

# Tunisian teachers' perceptions of the compulsory English education, language policies, and the future of TEFL: An interview study

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**Abstract:** To bridge the gap between education policies and teaching practices and based on Spolsky's (2004) framework of language education, this research aims to look at teachers' knowledge about English language policies, as well as their perceptions and dispositions toward English education curricula, approaches, and the future of TEFL in the Republic of Tunisia. As this is a qualitative investigation, a group of 12 Tunisian English language teachers working in Tunisian public schools were interviewed online. The analysis of the results is based on the interpretivism research paradigm as data was thematically coded and interpreted. Conclusions were drawn upon the analysis of the transcripts' emerging themes. Although the findings showed a striking misunderstanding of the notion of language policy, there is an interesting and enriching difference in the perception of the official curriculum, TEFL approaches, and planning strategies employed by the

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teachers. The results suggest that, for an effective and successful learning environment, it should be up to the teachers to decide whether to strictly follow official documents or to strategically plan what is suitable and productive for their students. The relevance of this study lies in the fact that such research has not been carried out in the Tunisian context, unlike internationally.

## 1 Introduction

Contributing to the betterment of education starts with looking at the policies governing the educational system and the perceptions of major educational stakeholders involved (Peláez and Usma, 2017). In the Tunisian context, “Tunisian educational policy makers are aware of the necessity to cope with the demands of today’s world” and of the fact that Tunisian schools should play an important “role in coping with these changes ... through the promotion of learning foreign languages” (Abid, 2013: 26). “English is exclusively taught in the classroom” as a foreign language, and therefore “it has been given importance by educational policy makers” (Abid, 2013: 27). Taking into consideration the status of the language in the country and its governing policies, teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the Republic of Tunisia seems an extremely challenging task. It is therefore imperative to investigate the present EFL scenario “for the pursuit of excellence in English language teaching and learning practices” (Liton, 2013: 20).

In the context of achieving quality education and to bridge the gap between theories and practices in English language education, several studies engaging teachers of EFL in different contexts have been conducted. Teachers, as major stakeholders in the educational process, are the direct implementers and practitioners of the existing curricula and official program in each country. They are the front-line soldiers of education and the “people of action” (Medgyes, 2017: 2).

Among these studies, [Kikuchi and Browne \(2009\)](#) tested the influence of English education policies on language pedagogy in Japanese junior and senior schools. The study demonstrated that there is a complicated gap between what is stated in the Japanese educational policies and the actual teaching practices within their schools ([Kikuchi and Browne, 2009](#)). This gap is relatively generalizable over various international contexts.

[Fallon and Rublik \(2012\)](#) looked at teachers' views of language education policies and their influence in the Canadian context. They explained that schools and language teachers are in constant struggle to achieve the intent of these policies and to rigidly follow the foreign language learning curriculum ([Fallon and Rublik, 2012](#)). Though it was positively welcomed, introducing compulsory English as a Second Language (ESL) educational policy in primary Canadian schools was faced with several challenges, according to ESL teachers and educators as it was difficult to address the needs of their students and reach their objectives ([Fallon and Rublik, 2012](#)).

[Hélot and Young \(2005\)](#) analyzed foreign language educational policies and practices in French schools. Several projects, including the Didenheim project, were implemented in French primary schools to encourage and raise awareness about linguistic diversity, bilingualism, and multilingualism in different regions of the country as a shift from the monolingual nature of education ([Hélot and Young, 2005](#)). The project helped in changing learners' attitudes regarding learning foreign languages and empowered foreign language education. It is also considered handy for teachers to adopt this model of language awareness and this linguistic diversity approach as a pedagogical solution for future language classes ([Hélot and Young, 2005](#)).

[Kolano and King \(2015\)](#) explored teachers' perceived beliefs about English language learners in the United States of America. The diversity of students and immigrants' backgrounds in the US schools and universities urges for the need for modifying and adapting the

English language courses to better accommodate for this multiculturalism (Kolano and King, 2015). Teachers of English as a foreign language to newcomers in the US expressed that they need specialized programs for better and effective results (Kolano and King, 2015). For teachers to be fully trained, the researchers made a suggestion that a new course about the perceived beliefs about learners of English from a multicultural perspective to be added to teacher education curriculum (Kolano and King, 2015). This course is one of many that researchers ought to consider in engaging teachers of English language to professionally develop.

Lanvers (2011: 63) answered the question “Is English the elephant in the room?” in an analysis of language education policy in England. In this study, the researcher explored the various policies and strategies that the United Kingdom had been implementing since 2000. The concluding notes explain the fact that the UK is poorly performing, in comparison with other European Union countries, when it comes to inciting and encouraging students to learn foreign languages, in the context of global English (Lanvers, 2011). The current practices and measures taken by the government and ministry of education to promote foreign language learning lack efficiency and coherence, which calls for the intervention, assistance, and collaboration of teachers as major stakeholders (Lanvers, 2011).

