



Towards a Knowledge-rich Curriculum: A Case Study of English as a Foreign Language Education in a Vietnamese Context

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ABSTRACT

This action research endeavors to develop a framework of a knowledge-rich curriculum from the traditional formalist knowledge-based approach. Rather than to replace current approaches to knowledge-based learning, this article seeks to enrich the knowledge mining orientations with additional criteria for organizing and assessing knowledge to ensure the quality of educational experience through which those orientations are developed. The proposed curriculum is characterized by principles for specific components: content, teacher roles, teaching sequence, and assessment. It presents one typical class session and subsequent teacher reflections that put the framework into practice for English as a Foreign Language in a secondary school in Vietnam during 2016-2017 academic year.

KEYWORDS

Curriculum; instruction; knowledge-rich curriculum; action research; English as a Foreign Language; language education.

INTRODUCTION

One of the classic questions in curriculum studies is "What is the curriculum?" (Dilon, 2009). The traditional approach to this question conceptualizes the curriculum as a dichotomy between conventional formalist and progressive curriculum (Egan, 2003). However, the "traditional versus progressive" debate is irksome if there can be no middle ground between those two polar opposites. The reason is that those two labels are somewhat ideologies, while in real-world practice, the two exist on a continuum where there shall stand a curriculum that can be mid-

way to serve best the goal of education: preparing a series of experiences that children and youth must experience for handling their own unknown future with intellectuality (Franklin Bobbitt, 1918). That goal is determined as the guiding rationale for sketching out the basic components of a curriculum.

This paper puts forward the fundamental principles for shaping a curriculum that is a midpoint on the continuum. This kind of curriculum is referred as a *knowledge-rich* (KR) curriculum, which is based on the traditional knowledge-based approach and the spirit of the scientific curriculum yet is different when it comes to discussing the subtle nuances. This paper follows the conceptual framework of Van den Akker (2003) in which there are four major premises that shape the components of a curriculum: the nature of content included in a curriculum, the role of teachers, the teaching sequence (the learning activities), and the assessment (see Figure 1). Those four premises help reflect the fundamental components in constructing a curriculum and, in this case, shape the KR curriculum. There may also be radical opponents who object to the formulation of KR curriculum, so this article additionally aims to address their concerns and elaborate epistemological stances which KR principles demonstrate.

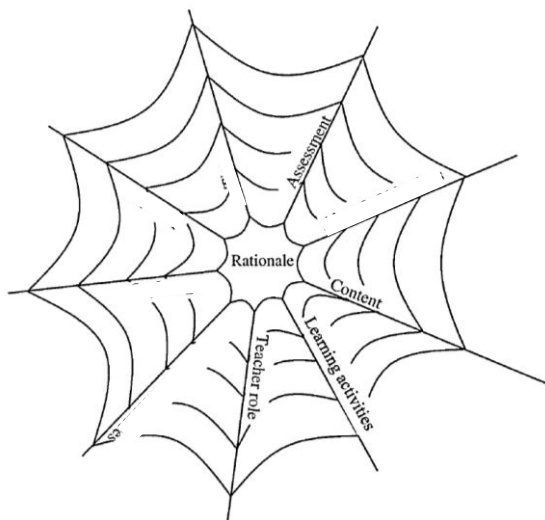


Figure 1. The spider web of curriculum components (adapted from Van den Akker, 2003)

The term “knowledge-rich curriculum” as a mid-way curriculum puts “traditional” and “progressive” as opposites on a continuum rather than a dichotomy. The proposal of the terminology, therefore, is unfamiliar within the context of mainstream education where the pedagogy is over-simplified and polarized in either authoritative or liberal directions (Lawton, 2012). A knowledge-rich curriculum has neither been translated nor applied into mainstream education. Therein lies the original contribution which this article aims to make. First, the article is going to clarify and make arguments on theorizing a knowledge-rich curriculum. Second, the proposed curriculum is contextualized in the case of Vietnamese language education, where the national teacher-centered and knowledge-based curriculum is struggling for curriculum innovation (Canh & Barnard, 2009). In other words, this paper aims to explore the implementation process of the new curriculum in a specific context through an interpretation

of qualitative data from classroom observation and in-depth interviews with teachers. The proposed curriculum was piloted throughout the 2016-2017 academic year in a Vietnamese international secondary school. The description about the KR curriculum provides a more nuanced understanding of how to enforce the intended curriculum, teachers' classroom practice, and teaching activities in real-world practices. Concrete curricular tasks would be cited to demonstrate the educational potential of the proposed curriculum.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

In the Vietnamese educational system, the curriculum is deeply rooted in the traditional knowledge-based approach, governed by the influence of Confucianism and Communism. The ideology underlying the national curriculum is the imposition of knowledge memorization, which is pre-determined and highly centralized through the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and its departments (SRV MOET, 2004). The curriculum content, teacher roles, teaching sequence, and assessment are regulated by the MOET's centralized management. Established upon those characteristics, the national curriculum is representative of the traditional extreme on the continuum.

