

## Evaluating the Communicative Effectiveness of the English Curriculum of a Language School in Myanmar

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### Abstract

As the Myanmar presidential government is changing their policy from close door policy to open door policy, the requirement of communicative English language ability is becoming more essential in education, politics, and economics due to the vital role it plays in communication chain throughout the world. Thus, the language curriculum that use in a language school needs to meet the language learners' needs.

The focus of this study is on the evaluation of communicative effectiveness of English curriculum of a language school in Yangon, Myanmar. Curriculum evaluation is to investigate its communicative effectiveness and to find out strengths and weakness that focus on the curriculum activities: objectives, contents, materials, teaching, and testing (assessment and evaluation process) of the syllabi. The term curriculum in this study refers to an English language course. In this study, six instruments, questionnaires, interviews, pre and post communicative ability test, observation, syllabus evaluation, and school achievement test results, were administered. The data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, percentage, coding measure, and content analysis. This study concludes with the recommendation for implementing modification for the better curriculum and its materials.

**Keywords:** Curriculum evaluation, English curriculum, Communicative effectiveness, Communicative language ability.

### Introduction

The demand of English language ability in Myanmar focuses on communicative language ability which can be attained by communicative language teaching (CLT) approach. CLT involves many different teaching methods such as active teaching, learner centered teaching, corporative teaching-learning, and group or pair works with authentic and meaningful interactions that provide the language learners opportunities to use the English language in real life (Richards, 2006). This study attempt to assess the communicative effectiveness of an English curriculum that focuses on its curriculum activities: objectives, contents, materials, teaching, and testing. The objectives of this study were 1) to evaluate the English curriculum of the target school, 2) to investigate the communicative effectiveness of

the curriculum in enhancing the students' communicative ability, and 3) to identify the students' opinion toward the curriculum.

Firstly, I will present literature review on a brief theoretical introduction about the concept of curriculum evaluation, elements of systematic curriculum design, communicative language teaching (CLT), and the evaluation model used in this research study. Secondly, I will discuss the methodology of this research study. Thirdly, the results of this research study and discussion of the results will be discussed. Finally, the recommendation and suggestion for the better curriculum in the future and limitation of the study will be discussed.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Curriculum Evaluation and Systematic Curriculum Design***

There are multiple ideas and definitions have developed by many theorists on the term curriculum evaluation which focus on whether the curriculum plan implemented has achieved its goals and objectives as planned and, sometimes, whether all the effort in terms of finance and human resources has been worthwhile. Moreover, the intended outcome of curriculum evaluation is to reveal clearly whether to adopt, revise or reject the curriculum plan implemented in the future.

Gay (1985) asserted curriculum evaluation as not only about gathering data collection to decide whether the curriculum is to be accepted or modified or eliminated but also to identify its weaknesses and strengths as well as problems encountered in implementation; to improve the curriculum development process; and to determine the effectiveness of the curriculum. Likewise, curriculum evaluation is the process of delineating, obtaining, and providing useful information for judging decision alternatives and the primary decision alternatives to consider based upon the evaluation results are: to maintain the curriculum as is; to modify the curriculum; or to eliminate the curriculum" (Oliver, 1988).

Curriculum evaluation plays vital role in systematic curriculum design as Brown (1995) pointed out in his idea on elements curriculum design which includes needs analysis, objectives, testing, materials, teaching and course evaluation. Brown added the last element, course or curriculum evaluation, connected to the first five elements to provide cohesion and meaning in the whole process. Razali Arof (1991) also asserted curriculum evaluation is seen as a sub model and final component in the curriculum development process. Again, Oliva (1992) emphasized on curriculum evaluation in his four main components of curriculum development model – curriculum goals, curriculum objectives, organization and implementation of the curriculum and finally evaluation of the curriculum.

Purpose of evaluating a curriculum is to investigate whether the curriculum is worthwhile to use in enhancing the students' language skills improvement, to implement the curriculum in the future and for the success of the school or the program Oliva (1992) & Patton (1990).

## ***Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)***

Communicative Language Teaching, CLT, was first proposed in the 1970s and has influenced in language teaching field as many of the issues raised by CLT methodology are still relevant today (Richards, 2006). Communicative Language Teaching approach fully pays attention on the needs and desire of the learners and makes connection between the languages as it is taught in the classroom and as it is used in the learners' real-life. As Nunan (1991) defines in the five features of CLT:

- an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language,
- the introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation,
- the provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the learning management process,
- an enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning

The purpose of communicative language teaching (CLT) approach is to improve the learners' knowledge on the language they are learning and to know how to use the language appropriately in the given social context (Li & Song, 2007). The primary goal of practicing communicative language teaching (CLT) approach in a language classroom is to develop the language learners' communicative competence (Wu, 2008).