In the Arab world, Barnawi and Al-hawsawi (2017) studied the challenges facing English education policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Although the actual educational policies are primarily driven by the forces of global changes, there is still a need for an efficient and effective implementation strategy (Barnawi and Al-hawsawi, 2017). For a successful planification and application of the new strategies, intellectuals and language teachers have been called to cooperate and collaborate in designing new language education programs. With the aim of internationalization of education, English language education policies have been ratified and amended to meet the expectations and to promote for mass literacy in English (Barnawi and Al-hawsawi,

2017). English language teachers in Saudi Arabia ought to master the pre-existing knowledge about language pedagogies and learn about the recent and newest aspects of teaching foreign languages (Barnawi and Al-hawsawi, 2017). The situation of English language education also calls for an alternative to the top-down approach utilized by English language teachers (Barnawi and Al-hawsawi, 2017).

Amara (2003) investigated foreign language education policies development in Palestine. The latest curriculum shows that there is an international orientation in these policies and a major importance is given to foreign language education. However, the commitment to foreign language learning and teaching, teachers in Palestine assert that there are still considerable problems which will need effort, time, and financial budgeting (Amara, 2003). Ghaith and Shaaban (1999) looked at Lebanese teachers' perceptions of teaching challenges and professional development. The researchers took into consideration various factors in analyzing the interrelationship and interconnect-edness between the teachers' perceptions about their teaching concerns and their gender, grade level taught, and experience (Ghaith and Shaaban, 1999). The study reveals that teachers are the primary source of change in an educational setting (Ghaith and Shaaban, 1999). Their personal and professional efficacies also play a role in the successful implementation of educational innovation (Ghaith and Shaaban, 1999). The development of professional foreign language teachers is the key toward increasing teachers' sense of efficacy and contribution to the learning process (Ghaith and Shaaban, 1999). English language teachers' education and trainings should not be restricted to contextual knowledge and pedagogical skills, but also to train teachers to deal with and overcome the effects of teaching concerns and to empower them throughout their career (Ghaith and Shaaban, 1999). In another context, Errihani (2017) depicted the gap between English education policies and practices in the Moroccan context. The study reveals that there is a shift from the emphasis on French as a first foreign language to English (Errihani, 2017).

Nonetheless, what governmental and constitutional policies are suggesting are different from what is in actual practice within schools. This rivalry between the two foreign languages in education is has been ongoing for decades, which is not so different from the Tunisian context (Errihani, 2017).

Tunisia considers English to be a third language (Boukadi, 2013). Therefore, English as a subject of study has not been given attention compared to the first and second languages; respectively Arabic and French. To better understand the situation of English education in the Tunisian context, it is important to mention that there have been no major changes introduced recently, even with English a compulsory subject (Derbel, 2001). The English curriculum and official programs, currently in use, have not been revised, modified or changed since 2006 (Mokhtari, 2017). Only minor changes have been implemented regarding teachers' guidebooks and students' workbooks in the different levels from primary (1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> grade), preparatory (7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade) and high or secondary schools (1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> grade).

In this research, I adapted Spolsky's (2004) framework of researching foreign languages education as it provides a methodological basis for this paper in order to explore qualitatively the proposed elements in his model; 1) language practices 2) language beliefs and ideology 3) language planning or management among EFL teachers. Hence, this exploratory study aims to evaluate qualitatively and holistically the current situation of English education in Tunisia from the perspective of teachers of English. When setting the main objectives of this research, I intended to discuss Tunisian English teachers' perceptions and views concerning the schooling conditions, the curriculum and the approaches employed as well as their dispositions toward the language policies and their aspirations for the future of TEFL in the country. Investigating the topic with these teachers is expected to provide a credible and realistic overview of the situation as they are in the frontline of the teaching process and familiar with the educational system, and their constructive criticism

could lead toward change.

In the light of this review of the literature, the first objective was to have an overview of the situation of English language education, the challenges and the quality control steps taken into consideration in the process of teaching and learning. The second objective was to identify the official documents, the materials and the approaches being used in TEFL. A third objective was set to determine the extent to which compulsory English language education teachers in state-schools are following the educational changes and reforms as well as the English language policies, and the extent to which they are willing to engage in revising the current curriculum or designing a new one. A final objective was to look at teachers evaluating TEFL in Tunisia, their contribution to the change in English education and, finally, their idea about a successful, if not, an ideal TEFL environment in the country.

The relevance of this research lies in the fact that this topic has not been investigated in the Tunisian context. Therefore, there is a remarkable lack in empirical studies investigating English teachers views and perceptions of English education in the Tunisian context. In the scope of this research, I attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How do Tunisian English teachers view broadly the current situation and the quality of English language education in Tunisia?
2. What are the current approaches to TEFL and ELT materials that Tunisian English teachers employ when teaching in state-schools?
3. What are Tunisian English teachers' dispositions toward the TEFL curriculum and its objectives?
4. What do Tunisian English teachers know about English language policies in their country?
5. How do teachers perceive and envision the future of TEFL in Tunisia?