However, in recent years, English-language education has been experiencing reforms, including in secondary schools, which are adopting a communicative approach to teaching. According to Canh (2003), "English must be taught both as an integrative discourse and an empowering discourse through a curriculum that reflects the cultures, values, and lives of students and provides them with knowledge of the cultural values and daily lives of the people with whom they are likely to interact" (p. 40). The documented curriculum seems to concentrate on the communicative and applicable language skills while formal linguistic knowledge serves as "the means to the end". Paradoxically, the MOET's central control over the curriculum still enforces the practices and standards across the whole system. This has led to an unwelcome top-down imposition of the renewed curriculum, which promotes learner-centered and communicative task-based teaching to enhance communicative competence, in real-world practice. The curriculum is prescribed for all grades from Grade 6 through to Grade 12, with three forty-five-minute lessons per week. Teachers and students use a set of textbooks that has been locally written and institutionalized since 2006. The curricular content is packed with key grammatical structures and phonetic features. The introduction of reading and listening texts is considered the consolidation of relevant grammatical rules, which is followed with speaking and writing sections as a practice of applying rules. For assessment, the curriculum employs quantitative measurements to evaluate linguistic skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) and linguistic knowledge (including phonetics, lexis, grammar) (MOET 2006: 18). It is not until the privatization and internationalization of education in Vietnam is possible that more alternative curricular models will be considered, including the learner-centered approach and societal-approach (Bui & Nguyen, 2016; Hung & Nguyen, 2006). Even in that favorable scenario, there is a lack of curriculum design orientation for the K-12 language education system.

In that K-12 context, the principles of a knowledge-rich curriculum are developed, which respect the value of knowledge and academic rigor that has existed within the traditional system for many decades. At the same time, the principles aim to incorporate a pressing need to address certain possible flexibilities in the theory and practice of knowledge content, teaching process and assessment. The empirical data of the research took place during the 2016–2017 academic year, when the researcher had a chance to pilot and implement the knowledge-based curriculum for an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) subject at a private secondary school in the South of Vietnam (four years, ages 11–14). A group of teachers for Grade 9, who were supervised by the researcher, were invited to participate in a collaborative action research project. The researcher documented the degree to which the principles for a knowledge-rich curriculum were applicable to secondary EFL classrooms. The class observation took place twice a week during the mentorship. At the end of each class session, the teachers sat down with the researcher to reflect on the principles of procedure that had been proposed, as well as reciting their designed specific tasks carried out in class. Before the data was reported, a concrete framework for constructing a knowledge-rich curriculum was described below.

PRINCIPLES OF A KNOWLEDGE-RICH CURRICULUM

The Nature of Content

Compared to other major types of curriculum (the learner-centered approach and the societal-based approach), the knowledge-based approach is the one that most emphasizes the systematic construction of specialized knowledge designed to develop the cognitive and intellectual abilities of a learner. A KR curriculum is in support of the knowledge-based approach because, undoubtedly, without knowledge an independent thinker cannot be born (Shinn, 2002). However, it is vague about what kind of knowledge should be included in the curriculum. Hence, it crucial to examine how knowledge is defined in a KR curriculum, and how it is different from the traditional, formalistic knowledge-based curriculum. A KR curriculum aligns with the traditional knowledge-based curriculum regarding the essence of academic knowledge in the liberation of thinking (Ellis, 2004; Eck et al, 2016 in “The Global Education 2030 Agenda UNESCO”). That being said, the essence of knowledge can be divided into two types: academic knowledge and procedural knowledge.

The first type of knowledge in a KR curriculum is academic knowledge, which is the systematic set of theoretical and empirical outcomes of perception and thinking generated by past and present generations. Knowledge, in that sense, is called declarative knowledge. It helps explain daily experiences and thinks beyond specific activities. In the KR curriculum, declarative knowledge exemplifies a reasonable line of thinking for the next generation – the students – to describes and explains things, events, or processes, their attributes, and their relations. For example, students can observe the falling direction of any object from a higher to lower place. However, only by going to school and explicitly being taught the vocabulary to describe a phenomenon in physics can a language learner explain the particulars of this phenomenon, such

as why an object falling through a fluid will not continue to accelerate indefinitely but reach a terminal velocity. Moreover, declarative knowledge is the common ground and expressway to enlightenment expected to obtain before any further explorations in a specific conceptual domain, or a sphere of life, can be proposed. The learner may observe the phenomenon and engage with it via his or her senses. However, without obtaining the knowledge about velocity, there would be no basis of inquiry and no linguistic building blocks for a student to further speculate on the conditions under which an object has reached a terminal speed.

