curriculum, what the curriculum tells me or do I just go with what I see.

The thing with the group work is that each time all these group members do not work equally or someone does not work at all /.../ and to give grades on the basis of that, I believe, it not quite right.²⁰

The teachers agreed that if students can produce oral text by themselves then the learning outcomes are achieved. "I think through communication you can see actually very well, if

¹⁹ Ma lihtsalt ütlen ette, et mis ma teen ja ma kasutan kõike – ma kasutan, ma ei tea, kõike mida vähegi annab. Lugemistüüpe mulle meeldib erinevaid proovida – valikvastused, lüngatäitmised või mida iganes. Ma olen nende aastate jooksul küll hästi palju erinevaid asju välja otsinud. Et ühe teema raames kasutan võimalikult erinevaid. Ma ei kasuta ainult ainult Click on 3, vaid ma kasutan seda Grammarit kõrvale ja Enterprise kõrvale, kui seal on mõni põnevam tekst, siis ma võtan selle paralleelselt kõrvale. Mul on hästi palju tehtud lehti, kus ongi nagu eesti keeles laused, artikli kasutamise kohta, nad üritavad tõlkida.

²⁰ Selle grupitööga on niimoodi, et seal igakord kõik need grupiliikmed ei tööta küllalt võrdväärselt või mõni ei tööta näiteks üldse kaasa /.../ ja selle põhjal hindeid panna, ma arvan, et pole vist päris õige.

they have gained what they are supposed to.” The main method to assess students was testing; teachers administer oral and written tests which can be smaller ones and bigger ones. “I do tests, I do usually one in the beginning trimester, two in the middle and one... I try to involve one talking, writing, reading tests. Speaking is usually a dialogue, they have to negotiate about something”.

Cooperation

Personal ideas to share. The teachers stated that often they shared personal ideas about teaching or pedagogy in general. In addition, they shared good practices.

In my opinion, the main thing about teaching is that you can go there with whatever, but if it does not speak to a young person in any way, doesn't, I don't know, mentally or physically, then yes, then it does not have much efficiency. He can simply learn it, but that's just it. This is exactly the experience that I share.²¹

Mostly the things that I've had success with. When there are some things that are really good work for me then I think it is good idea to let the other ones know as well. I have shared my knowledge about neural linguistic teaching”.

Behaviour. Teachers said that they discuss the issues of students' behaviour quite much. They admitted that they share the instances of unacceptable behaviour at school much more than those of positive and acceptable one. On the other hand, they share positive behaviour if some of their methods has influenced students' behaviour in a positive way.

I feel like we have shared quite a lot of bad experience about pupils, for example, someone was really like talk-active in a bad way, talking too much, really not concentrating, just totally out of the classroom, somewhere else. And we had shared these moments so much more than the good moments.

²¹ Minu meelest, et põhiline asi õpetamisel ongi see, et sa võid minna sinna millega iganes, aga kui see noort inimest mitte mingilgi viisil ei kõneta, ei, ma ei tea, vaimselt ega füüsiliselt, siis jah, siis ei ole sellel suurt kasutegurit. Ta võib selle lihtsalt ära õppida, aga ongi kogu lugu. See ongi see kogemus, mida ma jagan.

/.../ and this was one thing that I shared with the class teacher and she was also very much surprised that the boy is so quiet and modest that I was able to make him come to life. That this is one such case of exchanging experiences this year now. ²²

Methods. Mostly the teachers share useful methods and ideas that could be applied in the classroom, for instance, something that they have learnt in different courses, or language teaching methods, materials and how to approach some themes.

Lately, I have started to share very many ICT related experiences because I have trained myself in this field and whenever I discover something that I see would appeal both the students and would also make the teacher's job easier, then I share it. I have also used a kind of method or something and I have tried out before and I have seen it works then, I have shared with my colleagues, not a special teacher training event but during the breaks, just change the idea.