Communicative competence can be simply defined as ability to communicate by grammatically accurate sentence, proper and formally possible usages, social accepted language, and fluent speaking in a particular context. In other words, it is an ability to use appropriate language and to know the right thing to say at the right time (Johnson and Morrow, 1981). Testing communicative language competence or ability is needed to focus on the principles of communicative language testing such as: meaningful communication, authentic situation, unpredictable language input, creative language output, and integrated the four language skills (Brown, 2005).

### ***The Evaluation Model Used in this Research Study***

Brown's (1995) idea on the elements of language curriculum serves to apply and relate to the process of the present study's evaluation model and Nunan's (1991) five features of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach play a fundamental role in the present research study. Plus, Tyler (1950), Stake (1975), Stufflebeam (1971) and Bradley's (1985) curriculum evaluation models are engaged in the evaluation model that use in this research study since their focus is on measuring the effectiveness and investigating the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum, these models.

## **Methodology**

As the focus of this research study is on evaluating communicative effectiveness of the target school's English curriculum, there are there research questions as follows:

- 1) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current curriculum of the school?
- 2) How effective has the current curriculum been in enhancing the students' communicative language skills?
- 3) What are the opinions of the students toward the curriculum?

## ***Participants***

There were three groups of participants, namely the students, English teachers, and administrative staff of the target school. The population of the research study was two people from the administration office, four English teachers, and thirty-nine students, who were enrolled to attend the school for the term from mid-August to mid-November in 2013. As there are four levels of classes, Level 1, Level 2, Level 3, and Level 4, in the target school, the students were from Level 1 to Level 4. All the students are Myanmar nationality, and are aged 16 to 30 years. Also the students are either high school or university graduates as these are the criteria have to qualify for attending the target language school.

## ***Instruments***

- Two sets of questionnaires (pre and post questionnaires)
- Communicative ability test (pre and post-tests)
- School achievement test results
- Classroom observation
- Interviews questions
- Course syllabus evaluation form

Pre and post questionnaires: All the 39 students from Level 1 to Level 4 participated to answer these questionnaires. Pre questionnaire administered before the students attend the program and it focused on the students' needs which are survival language needs, difficulties and problems in language learning, preferences and desired language skills, and preferred learning activities. Post questionnaire was conducted after the program and focused on the students' opinions toward the curriculum.

Pre and post communicative ability test: Six students from Level 4, who had attended the school from Level 1 to Level 4 continuously, took the same communicative ability test before and after the course.

School achievement test results: The results of all 39 students' achievement test, final exam, of the school.

Classroom observation: The researcher visited four times, for each of the four levels of class on the use of each language skill in the Level (1), (2), (3), and (4) class. As there are 12 weeks in a term at the target school, researcher made observation during the first nine weeks of the program. There were two parts in observation, rating scale and field notes, both focus on the appropriateness and communicative effectiveness of the lessons' goals and objectives, content, materials, teaching methods and activities, and assessment process in the classroom.

Interviews: The researcher interviewed the instructors, the administrative staff and the students before and after the course. The pre-interviews were administered to elicit the teachers' thoughts on their beliefs and expectations about the course, administrative staff's policy and expectations for the course, and the students' expectations. The post interviews were administered to investigate whether the teachers, students, and staff expectation were met after the course. The participant numbers of interviewees in each interview group are presented in the following table.

No	Interview	No. of Participants	No. of Pre Interview Groups	No. of Post Interview Groups
1	Level 1 students	4	3	3
2	Level 2 students	3	3	3
3	Level 3 students	5	1	1
4	Level 4 students	3	3	3
5	Level 4 students	4	1	1
6	Teachers	2	2	2
7	Administration staff	2	1	1
Total number of interview groups			14	14

Syllabus evaluation: The syllabus and its lessons plans of each level of class were evaluated by two experts and the researcher focusing on its goals and objectives, contents, materials, teaching, and testing.

The data from these instruments were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively which are coding measure, content analysis, mean, standard deviation, and percentage.

## Findings

### Research Question 1

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current curriculum of the school?