However, a KR curriculum is inherently different from a traditional knowledge-based curriculum because its cumulative knowledge serves as the means and the regulator of thinking, not an end to thinking. The key characteristic of knowledge is that it does not emerge from mere imagination, but from a process of justifications in some ways (e.g. reasoning, synthesizing, experimenting, comparing and contrasting, grouping, measuring). In other words, the knowledge a student acquires in a knowledge-rich curriculum cannot be indoctrinated. Knowledge, by its nature, may lead down the road to counter-hegemonic, or even revolutionary, activity. Thus, knowledge needs to also be defined as a set of self-philosophized methodologies that demonstrate one's increasingly more profound levels of conceptual complexity when he gets closer to the truth of the matter. That second type of knowledge is called procedural knowledge. Students use knowledge to their advantage in navigating decisions, formulating opinions, solving problems, and generating new knowledge (Nagel, 2014; Young, 2013). In this vein, knowledge is not discrete and far-removed scripts summarized by a group of experts and material creators; knowledge is what has been recycled, consumed, and reconceptualized by students. For example, knowledge is not only the names of emperors and kings or rivers and mountains in English, which may be recorded in a vocabulary section in the textbook. Knowledge must be the students' interpretation of the pitfalls of power, inferences that separate personal opinion from the scientific methods to preserve natural resources, organizations of related ideas to judge the reasonableness of a knowledge application in new situations, such as whether monarchy or democracy is suited in the governance of contemporary societies. Procedural knowledge is mentored by the guidance of teachers, self-reflection, and peer discussion. Thus, knowledge in a KR curriculum is not merely what is transmitted from past generations and uncritically taken by the students. Students do not come to class as 'empty vessels' who passively receive declarative facts from their teachers. Indeed, the nature of knowledge is continually evolving, and (re)constructing, and knowledge receivers are simultaneously knowledge creators.

Categorizing the types of knowledge is important because opponents who support the learner-centered approach criticize the knowledge-based approach with regard to the unbalance between declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge. They claim that declarative knowledge is unnecessarily indoctrinated and cognitively overloading for learners (Solomon, 1999). The critical point is that, firstly, while there can be several disciplines and subjects arranged within the students' schedule at school to diversify their experiences, the

nature of selected knowledge in KR curriculum follows the principle of "less is more," which "focuses curricular efforts on (only) existential themes and generates deeper and broader learning of the students of the traditional school curriculum, while encouraging students' personal (and social) growth" (Stengel, 1997, p. 591).

That is to say, the amount of declarative knowledge is minimized into cohesive, simplified, and methodized sequences to benefit the procedural knowledge. The focal point in a KR curriculum is that it embraces the quality of knowledge, not the quantity of it, and provides students with time to think and explore the topics raised (Ildefonso, 2011). For instance, both the law of reflection (from Fermat's principle) and the ways to distinguish different types of mirrors (MOET, Grade 7 Physics Coursebook, Vietnam) are declarative knowledge which students are expected to memorize. However, the former shall be kept to apply in different contexts of use, while the latter shall be omitted. The reason is that if deep-knowledge structures about the law of reflection are prioritized, and if students acquire it, they are self-motivated and competent enough to develop relational understandings of that subject-matter. In brief, while the disciplines of study can be varied, the archetype concepts, patterns, and strategies in each discipline are tailored to represent more depth and less superficial coverage.

Second, despite the legitimacy of raising such concerns on the level of difficulty the knowledge in a curriculum exhibits that might wear out the students' interest, there is a considerable difference between cognitive overload and cognitive challenge. Knowledge in the KR curriculum, like everything else of value, is not to be obtained without disciplined effort, yet it does not mean such an effort would overwhelm students. The process to acquire academic knowledge simulates "the challenges of becoming human" (Leggo, 2004, p.34), so that not only specialized knowledge but also any other issue in real life must be worked for, studied for, reflected on, and more importantly, thought for. There is no short-cut to intellectuality. Although children can simply search for anything that does not exceed cognitive limits on Google, that information cannot be compared with the kind of knowledge extracted from their thinking process under the scaffolding of the teachers. Thus, when students can grasp the knowledge, they consider the subject a cognitive stimulation that shall be comfortable enough to struggle within before reaching what Vygotsky (1978) called "the zone of proximal development" (ZPD).

With that perspective, knowledge in a KR curriculum generated in the ZPD is only achieved when students depart from the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and move towards the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with peers (Chaiklin, 2003). That knowledge requires cognitive commitment and perseverance yet is bearable and intrinsically rewarding in the end. Such dedication and bravery, to step into exploring the unknown and embrace the standards of diligent knowledge construction, which is emphasized mainly in the knowledge-based approach, can prepare a solid foundation for any individual to gain both the

information and the methods of pursuing their interests and the ability to resolve whatever demands are placed upon them from society later in life.