Curriculum. The teachers do not share so many ideas about the curriculum; they say that there are not any special meetings to discuss the curriculum, only if they need to compile the syllabus. "I don't share, to be honest. As there are no other English teachers in my school, I don't share." ²³ "I don't remember that a special effort would have been made and that we would sit down specifically for this purpose and begin to take it and discuss it." ²⁴

The teachers mentioned that they have shared thoughts about value education, curriculum suitability, cooperation, year 9 examination, scope of work, topic suitability and high requirements. "I think mostly involved co-operation, sometimes we discuss, what can we do together so that the material that we teach could make more sense and could be something real, real life"

²² Ja see oli nagu üks asi, mida ma klassijuhatajaga jagasin ja tema ka hästi imestas, et hästi vaikne ja tagasihoidlik poiss, et sain talle elu sisse. Et see on üks selline kogemuse vahetamine sellel aastal praegu.

²³ Ei jaga kui aus olla. Kuna minu koolis ei ole teisi inglise keele õpetajaid, siis ma ei jagagi.

²⁴ Ma ei mäleta, et oleks eriti oleks niimoodi pingutatud ja kohe, et spetsiaalselt istume maha ja hakkame kohe seda võtma ja arutama.

SUPPORTIVE FACTORS TO CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION

Material and non-material support

Finances related support. Teachers thought that school supports curriculum implementation. School purchases textbooks, workbooks, as well as provides teaching materials and technical support. In addition, school offers different courses and sends to seminars.

Maybe school buys good new student's books, new workbook. School sends me to take part in different seminars, courses and so on.

We also have the technical support, the beamers, computers, everything that helps us to bring, to use info technology, involve into the teaching programs, info technology is important in new curriculum.

Non-finances related support. Besides finances related support the teachers mentioned non-finances related support as well. For example, it is important for the teachers that they feel supported by the school, that the school managerial staff supports new ideas. "I guess the headmaster and the main attitude in our school is that new things are important enough to get them know better." Teachers considered freedom important. "It's the freedom that the head mistress does not tell me what I have to teach and when and how." It is useful if the school head of studies reminds some aspects about curriculum implementation and organizes different workshops. "I think during the meetings the head teacher asks some aspects of the curriculum, maybe remind us of some aspects. Secondly, there have been some workshops about the curriculum." It helps if the language groups are organized suitably and if the school has set some rules about how many times students may retake their tests. "The groups are ok. Maybe some decisions are made. Maybe this has been resolved that students are not allowed to do their tests several times, it is allowed to

try twice and finally, this has been heard and it has been written in some school documents and rules.”²⁵

IMPEDING FACTORS TO CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION

Material and Non-material Impediments

Finances. The teachers feel that there are some impeding factors to curriculum implementation. For example, the teachers would like to have newer books. “It would be nice to have an access to the newer textbook”. Some teachers feel that one computer class in school is not enough and the school does not provide sufficient technical support “We have one printer and often it is broken, we cannot use it. We have many students but one computer class, I would like to use, not only books but also, some worksheets on the Internet.”

Workload, no time. The teachers feel that they have too many tasks and not enough time for that. They mention that there is not enough time for reflection and for applying everything from the curriculum.

Maybe the workload on the one hand. Because there is constantly so much to do that you can't always find the time to go back and look at the curriculum over and over again and compare it with your everyday acts.

There is a huge pressure of doing all the... like the written things, everything that you can see with your eyes, there's more pressure of completing the book, the exercise book. It is more pressure to that than the first points of the curriculum that the child has to be a good person /.../.

Type of class. On the one hand, teaching in composite classes is an impeding factor to implement the curriculum. “The biggest difficulty is that there are composite classes that there are two different grades at the same time in the class. And this really takes a lot of energy and takes a lot of time.” On the other hand, the teachers who teach in regular

²⁵ Rühmad on ok. Võib-olla mõni üksik otsus võetakse vastu. Võib-olla on see korda tehtud, et ei lasta enam nii vastata, et ongi kaks korda ja see on lõpuks kuulda võetud ja kirjutatud sinna kooli mingisugusesse dokumentidesse ja reeglitesse.

classes mentioned that there are many students with very different abilities in one group that this is an impeding factor as well.