To find out the strengths and weaknesses of the current curriculum of the target school, the information and data were collected and analyzed from all the research instruments which are pre and post questionnaires, pre and post interviews, syllabus evaluation forms, classroom observation, pre and post communicative ability test, and school achievement test results.

The responses of pre questionnaire and pre-interview of students showed upgrading the students' communicative English language skills, in other words, to be able to communicate in English language is the main reason to study English in the target school. Regarding the responses of pre interview with teachers and administration staff, they were confident that the curriculum allowed the students to achieve communicative ability. Post interview responses from students showed their positive opinions toward the curriculum. The teachers and administration staff were satisfied with the results of the students' communicative language achievement.

The result of post communicative test was significantly higher than the result of pre communicative ability test (see table 3 below). The overall percentage all the students' school achievement test passed results also highlighted that the curriculum is 'good' (see table 4 below). In relation to the results of observation (rating scales), the curriculum was rated as 'good' curriculum expect material authenticity which was rated as 'fair' in the rating scales. The syllabi were rated as it is good enough to help the students in achieving communicative language ability by the experts and the researcher.

Based on the results analyzed from all the above mentioned six instruments, questionnaires, interviews, communicative ability test, school achievement test results, observation (rating scale), and syllabus evaluation, the strengths and weaknesses of the current curriculum of the target school were clearly showed in the following table.

<b>Table 2 The Strengths and Weaknesses of Current Curriculum</b>	
<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
Objectives:	Objectives:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Match with the students' needs as the teachers know the students' needs according to their experience of teaching English</li> </ul> <p>i.e., in syllabus (lesson plans) teachers emphasize on the four language skills and communicative ability achievement (teacher interview) ; lessons focus on the four language skills and communicative skills are included (classroom observation, lessons plans)</p> <p>Contents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Contents contain of the topics that are interesting and related to the learners' real-life</li> </ul> <p>i.e., family &amp; friends, habits, environments, work &amp; study, culture &amp; custom etc., (syllabi, classroom observation, interviews)</p> <p>Materials:</p> <p>Teaching:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus on variety of activities to achieve the students' communicative ability (group &amp; pair works, games)</li> <li>- Focus to relate learners' real-life after each lesson</li> </ul> <p>i.e., walk around talk around to meet new friends, running dictation, jigsaw reading, miming &amp; guessing games etc., (interviews, observation, syllabi)</p> <p>Assessment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus on performance test &amp; continuous assessment</li> </ul> <p>i.e., weekly journals, conversation, role play,</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not formulated through the information from the process of needs analysis before the course</li> <li>- Aligning the syllabi's objectives and school objectives is needed</li> </ul> <p>Contents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Variety of topics are needed to be considered for Level-3</li> </ul> <p>Materials:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No authentic materials were being used in each lesson</li> </ul> <p>Teaching:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Time management is needed to be considered for each lesson</li> </ul> <p>Assessment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More formal communicative skills</li> </ul>
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short talks & impromptu-talk, presentation, discussion etc., (interviews, observation, syllabi)	testing should be prepared - Observation & monitoring are not enough to assess the students' language attainment in each lesson  Lack of Level-4 lesson plans in written form
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## Research Question 2

How effective has the current curriculum been in enhancing the students' communicative language skills?

To answer this question, the results from the following instruments were analyzed:

- Pre and post communicative ability test score of the six Level-4 students
- Targeted school achievement test results of the students from Level-1 to Level-4
- Classroom observation notes

Result of pre and post communicative ability test: The mean score of post communicative test result (42.00) which is interpreted as 'Excellent' is significantly higher than pre communicative test result mean score is (29.83) which is interpreted as 'Fair'. The differences between pre and post communicative ability test mean score is 12.17. Thus, the students' communicative language skills have significantly improved after taking the course (see table below).

Test	Number of student	Total Score	Mean	Standard Deviation	Margin
Pre-test	6	50	29.83	0.75	12.17
Post-test	6	50	42.00	1.41	

Results of school achievement test: As there were 30 students out of 39 students passed the school achievement test, the average total percentage of all the Levels of classes' achievement test passed results is 77%, it can be interpreted that the course is 'Good'. Thus, targeted school achievement test results show the quality of the curriculum as 'Good' curriculum. With the exception of Level 4 achievement test result which shows the quality of Level 4 course as 'Unsatisfactory', Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3 achievement test results show the quality of each course as 'Good' course.