Teaching Sequence and Learning Activities

The epistemological question, 'How do we know?' features more than the ontological question, 'What is there?' Therefore, the teaching process, which reflects the epistemological perspectives and affects all involving participants in the pedagogy (teachers and students), shall be the focus in a curriculum. In a traditional knowledge-based approach, the content and behavioral objectives from that top-down perspective make teachers focus on the end goals, not the process that leads to those goals. The importance and the dynamism of logical teaching sequences are downplayed. Those objectives overlook the psycho-cognitive processes the teacher has to facilitate to scaffold and transform students' existing knowledge.

Take the example of the national English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum in Vietnam as an example. While the documented curriculum envisage that students would participate in communicative activities actively, creatively, and collaboratively, the realized curriculum demonstrates a systematic, scripted teaching sequence. The teacher is an effective model of the target language, yet in such EFL curriculum, students could recite the verb form in simple past tense but could not retrieve it automatically to tell a story they experienced in the past. That teaching sequence trains students to be diligent knowledge receivers who could pass the requirements of a competence-based K-12 curriculum in Vietnam with the mastery of all English linguistic grammar points and functional meanings of English expressions. However, they are not confident in using the knowledge flexibly and naturally outside class. These students are competent at communicating with their partner in an assigned task in their coursebook, which consists mainly of fill-in-the-blanks and mechanical controlled exercises, yet they fail to be successful in real-life tasks, such as managing an interview in English. Thus, the competence may temporarily emerge within classroom practices, yet it is not proven in real-world relevant contexts. In consequence, there is a large gap between writing EFL curricular objectives and actualizing those in a way that is meaningful for EFL students.

That gap in epistemological framing for a curriculum, wherever it is (e.g., in Vietnam), needs to be closed because it directly affects the focus of teaching. The core value of a teaching sequence and learning activities shall be the process of facilitating students' experience in using content knowledge in meaningful contexts, including the quality of teaching sequence, the task authenticity, and the real achievements reflecting each student's current level. For that operational goal, firstly, learning objectives are provided not as the final inflexible outcomes of learning process but as the divergent expectations derived from each student's abilities. Next, the processed-based teaching sequence creates learning contexts that allow students to '*think* in a discipline at elementary as well as advanced levels of study' (Stenhouse, 1981, p. 38). It ensures the delivery of educational experiences in which knowledge is considered the materials for thinking (the food for thought), and simultaneously, the subject to explore and the goal to

gain (McKernan, 2008). Scholars so far have articulated a process-based sequence in curriculum design which engages students' prior knowledge background and experience, integrates declarative knowledge with underlying conceptual frameworks, and carries out explicit teaching of meta- cognitive learning strategies (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Erickson, 2002; Villacañas de Castro, 2016).

Developed from the process-oriented teaching philosophy of Stenhouse (1967), the teaching sequence of a knowledge-rich curriculum towards an orientation of deep knowledge mining would be as follows:

- (1) investigate how the knowledge works as a disciplined system;
- (2) investigate how society impacts the validity of knowledge and knowledge transformation throughout the course of history;
- (3) experiment with how to generate new knowledge based on the foundation of instructed knowledge;
- (4) experiment with how new knowledge can be expanded and validated in different contexts and fields (in an interdisciplinary approach); and
- (5) experiment with how to act on and transform social realities through knowledge application.

That teaching sequence promotes more open communication between teachers and students, more talk to seek both concrete and abstract information, and more questioning to relieve egalitarianism and intellectual inquisitiveness. Aligning with the five core principles in the teaching sequence, each teacher can accommodate his or her teaching sequence with available materials, resources, and pedagogical tools.

The Role of Teachers

Critics of the knowledge-based approach claim that teachers may find it burdensome to be experts in their subjects (see Friedman, 2000). Those perspectives are derived from the traditional notion that teachers are mere transmitters of knowledge (Grosser & De Waal, 2008). Nevertheless, in a knowledge-rich curriculum, the resolution is that teachers are not asked to list tiring facts and vocabulary on the board as in a Victorian class and act them out in a robotic manner: "Let's learn about the Romans on page fifty-six." Instead, the professional endeavor of teachers is to optimize the knowledge sequence in each lesson so that it can help students to secure key schema in a lesson; e.g., a sense of place and time, a framework for understanding diversity and human evolution, or a way to appreciate the aesthetics of poetry. In other words, they are the ones who fortify and turn the specific subject topics into experiences for the study of logic and the practice of thought processes. Teachers play an irreplaceable but not excessively strenuous role, irrespective of how large their class is or how different their student backgrounds and personal interests are.