Secondly, are the level of students, it is so different which means that you can't always achieve everything foreseen in the curriculum for the students which is also a little bit frustrating for time to time.

The most complicated cases involve not only mixed ability classrooms but the classrooms that, in addition, have also special needs students. This poses a great challenge for the teacher to ensure the achievement of the learning outcomes while it is clear that one curriculum does not suit all the students.

Personal factors. There was also an opinion that actually, the implementation of the curriculum depends on the personal will of the teacher. "Maybe my own will if I want to implement it. There are no other factors. It depends on the teacher if he / she implements it or not."

2.3 Discussion

The aim of the present thesis is to explore and understand the opinions and perceptions of English teachers about the implementation of the National Curriculum for Basic School. In this chapter the results are discussed according to the research questions.

How do English teachers implement the national curriculum in their practice?

The teachers implement the curriculum in very various ways, although the main aim in teaching English is almost the same for all the teachers. The teachers mentioned mainly two aims in teaching English: that students will be able to communicate independently and to broaden students' mind about target culture. These aims correspond well with the aims in the national curriculum that the students have to achieve by the end of basic school. However, teachers did not mention that their aim was that students would be able to use appropriately reference sources (reference books, dictionaries, Internet) in order to find necessary information also about other subjects (Põhikooli Riiklik Õppekava,

2011) but probably teachers thought that this aim is included in the aim that the students will be independent language users and learners.

Shawer (2010: 177-181) has found that there are three kinds of teachers: curriculum-developers, curriculum-makers and curriculum-transmitters. There are no teachers who would be curriculum-makers among these 10 interviewed teachers because nobody mentioned that before planning a year they would conduct needs assessment and then they would generate topics, organize and sequence. Part of the interviewed teachers are curriculum developers who base their work plan on the curriculum but supplement and adapt it according to their students' needs. Another part of the teachers are curriculum transmitters who follow the curriculum precisely and have a student's book as a single source.

The teachers use curriculum materials a lot. There are teachers who use just one textbook as a basis, some teachers adapt textbook to their students' needs and one teacher uses more than one textbook in parallel. Based on the theory (Fevre, 2014; Lee 2007), there may be both negative and positive influences on the implementation of curriculum. On the one hand, according to Lee (2007), using a textbook sets frames to the teacher and follows the curriculum, in addition it provides guidelines to the teacher. On the other hand, there are different learners in class, therefore using just one textbook may not support all the learners. Fevre (2014) adds that sometimes teachers do not want to change their pedagogical approach because they have to reduce dependence on textbooks. Using different materials may create a situation where teachers cannot follow who learned what and therefore the outcomes are uncertain. (Fevre, 2014)

The teachers referred to many useful aspects that the curriculum has, for instance: the curriculum is modern and practical, formative assessment and competence based curriculum are useful aspects to support learning, integration and teaching four skills were

also thought to be positive. However, there are teachers who admitted that they had not read the current curriculum. Also Paks and Kirss (2012) pointed out that 20% of the teachers do not have their own opinion about the curriculum which indicates that they may have not read it.

The study of Paks and Kirss (2012: 21) concludes that generally teachers are satisfied with the curriculum, although there have been some problems with implementing it. The teachers interviewed for the present study referred to ambiguous terms and some unachievable outcomes. They especially pointed out that the terms “everyday situations”, “important themes” and “short texts” that were not clear enough. The teachers did not understand what the “everyday” situations were that the students must cope with. Another vague term was the “important themes” because what may be important for the teacher may not be important for the student. How “short” is short also caused confusion, but in this case teachers hope to rely on the textbook where the length of the texts that the students must write is explained. The teachers admitted that the curriculum is too general and partially ambiguous but they said that they do not think that the curriculum should describe all the terms and outcomes very thoroughly. Engdahl (2004) supports this idea that curriculum does not prescribe how the goals should be achieved but it gives general guidelines, sets values and goals.