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Research instrument

To answer the aforementioned research questions, I opted for a qualitative method of investigation. The selection of this method for this study is based on the fact that qualitative studies are not tightly prefigured (Dörnyei, 2007). As a matter of fact, the study is to be kept open and fluid so that emergent details or new themes would be depicted throughout the analyses (Dörnyei, 2007). It also highlights its nature of flexibility and adaptability to meet the needs of an exploratory study as I had no preconceived hypotheses to test, but rather ideas to investigate (Dörnyei, 2007). That is to say I designed an instrument based on semi-structured questions, which allowed me to orient and guide the interviews effectively, while giving the interviewees the freedom to elaborate on any of those questions to finally capture rich and complex information.

In this study, I compiled an instrument adopted from several international and Tunisian studies. This rendered the instrument relatively long and exhausting for some participants to answer all the questions. Though insightful and valuable, the duration of the interviews was lengthy. Also, some questions of the main interview could have been better tailored to the Tunisian environment or to specific regions in the country. This was challenging for the participants as some of the variables were unclear for them to answer.

### 2.2 Design

The constructs of this research were adopted from various studies. Mokhtari (2017) elaborated in his doctoral dissertation on Tunisian educators' perceptions of educational policies and reforms related to English language after the outbreak of the Arab spring. Boukadi (2013) in her doctoral dissertation examined teachers' perceptions



about the future of English teaching and learning in post-revolutionary Tunisia. [Habeeb \(2013\)](#) discussed teachers' views of the possibility of implementing English as a foreign language in Kuwaiti kindergartens. [Mawed \(2016\)](#) explored, in her doctoral dissertation, teachers' attitudes towards designing and developing the curriculum of an English language teaching department in a Syrian Higher Education institute of languages. [Yook \(2010\)](#) investigated Korean English teachers' beliefs about English education and the ministry-of-education-initiated reforms. [Wang \(2008\)](#) looked at Chinese teachers' perceptions of the language policy implementation in tertiary education.

Based on these studies, I defined the major constructs that I intended to investigate, and I compiled a pilot study interview, in which I combined a set of 11 major questions and 23 sub-questions divided into four major sections (with six biographical questions and three closing questions). After piloting the instrument in the framework of one interview with a Tunisian female high school English teacher working in the capital city Tunis, I modified the wording and the order of certain questions to make them clearer and more coherent for the interviewees. The final instrument, the novelty of this study, includes 35 questions in total which are adapted to the Tunisian educational context, and divided into six sections (for the sample instrument, see appendix B):

- Biographical information
- Introduction to the topic
- TEFL curriculum and approaches
- Knowledge and perception of English language policies
- Teachers' perceptions of the future of TEFL
- Final questions

### **2.3 Participants**

To answer the research questions, I arbitrarily selected active Tunisian English teachers working in public institutions. I conducted the in-

interviews with 12 educators: one working in a primary school, five in a preparatory school and the remaining six teachers working in high schools. The teachers were working in eight different regions around the country (Ariana, Gbelli, Jendouba, Kasserine, Sfax, Siliana, Tataouine, and Tunis). Their experience in TEFL varied between one semester and twenty years. There was only one male participant in the interviews, and the remaining eleven participants were females. Their ages varied between 23 years and 46 years. The difference in the length of teaching experiences, age and gender variables were not considered for the analysis in this study. For the sake of anonymity, participants in this study were referred by pseudonyms: Sub1, Sub2, Sub3 etc.

## **2.4 Procedure for data collection**

To collect the data for this research, I first relied on the snowball technique. After the interviews, I asked the interviewees to recommend colleagues that might be interested in participating in this study. I conducted all the interviews online using Skype to ensure unlimited recording for the videos and easy access to the platform for all participants. All the data collection took place in January 2021.

## **2.5 Procedure for data transcription**

During the interviews, I recorded the videos on Skype and simultaneously the voice using a smartphone to ensure that there would be a copy of the interview in case of any technical issues. The recordings were saved with the names of the participants, and no one had access to them beside myself. Following the standard transcription scheme for conversations, I transcribed all the recordings via Otter application and then I reviewed the transcripts manually, one by one, to point out the inconsistencies between the recordings and the appli-

cation transcripts to correct them, to omit faulty data generated by the application, and to denote pause times. The answers in the transcripts were later annotated; based on the themes that emerged. The answers in the transcripts were annotated following a combinative annotation schemes whereby the answers were described and evaluated according to the themes. I divided the findings of the research based on thematic partition in order to answer comprehensively and extensively the research questions.

## 2.6 Procedure for data analyses

To analyze the outcome of the 12 interviews', I opted for an inductive data analysis procedure based on the interpretive research design (Dörnyei, 2007). This means that I reviewed all the transcripts and searched for common details which I coded into emerging themes. The set of questions was also divided into specific constructs that I wanted to investigate, which facilitated the coding (Dörnyei, 2007).

At the beginning of the interviews, I asked the teachers to reflect on why they had chosen to become English language teachers and their experience in teaching. The questions of the interviews were particularly oriented to looking at the teachers' views of the quality of compulsory English education in the Tunisian public schools and the quality control steps taken to maintain this quality of education.

They also were invited to discuss from an insiders' perspective the approaches employed in teaching EFL as well as describing the national English language curriculum; its structure, objectives, and the challenges it poses for its implementation. Further, Tunisian teachers were asked to comment on the Ministry of Education's materials that they had at their disposal to use during their classes and their usefulness.