In the KR curriculum, teachers support the students' methodological inquiry to develop their mental abilities so that they cannot only solve a particular novel problem in class, but so

that they can also transfer that ability to other problems and experiences beyond the classroom. For instance, one procedure for facilitating students' inquiry in knowledge-rich classroom discourse can be "I DO – WE DO – YOU DO" (Fisher & Frey, 2013). In this model teachers, promote learning through guided discovery by walking students through their presentation on declarative knowledge and modeling of procedural knowledge first; then, they involve students in reproducing the knowledge through practice, which explicitly constructs their conceptualization. The end goal of the teaching sequence lies in gradual scaffolding so that when students reach the "YOU DO" phase, they arrive at their "proximal development zone," which demonstrates their knowledge ownership and their abilities to do more than what they have received: they can apply the knowledge without the aid of teachers. The role of the teacher in a KR curriculum requires a disciplined yet open-minded and flexible approach. They orchestrate the learning experiences of students as the facilitator, making sure that each student gains the important knowledge, no matter which stage of the project he is working on.

Now, another concern raised by the learner-centered advocates is that a 'one fits all' orientation in a teaching sequence is impossible. The thing is, before teachers cater to the needs of each student and allow space for individual knowledge inquiry, all students must be equipped with a firm procedural foundation for thinking. Instead of jumping quickly to examining the topic, students are required to closely and patiently observe the topic with the teacher's modelling and guidance. Teachers need to make sure that the cognitive ability level is secured. All students first need to reach the requisite level before liberating themselves from the scaffolding for generating ideas that evolve alongside the reasoned facts. Such uniqueness and fundamentality in schooling experiences organized by teachers are what Young (2013) explained: "pupils do not come to school to know what they already know from (daily) experience" (p. 111). With the curriculum principle for content delivery sketched out above, the fact that teachers are facilitators for thinking and building procedural knowledge is the key to making "a coherent curriculum" (Van den Akker, 2003). That is, teachers as KR curriculum transmitters respect the core value of knowledge, which is the science of using knowledge, and refrain from a rote teaching approach that fails to integrate students' skills of critical thinking and decision-making effectively.

The Assessment

In the KR curriculum, the major shift from the traditional curriculum is the focus on both the bodies of knowledge and the practice. Consequently, the deviation from the progressive curriculum lies in disciplined study instead of an unstructured and extravagant construct of learning. The purpose of assessment in the KR curriculum serves, therefore, to parse teaching practice into lists of discrete procedures that can be both quantitatively and qualitatively evaluated. Thus, the notion of standardized testing, which is the most prevalent type of assessment in a traditional knowledge-based curriculum, needs to be revisited. At the same time, progressive educators are concerned with high-stakes testing because they are afraid that

such assessment would narrow the instructional curriculum into a teach-to-test practice (e.g., Crocco & Costigan, 2007). While skeptics' reticence on both sides is noted, it is not the idea of standardized testing that is detrimental to the quality of teaching and learning. Rather, it is the objective of the test and how teachers shape the content norms of the curriculum to match those of the tests, that matters most. Therefore, the curriculum-aligned assessment in a KR curriculum reserves space for formative assessment tasks to allow the individuality of students' learning. For example, teachers can evaluate student learning as it happens. After students have gained enough access to texts and concepts through visuals, media, and interaction with their teachers and their peers, they can be assigned a task that allows them to demonstrate their comprehension. The type of assessment that teachers opt for in the KR curriculum is to display the diversity in students' language output. That output is assessed in a non-judgmental manner to make small adjustments to the student's individual progress. The implementation of alternative, less anxious assessment types throughout the course of study is a way of preparing students for standardized assessment yet would maintain the motivation in teaching and learning.

INSIGHTS OF THE INSIDERS: A POSSIBLE CURRICULAR FRAMEWORK

When the teachers first examined the principles of a knowledge-rich curriculum, they generally experienced mixed feelings and doubt about its practicality. On the one hand, they were excited about the possibility of empowering their students stay interested in the knowledge for its own sake, reducing the amount of information forced to cover dictated by the MOET, and investing in an experiential learning process in which one can learn about and create knowledge. On the other hand, they raised considerable doubts and concerns about the students' reactions, the time management issues, and the levels of student anxiety, as they are not accustomed to learning by doing. Rather, both teachers and students are used to the old way of teaching sequence where they remain quiet, take notes, and are provided with information. One of the teachers expressed, "I started my teaching career with a lot of energy and wanted to make the bottom-up change in the way I taught to inspire students. However, I feel like I am in an isolated environment and have little power to affect the feudal structures which have been long embedded in the teaching sequence. I am in class to cover up everything in the coursebook so that I do not feel regretful if the test includes the question related to the part I skip. Activities are good for student's learning yet may not be beneficial for their test scores which test their memory of English rules."

Vietnamese teachers trained in the norms of the traditional-based approach are frustrated because it is not that they are falling short of their ideal expectations in pedagogy, but that they are not empowered to challenge a combination of complex manifestations of external control. To resolve those negative reactions, teachers found it necessary to engage in conversations with the researcher and administrators who actively support the subtle yet significant difference of setting up a knowledge-rich curriculum from the traditional knowledge-based curriculum. After

one month of training, teachers started to become the classroom leaders and promoted different coping strategies.