Paks and Kirss (2012) reported that 18% of the teachers thought that the learning outcomes in the curriculum were not achievable and 27% of those teachers mentioned that some outcomes are not achievable. In the present study the teachers thought that students in the 6th grade are not ready to achieve some outcomes. They pointed out from the given section of the curriculum that some goals were not achievable and some goals were partly achievable. For example, they thought that setting their own learning goals by the end of the 6th grade was unachievable, however, they may assess their outcomes. Teachers said

that by the end of the 6th grade students were not ready to compare and contrast their culture with the target culture but they agreed that probably students were able to compare and contrast the minor differences and similarities. The teachers thought that students were able to write short texts and do independent work, pair work and group work although they may need some assistance which is also stated in the learning outcomes of the curriculum. According to Paks and Kirss (2012) 82% of the teachers felt that the curriculum outcomes were achievable but 68% added that they were achievable for the students whose study abilities are normal and who are motivated to study.

The teachers found that assessment was a difficult aspect because sometimes it is too subjective and sometimes the strict criteria in the curriculum do not allow it to assess students' individual progress. The teachers believed that students had acquired the language if they could produce oral texts. Also Oder (2014) says that language learning is not just being good at grammatical knowledge but students need to be fluent as well. Abdullah et al (2014: 151-152) concur that "learning a language requires integration and fluent application between the explicit learning of vocabulary and language rules." The interviewed teachers conduct oral and written tests to assess the achievement of learning outcomes and they consider formative assessment positive. Paks and Kirss (2012) confirm that 6% of the teachers believe that formative assessment helps them in the assessment process.

Zhang et al (2013), Mak and Chik (2011) and Shreeve et al (2008) explain that there is student-centered approach and teacher-centered approach. In addition, Shreeve (2008) adds problem-based approach and experiential-learning theory which are both rather student-centered than teacher-centered approaches. None of the interviewed teachers employs purely problem-based or experiential-learning approach, although some of the teachers mentioned using some elements of problem-based approach "I want them to be

active in the learning process so I usually, for example, the rules but I want them to discover them by themselves”. Most of the interviewed teachers said that they use both student and teacher centered approach and they explained that different learners need different approaches. However, there are some teachers who use mostly student-centered approaches. They use group-work, pair-work, discussions, and different games in the lessons. Teachers with teacher centered approach use one set of textbook, translation exercises, reading activities etc. But as Zhang (2013) explains, generally teachers do not use just one approach but one approach dominates in a teachers’ view of a successful lesson. The findings of the study in this thesis indicate the same that most of the teachers use both approaches but often one dominates.

The teachers cooperate, they share personal ideas that they think are important or the ideas concerning the main principles of their teaching. Students’ behaviour is very often discussed and teachers share negative experiences or such practices that have changed students’ behaviour to the positive. Teachers cooperate very closely in order to exchange and share different methods but they admitted that they do not discuss curriculum implementation very much. While Paks and Kirss (2012) mentioned that teachers need to cooperate with a school psychologist and a social-pedagogue, the interviewed teachers did not mention cooperation in this field.

What supports English teachers to implement the national curriculum, according to the opinions of teachers of English in Viljandimaa?

The teachers mentioned two types of support: finances related support and non-finances related support. They thought that the school supports teachers with equipment, materials and it is supportive if schools send teachers to seminars or courses. Both Yan (2012) and Kirköz (2008) emphasize that teacher training and common understanding of the curriculum is the basis for implementing the curriculum changes.

