



# TESOL Connections

Keeping English language professionals connected

## Supporting Teachers During Curriculum Change

by [Ilka Kostka](#) and [Lucy Bunning](#)

Because one of the main goals of curriculum design is to make improvements to teaching and learning, some degree of change is inevitable. Nation and Macalister (2010) point out two particular kinds of change, which are “the change that occurs in the curriculum, and the change that needs to occur in the minds of the various people affected by the curriculum” (p. 172). Though a lot has been written about the curriculum design process, much less attention has been paid to the emotional and mental effects of change on teachers. Nonetheless, understanding teachers’ response to educational change is important for successful change processes.

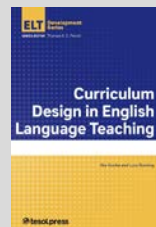
Paying attention to how teachers feel is important because they may experience a range of emotions in their professional roles (Chen, 2016). Positive emotions may include feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction for implementing effective curriculum changes and witnessing improvements to teaching and learning. However, negative feelings may also surface. For instance, evaluating a curriculum can expose shortcomings which may be experienced as face threatening (Nation & Macalister, 2010). Curriculum changes may also stir up feelings of resistance if teachers are not willing to participate in curriculum development. All of these factors, combined with the notion that “innovation is an inherently messy, unpredictable business” (Nation & Macalister, 2010, p. 180), can make curriculum change an emotional experience for teachers.

Once it is understood and agreed that a curriculum change is necessary, special care should be given to managing the range of emotions that might emerge. Drawing from literature on curriculum design and our own experiences working on English language curricula in diverse settings, we describe three ways that English language curriculum developers can help minimize teacher stress and anxiety and foster success during change.

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by Ilka Kostka and Lucy Bunning



## 1. Recognize That Change Takes Time

As English language teachers, we know that language learning and adjusting to a new culture take time and support, and the same is true for curriculum change. Recognizing that curriculum change is a process divided into smaller steps over an extended period of time helps ensure that appropriate support is chosen and enough time is allotted.

Nation and Macalister (2010) recommend several strategies for introducing change, such as

- ensuring that the change is supported by final decision-makers,
- establishing a common understanding of the change's value,
- involving those who will be affected by the change, and
- communicating about the changes often and effectively.

When determining which strategies to use, it is also helpful to understand how teachers experience change. Waters (2014) describes the notion of a “transition curve” during a period of educational innovation and change that traces an individual's psychological stages from the initiation of a transition going forward (p. 104). These stages are as follows:

1. Immobilization (i.e., not moving forward because of “emotional and cognitive paralysis”)
2. Denial (i.e., temporarily refusing change)
3. Awareness of incompetence (i.e., feeling unsure about how to deal with change)
4. Acceptance (i.e., learning to live with the change)
5. Testing (i.e., experimenting with coping mechanisms)
6. Search for meaning (i.e., examining the underlying reasons for change)
7. Integration (i.e., incorporating the change into teaching)

The transition curve also indicates that as time passes and as teachers progress through these stages, their competence varies. For instance, Waters (2014) notes that a teacher's competence may dip in the immobilization, awareness of incompetence, and acceptance phases, but then increase from the testing stage and beyond. If we apply Waters' (2014) model to a curriculum change process, we can recognize that these reactions are normal and expected and provide support at each stage. For instance, we might anticipate that the teachers involved in a curriculum-related change may at first be resistant. However, with time, communication, and support, it is possible for them to make sense of it and integrate it into their practice, with a result of increased competence. Understanding these stages also helps those driving curriculum change set realistic expectations of teachers and meet their reactions to change with empathetic responses.

## 2. Prioritize Communication

Effective and frequent communication among those affected by change is crucial for implementing change and ensuring success (Markee, 1997; Nation & Macalister, 2010). In fact, communication is so important that when a new program is introduced, the effectiveness of communication “can make or break it” (Carroll, 2007, p. 8). Markee (1997) stressed that

communication should be relayed through multiple channels over multiple avenues and that “change agents should never assume that they have successfully communicated their message by discussing it once or twice” (p. 174). When you provide teachers with the information they need and update them about important developments, you can reduce their anxiety.

We kept the importance of timely and effective communication in mind as we recently worked on revising our undergraduate curriculum. To make sure that our colleagues were aware of how curriculum changes would impact teachers and students, we created a video presenting the new curriculum. We emailed a link to this video to staff, faculty, and advisors along with a survey link where they could submit questions and comments. The curriculum committee was then able to prepare a thoughtful response to share at an in-person meeting. We found that this approach was successful in making information available to everyone who was affected by the curricular change and allowing them time to process the information. Our colleagues could access the video at any time, and everyone had an opportunity to respond to the changes; we were then able to address questions and concerns efficiently in a meeting (Kostka & Bunning, 2017). Communication should thus be approached as a continual conversation rather than a one-time event.

### 3. Provide Support and Training

Teachers need to be supported throughout a curriculum change process to facilitate buy-in and to ensure that changes are implemented (Wedell, 2003). This support may include formal training, funding, supplies, materials, professional development, or teacher education. More specifically, Wedell (2003) proposes that curriculum planners consider the cultural shifts and values involved in change and how teachers can be supported during these shifts. Ongoing communication and training throughout curriculum planning and implementation are important in figuring out the answers to these questions.

Short, Cloud, Morris, and Motta (2012) provide an excellent example of how teacher support and training can lead to successful curriculum work. The authors describe a unique multiyear cross-district curriculum design project that involved both veteran and less experienced teachers from two different districts in Rhode Island, USA. The objective of this project was to develop a new standards-based curriculum for English language learners in their school districts. As teachers collaborated to work on this curriculum, they participated in workshops, received coaching throughout the year, and were observed in class. One of the positive outcomes was the inspiration teachers felt to continue their training in teaching English language learners and improve teaching and learning in their districts. Short et al. (2014) illustrate how complex and multilayered curriculum projects can be a valuable learning opportunity.

### Conclusion

Our experiences and work on curriculum design have alerted us to the importance of managing the affective factors that may arise during curriculum change. As we have learned, change can be daunting, scary, exciting, and rewarding. However, by recognizing that change takes time, communication, and professional support, those involved can minimize the negative impact that

new changes may bring about and maximize the probability that these changes will positively impact teaching and learning.

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