Due to space constraints, only one example of classroom observation that implemented the proposed knowledge-rich curriculum proposal is reported. Van, one of the teachers from the group, designed a workshop entitled *News Around the World & My Response*, which was implemented with EFL learners grade 9 in Unit 5 (SRV MOET, 2011, p. 40). The pupils were tasked with learning about writing in an English argumentative essay with a list of different vocabularies related to the unit topic – “The Media.” In order to teach about the organization of an argumentative essay, Van asked students to examine model essays written in the coursebook. She also brought along some other samples from the argumentative genre she found in newspapers. Students were given time to read the model essays, but not to memorize them, and mimic that knowledge in practices such as “fill-in-the-blanks” and “read and answer questions” in the coursebook (Figure 2). Students were asked to write down questions related to the genre of the text and the content conveyed. Next, Van asked her students to discuss those questions in groups. The aim of this activity is to activate students’ knowledge background and accelerate incidental learning.

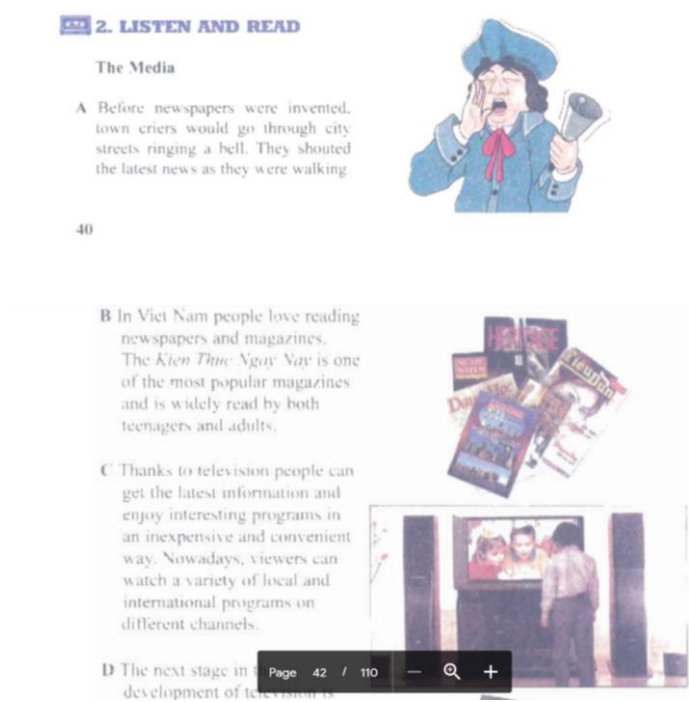


Figure 2. Screenshots from the English coursebook

Van moved on to give each group some other model essays and asked which essays prove to be the most persuasive, coherent, and well-articulated. Students needed to think critically about how an argument should be organized to be both effective and persuasive. Students also had to determine whether the style of argumentative writing differed in different modalities. One group was given print newspapers while others read online newspapers and watched

videos. The students had to devise a rubric delineating what they believed to constitute a well-structured argumentative essay. Students could refer to the theory and principles of organizing ideas for an argumentative essay in their book, yet they could also argue to make modifications to it as long as they could justify their points of view. That activity allowed them to gain facts about the genre and investigate the underlying procedure to produce the text at the same time.

After those warm-up inquiry-based activities, Van carried out the “I DO” phase. Van told the class that she would simulate the writing process of how an argumentative paragraph could be produced. The students observed Van articulate her opinion on the topic, “Shall we let young children use social media?” on the board. During this phase, Van was careful to do a step-by-step procedure, explaining the strategies a writer would use to strengthen their argument. She also repeated the organization of an argumentative essay genre as it was presented in the coursebook. Then, during the “WE DO” phase, Van and the students revised their rubric and evaluated Van’s paragraph with the rubrics that the students had come up with in their groups. Throughout this phase, if students could not retrieve a word in English, Van allowed them to use their first language while she noted down that word on the board in English. She asked students to use those words in English if they emerged again in the discussion. Once the students were clear about how an argumentative paragraph should be, they gave evidence of their acquired knowledge at the broader level of an essay. At that time, Van asked students to choose one topic that their group wanted to research. Adopting Google Docs, Van let students do the research and gather the information in a matrix. The group then did collaborative work while drafting the essay on their chosen topic (Figure 3). Van did not force the stance of students on the topic they chose. She visited each group to facilitate the inquiry into the topic and the interactions among group members.

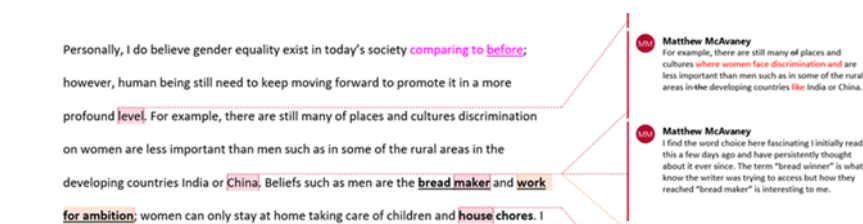


Figure 3. A sample of group corrections during the process of argumentative essay writing

When the drafting was complete, Van organized the class as a gallery where students of all groups could mingle and provide feedback on each other’s work, using the rubrics they had worked on from the beginning of the class.