In addition, the teachers mentioned non-financed related support. They said that it was very important to feel supported by the managerial staff and it was essential to the teachers that the school supported trying out new ideas. Hardman and Rahman (2014) also argue that supporting teachers and providing necessary materials are important factors to implement the curriculum successfully. The interviewed teachers said that freedom in their teaching was a relevant factor that supports their curriculum implementation. This is also supported by the findings of the study conducted by Paks and Kirss (2012). The teachers said that organizing language groups suitably is helpful, and the groups should not have too many students. This factor is related to the successful curriculum implementation, and also Paks and Kirss (2012:15) suggest that one language group should not be larger than 15-17 students, especially if there are students with special educational needs.

What impedes English teachers to implement the national curriculum, according to the teachers of English in Viljandimaa?

There are many factors that teachers feel impede their curriculum implementation, for instance, the impeding factors that are related to finances. Teachers would like to have newer textbooks and materials and in some schools teachers do not have enough technical support. This impediment is described also by Paks and Kirss (2012), according to whom 12% of the teachers need newer materials. The second impediment that Paks and Kirss as well as the interviewed teachers pointed out was workload, and therefore teachers do not have enough time to do curricular work. Çimer and Günay (2012) observe that if teachers have too many tasks, there is no time for reflection which should be usual part of teaching. Paks and Kirss claim that full-time teachers should have no more than 20 contact lessons per week. The third very important impediment to implement the curriculum was the composite classes and the classes where there are students with extremely mixed abilities.

Hardman and Rahman (2014) agree that managing the classes with mixed abilities students is challenging to the teacher.

Controversies

In this section the author indicates some controversies that occurred according to the results. Firstly, the teachers were asked if they had had any questions related to the interpretation of the curriculum. Some teachers said that they had not had any questions and everything was clear for them. When the teachers were subsequently given a section from the curriculum to explicate, all of them pointed out some ambiguous terms, phrases or admitted that some outcomes were not achievable. There might have been the reason that the respondents did not want to leave the impression that they did not know the curriculum and that is why they said that everything was clear, however, another reason might be that they had not thought about the learning outcomes in the curriculum so thoroughly before.

Secondly, one teacher admitted that she had not read the curriculum at all and another teacher admitted that she had done it a long time ago. However, both of them said later that they base their work plan on the curriculum. It is not possible to compile the work plan based on the curriculum if they had not read it before. The author suggests two explanations: firstly, the teachers did not consider it as “reading” while writing their work plans or secondly, the response that the work plan was based on the curriculum was considered an obligatory answer.

Limitations and practical value

The limitations of this study are definitely the author’s lack of previous experience with conducting qualitative research and data analysis. However, the findings of this thesis can be used as a basis for organizing courses and seminars to teachers on issues and problems related to curriculum implementation and to create common understanding of basic concepts and premises underlying the new curriculum among

teachers. Besides, curriculum designers could have valuable information from the present thesis. Last but not least, school administration may wish to take into account the factors that impede and support teachers to implement the curriculum and offer more help.

CONCLUSION

Curriculum is a document that sets goals, outcomes and values. Implementation of curriculum changes does not simply depend on government reforms but teachers and their beliefs, values, and will. There are factors to impede curriculum implementation, for example workload, big classes with mixed abilities, and lack of teaching materials. Other factors support curriculum implementation, for instance efficient sources, teachers' common understanding, and enough time to reflect work.

The aim of the present thesis was to explore the perceptions and opinions of English teachers about the implementation of the National Curriculum for Basic School. The research questions were: What supports English teachers to implement the Estonian National Curriculum, according to their opinion? What impedes English teachers to implement the National Curriculum, according to their opinion? How do English teachers implement it in their practice?

10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with basic school English teachers in Viljandimaa. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because of flexibility. Teachers were asked about their aim of teaching, achievement of learning outcomes, teaching methods, teacher curriculum approach, aspects supporting curriculum implementation and aspects impeding curriculum implementation.