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Class	No of Test Taker	No of Test Pass 60 points	Percentage of students who passed the criteria 60 points	Quality of the course
Level – 1	12	12	100%	Excellent
Level – 2	9	7	78%	Good
Level - 3	5	5	100%	Excellent
Level - 4	13	6	46%	Unsatisfactory
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>77 %</b>	<b>Good</b>

**Percentage (%):** 0 – 49 %= NA, 50 – 59 %= Unsatisfactory, 60 – 69 %= Fair, 70 – 79 %= Good, 80 – 100 %= Excellent

Observation notes: According to the researcher’s classroom observation notes, the curriculum can be defined as a good curriculum for the objectives, contents, materials, teaching, and testing in each classroom was effective enough in enhancing the students’ communicative language ability except lack of authenticity in materials.

Thus, the current curriculum used in the target school can enhance the students’ communicative language ability.

### Research Question 3

What are the opinions of the students toward the course?

This question was answered by the results of following instruments:

- The second set of questionnaire (all students were asked to answer)
- Interview with all students of the school

As the students rated the overall total mean score at 4.11 which was interpreted as ‘Good’, their opinion toward the course is positive (see the below table 5).

No	Questionnaires Statements	Mean	Interpretation
Content			
1	The four language skills taught in the course met my needs	4.33	Excellent
2	The content of the course was met with my language needs	4.50	Excellent
		<b>4.41</b>	<b>Excellent</b>

Materials			
3	Teaching materials were authentic and related to my real-life	3.25	Fair
4	Teaching materials were good and they helped me to improve my communicative language skills	4.00	Good
		<b>3.62</b>	<b>Good</b>
Teaching			
5	Teachers' instruction in the classroom were clear enough to understand	4.87	Excellent
6	Teaching methods and activities in classroom supported me to be more active and interested in my studying	4.37	Excellent
7	The teachers were active and able to encourage me to participate in the classroom activities	3.50	Good
8	Teachers treated me fairly	3.75	Good
		<b>4.12</b>	<b>Good</b>
Assessment & Evaluation			
9	My overall understanding of the class assessment plan was clear from the beginning of the course	4.00	
10	I am satisfied with my teachers' method of grading my work	4.37	Excellent
11	Assessment in my classroom were emphasized on communicative language testing (i.e, role play, interview, authentic reading, communicative writing etc.,)	3.83	Good
		<b>4.06</b>	<b>Good</b>
General Opinion on the Course			
12	I am satisfied with the course because it met my language needs and helped me to improve my English language skills.	3.95	Good
13	After taking this course I can be able to communicate in English much better than before	4.75	Excellent
		<b>4.35</b>	<b>Excellent</b>
<b>Total mean</b>		<b>4.11</b>	<b>Good</b>

**Mean:** 1.00- 1.80= NA, 1.81- 2.60= Unsatisfactory, 2.61- 3.40= Fair, 3.41- 4.20= Good, 4.21- 5.00= Excellent

Students mean scores rated the courses, 'materials', 'teaching', and 'assessment' of the course point out the quality of the course as 'Good' and students rated mean score of 'content' of the course points out as 'Excellent'. However, there is a statement about material

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authenticity in 'materials' area that rated as 'Fair' for the students think that there was lack or shortage of using authentic materials in the class.

Plus, the responses of post interview with the students about their opinion on the course they took almost all of the students, except three students, rated the course is good enough to improve their communicative language ability. Thus, students' opinions toward the curriculum are highly positive and they are satisfied with the course they took.

Even though there are some weaknesses such as lack or shortage of material authenticity, lack of formal needs analysis, and lack of Level 4 syllabus in written form, the findings of this research study explicitly show that the current curriculum of the target school is highly effective in enhancing the students communicative language ability and the students' opinions towards the course is highly positive.

### **Discussion of the Results**

According to the idea of Wesche and Skehan (2002) on communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, it is needed to use the activities that require frequent interaction among students to exchange information and solve problems, use authentic texts and communication activities related to the students' real-life, and focus on learner-centered teaching that take into account learners' background, language needs and language learning goals. Likewise, Richards (2006) included material authenticity, targeted language communication in classroom, and integrated the four language skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) in his idea of communicative language teaching (CLT) principles. Integrating the four language skills is needed to emphasize in communicative language teaching (CLT) approach as Lee and Vanpatten (2003) point out that speaking is not the only skill that CLT approach focuses on.