Afterwards, I inquired the participants whether they were knowledgeable about the English language policies in the Tunisian context and if these influenced the way they taught English. Toward the

end of the interviews, I investigated teachers' perceptions and views about the need to design a new curriculum or update the existing one. They also reflected on their teaching strategies and what they would like to change in their classes. Finally, they projected their ideas of not only a successful, but an ideal TEFL environment in the country.

Later, I started interpreting the data for each theme and drawing conclusions and implications. To ensure anonymity, the interviewees quotations were referred to by pseudonyms per their consent.

### **3 Results**

The study mainly aims at narrowing the gap between language policies, language education theories and their implementation in TEFL in Tunisia by investigating the perceptions of the major stakeholders involved in the educational process, Tunisian English teachers. The following results are classified according to the emerging themes.

#### **3.1 English language education in Tunisian state-schools**

##### **3.1.1 Learners of English language in Tunisian schools**

The Tunisian educational system is 'shy' claimed Sub1. To further explain, he argued that it takes a lot of time to react to what is happening around the world and in the country. However, the quality of teaching English is believed to be average. Teenagers seem to be more interested in learning English than before, 'it's really popular among the youth' as Sub1 expressed. Though class attendance and attention towards learning English is improving, English teachers still face many challenges in dealing with learners, bureaucratic administrations, the curriculum, and the materials available.

The participants argued that learner motivation is at stake during the lessons. While some students might show a high level of

motivation and interest in attending English classes and learning a great deal of English, the others feel disoriented and disinterested in acquiring English and they would rather learn French as it is a working language in all spheres in the country. There is also a tendency to focus on science subjects at the expense of the social sciences and humanities courses.

### **3.1.2 Teaching English language in Tunisian schools**

In describing their classes, teachers assert that their English lessons are not learner-centered but rather teacher-fronted. The courses' major goal is to prepare learners for the examinations rather than for learning the language. There is also a focus on teaching writing skills and grammar structures. This makes learners' communication skills relatively low as they are not accustomed to those skills.

The interviewees believe that English teaching lacks innovation and creativity from the side of the teacher. The materials being used are outdated and the topics of discussion are uninteresting for both learners and educators. All teachers declared that they were teaching from the same textbooks that they used as learners. The classes that they are teaching are usually with mixed levels and abilities, which for some is found challenging and for others effective. Opinions about having low and high achievers in the same classes varied depending on the teachers' abilities to manage the classroom and lesson progress.

### **3.1.3 English language teacher education**

The issue of teacher education was pointed out by almost all the interviewees. They admit that English teachers did not have enough practice or training during their university studies before they start their teaching careers. Most of the teachers graduate with a diploma in English language, literature, civilization, and linguistics. However, by looking at the curriculum of the English studies' degree in

the various faculties or institutes, there is no sign of practical or experimental training provided for future teachers of English. In university, students become acquainted with philological matters and the theoretical background to teaching a foreign language, but there is no room for TEFL or TEYL practice. Once they are in the field, teachers did not receive enough supervision from inspectors or the ministry of education regarding their in-service training. When it comes to self-professional development, some teachers, especially the more experienced ones, seem to be reluctant to participate in further training and to change.

#### **3.1.4 Quality control of English language education in Tunisian schools**

As for quality control in the Tunisian system, most teachers affirmed that it is solely the responsibility of inspectors. They hold meetings, workshops, training sessions and collaborate with teachers for demonstration lessons. Inspectors also give advice about the innovations in teaching the language in accordance with the guidelines of the Ministry of Education and the curriculum. They are responsible for assessing and evaluating both the preparation and the performance of teachers. Inspectors usually assist in observing, commenting, highlighting the strengths, and pointing out the weaknesses. Nevertheless, the inspectors' visits are very rare; it could be once per two years which is claimed to be insufficient for novice teachers.

#### **3.1.5 Administration in Tunisian schools**

As far as administrative organization is concerned, the contact hours for English classes are very limited. It could be up to only one to two hours during a week for primary and preparatory school levels whereas it is three hours for high school students. Teachers also commented on the fact that the school principals and general regulations do not allow much flexibility for classroom management and

the tables are usually set in rows instead of a U shape which would be preferable for language classes. In some schools in remote areas, the conditions might be even worse because of power cuts.

## **3.2 TEFL approaches**

In this section, I prompted teachers to describe the approaches and the strategies they use when teaching English. Teachers use different methods. Most of them claim to be following the audiolingual method and the communicative language teaching approach, respectively. While the first method enables students to practice the pronunciation of the newly acquired vocabulary, the second one aims to help them initiate conversations in English in authentic situations.

### **3.2.1 A mix of approaches in TEFL in Tunisian schools**

As assessment is purely summative and students will be evaluated in national examinations by the end of their preparatory and high school studies, teachers need to opt for the grammar-translation method to teach syntax, lexis, and the stylistic structures of the English language. Some interviewees also claimed to rely on project-based learning wherein they would divide students into groups and assign tasks from the project they plan to work on, depending on their needs and levels. Meanwhile, most of the novice teachers rely on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as the new generation are more audio and visual oriented than the previous generations. Teachers who work with beginners use the total physical response and gamification as they both help learners acquire the language faster.