Teachers said that their aim of teaching is communication and culture, they thought that by the end of basic school students should be independent language users and be aware of some aspects about British culture. Teachers interpreted a section from the current curriculum on the learning outcomes that the 6th graders must achieve and they admitted that some terms are ambiguous like "everyday communication situations" and "short" text. They added that some aims are unachievable, for example, students are not able to compare and contrast their culture with target culture and they are not able to set

their own learning goals. Teachers thought that students can assess their own learning outcomes by the end of 6th grade, they can do group work, pair work and independent work.

Teachers considered the following aspects useful in the current curriculum: integration, formative assessment, competence-basis, concentrating on four skills, and they liked that the curriculum is modern and practical. Teachers compile their work plans on the basis of textbook, the curriculum, textbook and students and the curriculum and students. Teachers use curriculum materials such as textbook and workbook a lot in their everyday work. Most of the teachers adapt textbook, some teachers follow the textbook precisely and one interviewed teacher uses two textbooks in parallel. Teachers said that assessment is very difficult for them, because on the one hand, it is subjective and on the other hand, very strict criteria do not let to assess students' personal development. Teachers share methods, thoughts about students' behaviour and personal ideas about teaching. Less they share thoughts about curriculum, but if they do it, the topics are suitability, scope of work, year 9 examination, cooperation and high requirements. Most of the teachers use both student centered and teacher centered approach.

Factors that impede curriculum implementation are as follows: finances, workload, type of class, and personal factors. Teachers would like to have newer textbooks and more technical support. Composite classes impede curriculum implementation, and also classes where students are with extremely mixed abilities. They admitted that curriculum implementation depends on their personal will as well. Supporting factors are finance related and non-finance related support. Teachers mentioned that school helps them to implement the curriculum if the school provides curriculum materials, technical support and if the school sends teachers to seminars and courses. Teachers considered non-finance related support like the feeling of being supported, and workshops important as well.

In conclusion, the aim of the present thesis was achieved. It gave a thorough analysis of teachers' perceptions and opinions about curriculum implementation, and in addition, it complemented Paks and Kirss (2012) quantitative research. Further research on this topic could extend the sample in order to continue to explore the diversity of teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the current national curriculum. It would be also rewarding to focus on an investigation of teachers' approaches to curriculum to better understand the reasons behind their preferred or dominant approach.

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Appendix 1: Interview questions for the teachers of English

I Introductory question

- How did you become a teacher of English?

II Aim of teaching, achievement of learning outcomes, and teaching methods

- What do you see as the main aim in teaching English?
- How do you assess the achievement of learning outcomes?
- Which teaching methods do you consider efficient?

III Teacher curriculum approach

- What is the basis for writing your own work plan?
- What aspects of the new curriculum do you consider useful in your work?
- How do you use curriculum materials (textbook, workbook, teacher's guide)?

III Aspects supporting curriculum implementation

- Which teaching experiences do you share with other teachers?
- Which questions related to the curriculum do you discuss with other teachers?
- What in your school helps you in the implementation of the curriculum?

IV Aspects impeding curriculum implementation

- Have there been any questions related to the interpretation of the curriculum?
- How do you interpret this section of the curriculum: 6. klassi lõpetaja: 1) saab õpitud temaatika piires aru lauseist ja sageli kasutatavaist väljendeist; 2) mõistab olulist õpitud temaatika piires; 3) kirjutab lühikesi tekste õpitud temaatika piires; 4) tuleb teda puudutavates igapäevastes suhtlusolukordades toime õpitavat keelt emakeelena kõnelejaga; 5) teadvustab eakohaselt õpitava maa ning oma maa kultuuri sarnasusi ja erinevusi ning oskab neid arvestada; 6) rakendab õpetaja juhendamisel varem omandatud õpioskusi ja -strateegiaid; 7) töötab õpetaja

juhendamisel iseseisvalt, paaris ja rühmas; 8) seab endale õpieesmärke ning hindab koostöös kaaslaste ja õpetajaga oma saavutusi.

- What in your school hinders you in the implementation of the curriculum?

V Concluding question

- Is there anything you would like to add?