Each student was then asked to reflect on the knowledge they gained in their journal. During the last phase – “YOU DO,” each student needs to choose a topic to write his or her own argumentative essay. Each student could continue working on the topic chosen by his or her group and incorporate the feedback the group had received from peers and the teacher. The students could also choose the topic of another group that they had found interesting during the gallery exhibition. For assessment, students needed to submit their essay and use it as a

model for standardized testing when they would be asked to produce their essay within a time limit. The standardized testing would occur at the end of the semester. Thus, Van added a formative assessment when she asked students to think of a way to present their arguments. Students could choose one form of media to deliver their argumentation. In the next lesson, students would use the rubric, which was derived from the knowledge listed in the book and from their own experience.

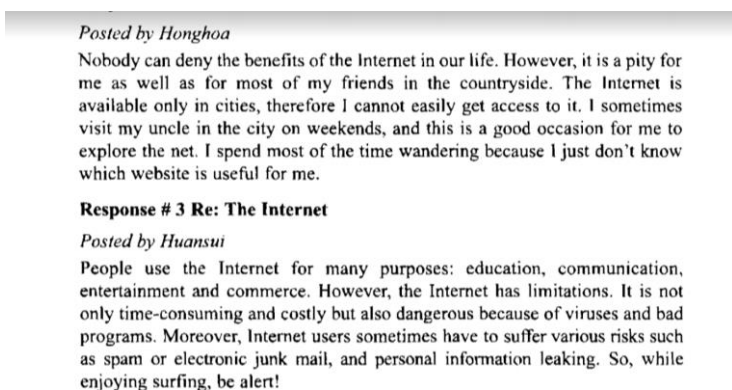


Figure 4. A sample of peer feedback on a topic chosen by a group



Figure 5. Samples of digital portfolio, comic strips, and digital storytelling, which are the three formats that students showcased for their argumentative project

Van expressed her opinions towards the knowledge-based framework: “To make sure that the students can gain a deep knowledge about argumentative writing essay, I need to let them consolidate the knowledge repetitively but with an increasing level of cognitive difficulty. I feel like I am still in charge of offering to them, which I find it an honor of my job. At the same time, I also feel that my students can have a voice over their interests and showcase their ideas right

away in class after they grasp the knowledge. What is important here is that we need coursebook as a skeleton for knowledge to emerge systematically, yet all the learning process is organized under the facilitation with the teacher. My students and I interact with each other in our experience with the intention of earning the knowledge, but we do not have to stick to the formatted activities in the coursebook. That gives me more space for creative and meaningful lesson planning.”

Another teacher added, “I agree with the importance of assessment and such assessment tends to repeat the mechanical types of exercise in the book. That washback effect of testing creates a teach-to-test orientation in a traditional knowledge-based curriculum. Fortunately, a knowledge-rich curriculum can mediate by allowing teachers to bring in more types of formative assessment in class. It means that students can indeed obtain the knowledge, but not in a one-way indoctrination. It is a way that allows us to stay curious about different products students can make using knowledge as a material or a subject to work on.” He concluded, “The major difference between a knowledge-rich curriculum and a knowledge-based one is that it is process-based priority, knowledge-focus yet allowing more methods to get that knowledge as long as they can be justified, and triangulated assessment which gives a more holistic picture of learning. Also, the major strength of a knowledge-rich curriculum over other types of curriculum is its systematic knowledge. That cannot be possible if a curriculum designer or a teacher gives excessive freedom for students when they go to class to study or when they are too into ambitious projects. I want them to take their intellectual journey at school at their own pace with the finer things in life that we are willing to offer.”

However, maintaining the excitement and effectiveness in implementing knowledge-rich curriculum in the language education in Vietnam is challenging. From the micro-level, while the Vietnamese English teachers welcomed the proposed curricular model, they expressed the concern about the long-term practicality of applying it into large classes where they still had to maximize the number of students passing the standardized testing with high scores. “Both I and my students want learning to be relevant and meaningful to students, yet we need to take time to coordinate the class activities that allow both serious learning and enjoyable learning. We have been either used to the old ways of teaching for a long time or the over-liberal teaching. It is either to ask students to remember rules and do quizzes or to listen to us reading PowerPoint slides or letting them do whatever they want. I feel like the cultural norms of respecting the teachers give us the advantage to tell students what to do, yet if we do not let students practice their independent thinking, they will have low tolerances for challenge in life, including applying the knowledge,” Van expressed in her reflection on her lessons. Her reflection reveals that the merger of theoretical complexities and practical realities is necessary to collapse the binary of traditional curriculum and progressive curriculum, as well as teacher-centered and student-centered classrooms. A balanced way of teaching takes effort, experience, and a passion for learning, both for the sake of knowledge and for students’ growth. To embrace this model, both teachers and students need training workshops, time, and mutual support to address a number

of factors that may contribute to their resistance to the intellectual work of knowledge-rich learning.