### **3.2.2 A variety of techniques in TEFL in Tunisian schools**

Tunisian English teachers vary their activities and techniques depending on the needs, interests, and abilities of their learners. Simi-

larly, the methods being applied depend on the lesson, the content of the workbooks and textbooks. Sub2 believes that ‘the best learner for the pupil is the pupil himself’ and so she lets them interact and engage in conversations or group work to learn from each other effectively. According to Sub2, the technique seems to be ‘entertaining and engaging at the same time’ as students, thus, have the opportunity to choose the lesson, they might be interested in preparing, and come to the classroom to report the work they have accomplished.

Though the curriculum might be rigid and exhaustive in its terms of the number of lessons, the focus is on quality rather than quantity, as one of the participants admitted. Teachers of English in Tunisian schools try to vary their strategies and approaches in teaching the foreign language. Therefore, English teaching becomes fairly diverse, engaging, enjoyable and accommodating for the different levels. TEFL in the Tunisian context is basically eclectic.

### **3.3 TEFL curriculum and its objectives**

#### **3.3.1 Outdated English language education curriculum used in Tunisian schools**

The interviewees agreed that the national English language education curriculum appears to be clear and coherent, even though ‘it’s very old’ as Sub3 commented. They said that the curriculum is useful for their classes; ‘it’s the pillar we step on and then expand from or zoom in and out’ as Sub3 explained, but to an extent. The curriculum in use for preparatory and high schools is ‘outdated’ and ‘redundant’, as Sub4 declared. Teachers claimed that 15 years ago, this curriculum would serve its purpose with English learners. However, it no longer serves and meets the needs of students of this decade. There is a clear and vast gap between the content of the materials in use and the students in the classes.

The syllabus is organized around the idea that the teacher is the main source of information. The instructor is still seen as a god-



like figure instead of a facilitator accompanying students in their language learning journey. Teachers believe that they cannot rely heavily on this curriculum. Sub7 said that they just 'need to know the gist of it'. Though its objectives are precise, and it seems to be built around a certain sequencing of content, some lessons Sub5 deemed 'very irrelevant' and do not present any link with the remaining lessons.

### **3.3.2 English language education curriculum contextualization**

Teachers questioned the appropriateness and the relevance of the curriculum in the Tunisian context. For some teachers, the curriculum is completely decontextualized. The materials do not talk straight to this generation's interests and needs for learning the English language. While some teachers would advocate a Tunisian-contextualized curriculum, others would favor an English-speaking country contextualization of the materials. They would also favor a curriculum that is oriented toward contributing to the future and professional aspirations of learners. For example, each branch of studies in high school should have English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes that would help them meet the needs of their specialization field instead of learning with a curriculum for general use.

### **3.3.3 English language education curriculum objectives**

As far as the objectives are concerned, they are divided into general and specific aims. The curriculum is composed of units including general aims, which are constituted of modules with narrower aims and divided into lessons with specific goals. The activities are generally focused on either the productive or receptive skills. That the students, by the end of each lesson, would be able speak, write, read, or listen. According to Sub6, 'the foremost objective would be to have students speak English correctly and fluently and in context'.

In theory, the objectives are well defined. However, in practice, it is more challenging to achieve all of them. Some objectives are simply unrealistic and do not meet the needs of the day.

When asking the teachers about the ways they can achieve these objectives, they commonly affirmed that it is important to adopt ‘the right activities to the specific goals’ while taking into consideration the learners’ background, level, interests and needs. Planning a lesson is the most crucial step for reaching the goals and the success of the course. Sub7 proposed that ‘it is up to the teacher to know how to strike a balance between these two elements’: productive and receptive skills. Implementing the curriculum is dependent on the diversity of levels within one classroom. While an under-achieving class encourages a strict use of the curriculum, a high achievers’ class would go beyond what is stated in the official program. Hence, it is up to the teachers to follow rigidly what is stated in the official documents or to deviate from it either by adding extra worksheets or changing the texts or the supporting materials.

### **3.4 TEFL official documents and materials**

The regulatory or official materials that teachers have to take into account when teaching are very limited. As Sub6 mentioned, these documents give ‘an introduction about the current state of English in Tunisia ... and how English is both the subject matter and the means’, while it also emphasizes the perception that the student is the center of the teaching process.

All the interviewees pointed out the inspectors’ guidelines, recommendations, notes and remarks they receive after a class inspection, demonstration lesson, or general meeting. The inspectors ‘are the ones who will help us putting theory into practice’ as Sub5 suggested. Besides the official program and teachers’ guidebook and the curriculum, the national pedagogic center is responsible for compiling the students’ English language textbooks or workbooks for all

levels (from primary to high schools).

#### **3.4.1 Ministry of Education materials**

In discussing the usefulness of the teachers' guidebooks, some participants mentioned that it includes standardized lesson plans which help in designing the course at the beginning of their career. These guidebooks also state the detailed goals and objectives to be achieved by the end of each lesson, unit, term, or year. Sub1 claimed that they 'tell me what framework I am working on, so it keeps me timewise . . . it gives an idea of the broader framework, so it keeps me from going back and forth on something, and it helps me to trace the extent to which my lesson was successful'. At the same time, Wendy sees them 'as not so useful' and they can design their own plans. In general, teachers' books are consistent and precise about grammatical structures to learn, but it is not useful for learning vocabulary.