RESÜMEE

Tartu Ülikool
Anglistika osakond

Merit Varblane

English Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation of the National Curriculum for Basic School in Viljandimaa

(Inglise keele õpetajate arvamused Põhikooli riikliku õppekava rakendamisesest Viljandimaal)

Magistritöö

2015

Lehekülgede arv: 55

Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva töö eesmärk on uurida Inglise keele õpetajate arvamusi Põhikooli riikliku õppekava rakendamisesest. Antud töö uurimisküsimused on: mis aitab inglise keele õpetajatel nende arvates õppekava rakendada? Mis takistab inglise keele õpetajatel nende arvates õppekava rakendada? Kuidas Inglise keele õpetajad õppekava rakendavad? Antud töö koosneb kahest peatükist. Esimeses peatükis antakse teoreetiline ülevaade kirjandusest ja varem läbi viidud uuringutest. Teises peatükis kirjeldatakse antud töö raames tehtud uuringu metoodikat, esitatakse saadud tulemusi ning arutletakse nende üle. Õppekava on kooli alusdokument, mis sätestab eesmärgid, õpitulemused ja saavutatavad pädevused. Õppekava annab üldised suunad ja juhised. Põhikooli riiklik õppekava ei sea õpetajatele piiranguid, kuidas õppekavas olevad õpitulemused tuleb saavutada.

Antud töö käigus viidi läbi pool-struktureeritud intervjuud 10 põhikooli inglise keele õpetajaga Viljandimaal. Intervjuu käigus uuriti nende õpetamise eesmärki, õpitulemuste saavutamist, õpetamise meetodeid, õppekavale lähenemist ja aspekte, mis toetab ja takistab neil õppekava rakendamist. Õpetajate eesmärk inglise keele õpetamisel on, et õpilased oleksid iseseisvad keelekasutajad ning omaksid teadmisi õpitavat keel emakeelena kõnelevate kultuuride kohta. Intervjuu käigus paluti õpetajatel 6. klassi lõpuks saavutatavaid õpitulemusi tõlgendada. Õpetajad tunnistasid, et neile on osa mõisted ja väljendid antud lõigus arusaamatud, näiteks „igapäevased suhtlusolukorrad“, „lühikesed“ tekstid ning osa õpitulemusi ei ole 6. klassi lõpuks saavutatavad, näiteks pole 6. klassi õpilased suutelised võrdlema kultuure ning seadma endale õpieesmärke. Õpetajad ütlesid, et nad peavad õppekavas oluliseks lõimingu, kujundavat hindamist, kaasaegsust, praktilisust ning pädevusepõhisust. Õpetajate õppetöö planeerimise põhjal jagunevad nad nelja rühma: õpetajad, kes planeerivad õppetööd õppekava põhjal; õpetajad, kes planeerivad õppetööd õpiku põhjal; õpetajad, kes planeerivad õppetööd õppekava ja antud klassi / õpilaste põhjal ning õpetajad, kes planeerivad õppetööd õpiku ja klassi / õpilaste põhjal. Õpetajad kasutavad õpilasekeskset lähenemist, õpetajakeskset lähenemist ning elemente ka probleemipõhisest lähenemisest. Õpetajad pidasid keeruliseks hindamist, sest ühest küljest on see subjektiivne teisest küljest piiravad õppekava hindamiskriteeriumid õpilase individuaalse arengu hindamist. Õpetajad leidsid, et õppekava rakendamist takistab neil uute õpikute puudus, tehnilise toe puudus ja suur töökoormus. Õpetajate arvamuse järgi aitab kool õpetajal õppekava rakendada sellega, et tagab õpikute olemasolu, õppevahendid, tehnilised võimalused ja saatmise koolitustele ja seminaridele. Lisaks veel toodi välja mitterahaline tugi, näiteks töötubade korraldamine, toetav suhtumine, eriti uue proovimisse.

Märksõnad: õppekava rakendamine, inglise keele õpetamine.

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