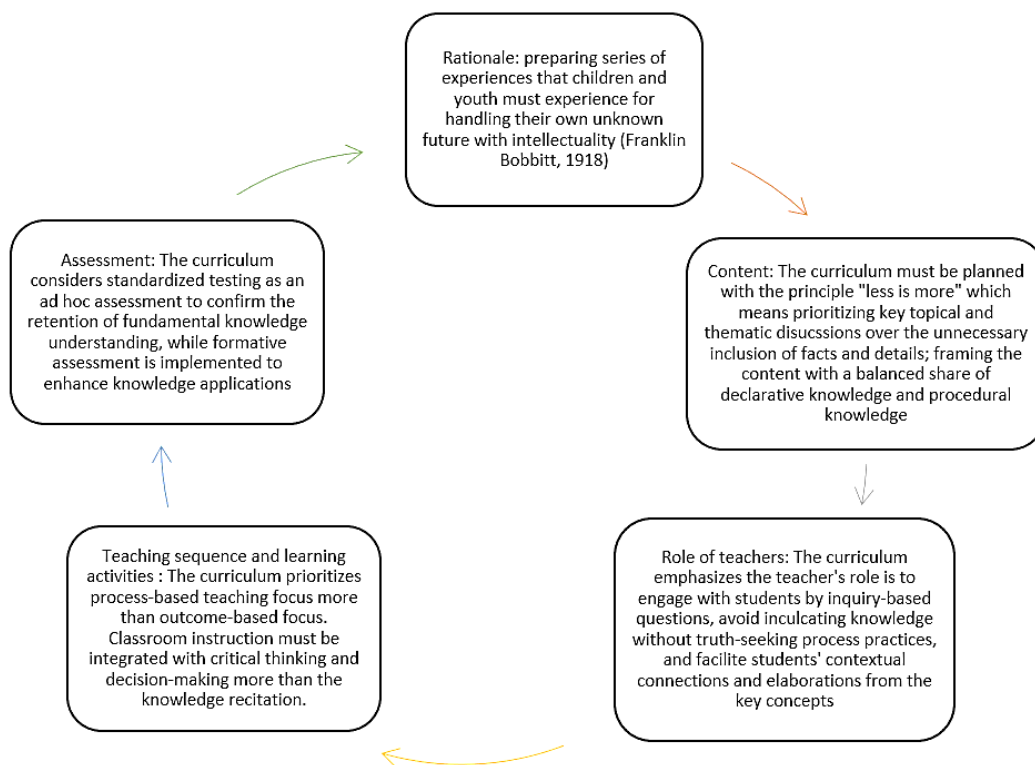


Figure 6. Principles for developing a knowledge-rich curriculum with an orientation towards deep knowledge mining

CONCLUSION

A knowledge-rich curriculum attempts to tackle the long-held assumptions of both a knowledge-centered approach and a learner-centered approach. The knowledge-rich curriculum proposes an alternative framework that is grounded in traditional knowledge-based curriculum yet selectively incorporates the value of liberal thinking. It looks into the nature of knowledge worth teaching, such as elements of interactivity, abstraction, underlying principles, and counter-intuitive experimentation. While the primary focus is inevitably academic knowledge, the curriculum prioritizes the development of students' procedural knowledge, which would become transferable how-to skills to tackle problems related to the declarative knowledge and benefit students' conceptual understanding. Consequently, the role of teachers is to mentor that development in thinking, not to reinforce rote learning in students. The teaching sequence, accordingly, needs to be emphasized on how the knowledge is delivered within the manner and the context such knowledge emerged, is being applied, and will be implemented. Once the seed of knowledge-seeking strategies is cultivated, teachers let the intrinsic passion for deep knowledge mining inside students thrive naturally via their formative assessment as well as standardized testing.

The question of whether a knowledge-rich curriculum is or is not an acceptable and durable good practice of curriculum design is open to empirical studies. This paper, however,

aims to confirm how a knowledge-rich curriculum has to be set up and how it is contingent on distinguishing itself from other types of curriculum on the "traditional versus progressive" curriculum continuum. In addition, I demonstrated the preliminary findings from my case study to indicate a promising movement from Vietnamese EFL teachers who used to be trained to teach in a traditional formalist knowledge-based curriculum. Such a growth mindset among curriculum practitioners proves the possibility for refining and translating curricular proposals into more meaningful practices for all levels in an educational system in the 21st century.

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