The students' textbooks, on the other side, are outdated and cover unrealistic and disinteresting topics. Their content is redundant, and the activities are sometimes irrelevant. 'That is why some teachers are left to their own devices', and they 'do not always concentrate on these work and activity books', as Sub7 suggested. Thus, they end up writing their own activities and tasks.

#### **3.4.2 Lack of supporting materials**

The absence of supporting materials is another problem that all the participants shared. While they could make use of the official documents provided by the ministry of education and produced by the national pedagogic center for education, which an interviewee referred to as 'The holy Trinity' (guidebooks, textbooks, and activities), there is a striking need for other materials. English classrooms lack Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools. English teachers should have access to laboratories where they could work with tapes on students' pronunciation and speaking as well

as listening skills. The participants expressed that, ‘unfortunately’, these laboratories and CDs that come with student books, are no longer available for use.

In addition, as learners are becoming more audio-visual oriented, teachers do not have the opportunity to use speakers, data-shows to project videos and computers to play educative music and smart boards to make use of online applications. Financial issues and budgeting come into to play as there are no available digital materials or rooms to have printed worksheets and handouts from the administration. To put it simply, the conditions of the classrooms are not welcoming for either learners or teachers.

### **3.4.3 The ongoing evaluation of English language learning**

Another important document that teachers discussed is ongoing evaluation. According to Sub1, ‘this is more concerned about the tests, and how the testing of each element should be’. It is the major supporting document in use when preparing tests. The summative nature of assessment makes students learn just for the sake of the final examinations that they should pass successfully with the minimum score required. Any extra materials are not considered official; therefore, they should be firmly adjusted to the program, lesson goals and students’ needs.

These documents, even if low in number, certainly add to the teachers’ preparation for the lessons. They also include theoretical approaches and methods that they can refer to. In comparison with experienced teachers, who are more rebellious to the existing documents, novice teachers rely heavily on these documents as they guide them before, during and after the lessons.

### **3.5 English language policies and English education reforms**

Most of Tunisian teachers of English either have little or no knowledge about the English language policies of the country. The research findings allude to the fact that they misunderstand the notion of policy. When answering the questions 'What do you know about English language policies in Tunisia?', many of the interviewees started discussing reforms and change related efforts related to education or the curriculum and the approaches they employ.

The common idea is that the 'government does not give attention to English', Sub3 claimed. Sub6 added that 'there is nothing clear about the status of English'. Indeed, this opinion is supported by the fact that there are no official or governmental documents at the disposition of the public to learn more about the position of each language in the country. The Constitution is considered to be the number one reference, but it does not seem to discuss any linguistic matter besides Arabic as the native language.

Nonetheless, teachers assert the important role that English plays in a modern society and the awareness about using English as a primary source of information in all fields, especially in higher education, academia and working domains. This lack of emphasis from a governmental perspective on the importance of English as an international language is reflected in students' behavior. Learners do not see the need of learning a language that they are not able to use in the future in Tunisia. The curriculum is the outcome of a rigid regime that has been, and still is, under the the French influence. The documents are compiled by Tunisian and French experts, who are obviously far from being able to design a proper English program.

As far as the educational reforms are concerned, Tunisian teachers agree that there were few and shallow changes related to English education. Though there has been a move from the audio-lingual and

traditional methods of teaching to using the communicative teaching approach, there is no concrete change inside the classrooms. Since 2006, there has been no major reform introduced.

### **3.6 The future of TEFL**

Tunisian English teachers believe in the urgency of a change in TEFL and English education. Being innovative and creative is not sufficient for a teacher to enhance the quality and the outcome of the process of learning English as a foreign language. While some teachers are reluctant to professionally develop, others are eager to participate in educational training and are keen to follow the modern trends and implement the recent approaches in TEFL. Teachers need to reflect on their own teaching and professional development and there should be a new system of quality control and evaluation.

‘There is a spark that should be fueled’ and teachers are the spark that is ready to be part of the reform to revolutionize English education in Tunisia, Sub1 expressed. Teachers, especially the younger ones, would need to team up with experts, decision, and policy makers to either edit the existing or create a completely new curriculum suitable for meeting the needs of the new generations and respects the deficiencies and differences in each region of the country, and at the same time, meeting the international standards for English education.

In addition, there should be a move from the traditional method of assessing learners of English. ‘The standardized testing does not really do justice to the diversity, and the richness of the classrooms’, suggested Sub1. Students’ textbooks need to be revised to teach ‘the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills’, as Sub7 proposed. Sub3 claimed that the materials ‘should be close to the everyday life of the students, their minds, their fresh youthful spirit and their personalities. These books should be made more colorful and vivid’. They should similarly respect the abilities and the capacities of each learner as well

as their own suggestions.

Including a variety of materials and digitalizing education, by introducing new digital tools and platforms, or moving toward a blended approach of TEFL would be a valuable change in the future in Tunisia. Adaptability and flexibility in the teaching profession are badly needed nowadays and this should be applicable to English lessons as well. Enhancing the teaching environment and providing the supporting materials and English-only classrooms would effectively and positively influence English education.

Teaching English in Tunisian schools should be looked at as if they were teaching an art and a skill for life. Concluding on a Sub1 positive note, 'there must have been someone who decided that we are taught these theories. If the line of thought has come from the Ministry of Education, so there is a move towards more modern, more utilitarian and more communicative language teaching.' To an extent, English education in the Tunisian context is successful. Although there is no ideal environment for TEFL, teachers can always opt for an intellectually stimulating environment.

Teaching English as a foreign language in Tunisian schools is not the easiest task. Considering that English comes as a second foreign language (after French) and a third language to be taught at schools (Arabic, French, and English) from a very early age, it poses several enormous challenges. Change does not happen over one-night. Certainly, there is a strong need for modernization, evolution, and progress in education. Tunisian English education and education in broader terms has not been at its best in the last decade. However, there is always a path for development and a hope for betterment. This research comes as a modest part of investigating, first, and revolutionizing, second, English language education in the Tunisian context.

## 4 Conclusion

In this qualitative study, I interviewed 1 teacher for the pilot instrument validation and 12 active Tunisian teachers of English working in public primary, preparatory and high schools. The analyses of the transcripts of these interviews led the researcher to draw the aforementioned conclusions. The condition of compulsory English education in Tunisian schools, though not at its best, reflects the efforts of change and improvement for the last decades. The increasing rise of interest in learning English as a foreign language is pivotal to initiating reforms projects at governmental, ministerial, regional, and administrative levels in the country.

Despite the challenges, Tunisian educators are the first implementers of change. Moving from a teacher-centered learning environment and employing up-to-date materials as well as diverse approaches and strategies are crucial points to consider for the development of English education sector. The curriculum needs to be revolutionized to meet the requirements of international standards as well as the different needs and interests of Tunisian learners. Further, there should be a focus on English teachers' education and professional development during pre-service and in-service training.

While the topic investigated in this study has been extensively discussed in the international context, very few scholars have worked on teachers as being the major stakeholders in the Tunisian context. There is an ongoing rivalry between English and French as foreign languages taught as compulsory subjects since primary schools. Experiences of drafting French language policies, designing French language curriculum and training teachers to teach French could be beneficial in developing English language education process. Nonetheless, the focus of this study is to investigate particularly orientations and issues with English as a foreign language in the Tunisian educational system.

This study is exploratory in nature. Therefore, the questions,



despite their length, needed to be general rather than narrow which often led to deviations from the topic and the specific aims of the study. These deviations led me to think of issues to tackle in future studies, including English language teachers' education, English language assessment in Tunisian schools, and English language education curriculum. Additionally, the number of participants was limited to 12 (in addition to one pilot) and thus, saturation may not have been reached. Finally, as the interviews were conducted online, internet interruptions led to some data loss.

Despite the limitations, the research is a modestly enough addition to researchers investigating different stakeholders' perceptions of education. This study served the aim to explore Tunisian English education from the teachers' perspective. By exploring TEFL approaches in the Tunisian context, and investigating teachers' dispositions toward the national English language education curriculum as well as the challenges they face and their aspirations for the future of EFL, teachers in the international sphere are hoped to have learnt a great deal about TEFL in Tunisia. Researchers in the field of applied linguistics could further adopt the instrument for other qualitative and quantitative studies in different contexts.

Meanwhile, this study accentuates the need to work more thoroughly on TEFL in Tunisia by looking not only at teachers of English, but also at learners, and the stakeholders involved. Further research could be related to national English language curriculum design and development in Tunisia, innovations in TEFL approaches and teaching the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills as well as critical thinking in TEFL. The research also briefly tackled the ongoing evaluation which could be worthy of investigation in terms of testing and assessment of English in Tunisian public schools. Teachers in this study discussed their own training and education as well as their role as teachers in enhancing English language education which is an important issue to look at in upcoming studies.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Interview Consent

Interview consent form for the interviews  
Eötvös Loránd University  
Department of Language Pedagogy and English Applied Linguistics  
Budapest, Hungary

**Title:** Investigating Tunisian teachers' perceptions of compulsory English education, language policies and the future of TEFL

**Investigator:** Wijdene Ayed

**I. Purpose of the Research:** This study aims to bridge the gap between language education policies, curriculum, and their implementation in TEFL environment in the Republic of Tunisia. The researcher aims to investigate Tunisian English teachers views of the current situation of English education, their thoughts about the current TEFL approaches and methods employed, their knowledge and

dispositions about the existing curricula and, their beliefs and perceptions of the Ministry of Education initiated reforms and TEFL policies. The investigation ends with discussing teachers attitudes toward the future of TEFL in Tunisia.

**II. Procedure:** Interviews will be conducted online via Skype. You will be interviewed once, and the interview will take about 90 minutes.

**III. Risks:** The risks of participating in this study are no greater than those encountered in daily life.

**IV. Benefits:** Taking part in this research may benefit you as an English teacher. You will have the opportunity to reflect on your teaching approach, methods, and techniques as well as your role as a teacher within the Tunisian educational system. The results of the research will show the role of English teachers' attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs in reforming English education the Republic of Tunisia. This will help us find out more about how to improve English education in the country.

**V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:** Participation in this research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**VI. Confidentiality:** I will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. Dr. Wein Csizér Kata will have access to the information you provide. I will use a pseudonym of your choice rather than your name on study records and it will be destroyed after the research is conducted. Your record will be stored in the researcher's protected computer. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in such a way that you will not be identified personally.

**VII. Contact Persons:** Contact Wijdene Ayed at +36 20 43 85 48 1,

[wijdene@student.elte.hu](mailto:wijdene@student.elte.hu) and [wjdnayd@gmail.com](mailto:wjdnayd@gmail.com) if you have questions about this study. You may also reach out to my supervisor through [wein.kata@btk.elte.hu](mailto:wein.kata@btk.elte.hu) and [weinkata@yahoo.com](mailto:weinkata@yahoo.com).

**VIII. Copy of Consent Form to interviewee:** You will receive a digital copy of this form.

## **Appendix B: Interview Instrument**

Dear X,

I invited you to participate in my research as you are teaching at one of the Tunisian institutions, I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. I would like to inform you that you have the right to drop out at any time. You may also skip questions or stop participating at any time as well.

This interview will be recorded, and I will keep your records private. I will use a pseudonym of your choice rather than your name on study records and it will be destroyed after the research is conducted. Your record will be stored in the researcher's protected computer. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results.

This study aims to bridge the gap between language education policies, curriculum and their implementation in TEFL environment in the Republic of Tunisia. I, the researcher, aim to investigate your view of the current situation of English education, TEFL approaches, and methods employed, knowledge and dispositions about the existing curricula. The investigation ends with discussing your attitude toward the future of TEFL in Tunisia.

1. A. Due to technical reasons, I have to ask your age: What year were you born in?
  - B. Where and when did you graduate? What did you graduate in?

2. A. Could you please introduce yourself as a teacher?  
B. Why did you choose to become a teacher? How long have you been a teacher?
3. A. Throughout your career as a teacher, what age groups have you taught?  
B. Which educational level are you teaching English now? Where?

### **I. INTRODUCTION TO TOPIC**

1. What is your opinion about the overall quality of the Tunisian English education? What characterized the quality of English teaching in your context?
2. What quality control steps are included in the Tunisian education system to maintain the quality of English education? What do you think about their usefulness?

### **II. TEFL CURRICULUM AND APPROACHES**

1. How would you describe the approaches and strategies you use when teaching English?
2. A. In what ways do you think the Teacher's Guidebook and students' workbook support the TEFL approach you are following? What are their learning objectives? In what ways do you think they help in achieving these learning objectives?  
B. What do you think about the appropriateness of the materials and equipment provided by the MoE for TEFL? What other materials you think they can be useful for your classes?
3. A. What are the regulatory or official documents that you have to take into account when teaching? (*governmental decrees/ Ministry of Education documents/publications/letters/ recommendations/national pedagogical center/ inspectors' notes*)  
B. What do you think about their content? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these documents?
4. A. What do you think of the clarity of the national English

language education curriculum? What are its objectives? What do you think about these objectives?

- B. In what ways you can achieve the objectives stated in the official English language education curriculum during your classes?
- C. What are the most challenging aspects or the main barriers that you face regarding implementing the national English language education curriculum?
- D. How appropriate is the language education curriculum for your teaching context?

### **III. KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE POLICIES**

- 1.
  - A. What do you know about English language policies in Tunisia? What do you think of these policies?
  - B. Do you know of any official document that explains the language policy? If yes, what are these documents? What do they contain?
  - C. To what extent do these policies influence the way you teach English in Tunisia?
- 2.
  - A. What do you know about the MOE-initiated reforms in English language education?
  - B. What do you think of the changes in TEFL that took place in the past few years? Do you think your teaching reflects the reform efforts? If yes, in what ways? If not, why not?



### **TEACHERS PERCEPTIONS OF THE FUTURE OF TEFL**

1. Do you think there should be a reform or change in English language policy? If yes, what further changes in TEFL policy do you expect?
2.
  - A. Given the current language education curriculum situation in the Tunisian context and considering your experience in the classroom and the teaching materials you use; do you think there is a need to develop a new curriculum?
  - B. What should be the main features of a potential new curriculum?
  - C. What thoughts do you have about the teachers' role and involvement in designing a new curriculum?
  - D. What would you like to change in TEFL approaches and strategies in the future and what would you add/remove/make in your current educational context?
3.
  - A. What do you think about the success in TEFL in Tunisia? What would make TEFL successful in Tunisia?
  - B. What would make an ideal TEFL environment in Tunisia?

### **FINAL QUESTIONS**

1. Could you please raise any issue that needs to be discussed and studied?
2. What should I have asked you that I did not think to ask?
3. What would you like me to use as a pseudonym?
4. This was the end of my questions, and again I would like to thank you for your giving me your valuable time, for your participation and for your valuable insights in the topic.