Based on the ideas of Wesche and Skehan (2002) and Richards (2006) on communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, activities in the classroom teaching play vital important role for frequent interaction and communication in targeted language among the learners is needed to be emphasized. This research study reveals that the activities in classroom mainly affect the improvement of language learners' communicative skills, increase confident level and reduce the anxiety level which related to learning. As there are varieties of activities, which help the learners to communicate in target language, practiced what they learn in target school. The learners are not only improving their communicative skills but also their motivation, confidence, and problem solving skills in language learning and used. For instance, the learners have to work in groups or pairs doing exercises or task which make them to be cohesive, and to help, think, take turn to speak, write or interact. Moreover, each member in the pair has a part of information (i.e. incomplete picture) and attempts to convey it verbally to the other (Prabhu 1987, cited in Hedge, 2000:58).

All their lives the students in the target school had learnt a very passive teacher-oriented teaching and had never done group or pairs work. Furthermore, almost all of them have certain degree of anxiety in classroom as it said the degree of feeling anxious depends

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on individual past experience (University of Cambridge Counseling Service, 2012). Thus, most of them are anxious and used to be quiet in the classroom to be recognized as a good student. However, the language learners in the target school become more cohesive. Trust and understanding typically build to the point that even naturally quiet members are willing and able to engage in intense give-and-take interactions without having to worry about being offensive or misunderstood by working in group (Michaelsen, Watson & Black, 1989; Watson, Michaelsen & Sharp, 1991; Watson, Kmnar & Michaelsen, 1993; Michaelsen, Black & Fink, 1996).

Again, the activities that teachers used in the classroom also allowed to relate the classroom language learning and language activities outside the class room as Nunan (1995) suggested in the features of CLT approach.

Thus, it is a significant strength of the curriculum for the activities that include group work/task, pair work/task, and games in the classroom of the target school can also be able to make the students not only to be communicative but also, especially, to be confident or not to be anxious in using the language they are learning and many other advantages. As Oxford (1997) discuss in her study on 'Three Communicative Stands in the Language Classroom', there are numerous studies that indicate that compared to competitive or individualistic learning experiences, cooperative learning is more effective in promoting intrinsic motivation and task achievement, generating higher order thinking skills, improving attitudes toward the subject, developing academic peer norms, heightening self-esteem, increasing time on task, creating caring and altruistic relationships, and lowering anxiety and prejudice.

Furthermore, studies on students' anxieties in classroom found the relation between anxieties and classroom procedure and suggested to do more pair work, play more games, and tailor classroom activities to the effective needs of the learners to decrease learners' anxieties (Young, 1991). Again, Young pointed out that the learners' language anxiety is alleviated when they work in small groups and do pair work and playing games with the language can also reduce language anxiety.

The curriculum objectives and goals need to be formulated through the information from needs analysis as Brown (1995) asserted objectives and goals of the course based on the learners' needs. Even the objectives meet the needs of the students the objectives and goals of the curriculum were not formulated through the information from needs analysis at the target school, it is one the weaknesses of the curriculum.

According to the findings from this research study, it is clearly revealed that there is a significant weakness which is lack of authentic materials in classroom. For instance, in the Level 1 listening and speaking classroom of target school students are asked to work in pair and group about their 'favorite extreme sports' by doing exercises from the hand out that directly make use from the course book (Let's Talk). Some of the extreme sports that mentioned in the hand out are not really related to the students' real-life, they are 'kite surfing', 'paragliding', 'snowboarding' etc. As the students are Level 1 students and they are

very new in learning English or the foreign sports, they have a very hard time to discuss about the extreme sport in the hand out which they have never played or watched in their real life. Again, in another class while students are studying about ‘what are your interests’ which focus on spending free time, some of the interests that mention in the hand out are beyond the students knowledge like ‘fishing’. ‘Fishing’ is usually defined as livelihood of fishermen along rivers who are not well off or well educated in Myanmar context, thus it is not very easy to accept as an interest that a person love to do in their free time for a student.

Moreover, authenticity in listening skill also needed to be considered to use in the future as there are only non-authentic audio materials from the course book that are being used in the class. For instance, short authentic video clips about authentic situation such as meeting new friends in class, hotel booking, waiter & customers and television news (international news) are needed to be used for the improvement of the students’ listening and speaking skills and to attain target language exposure.

Thus, the hand-outs need to be revised or to contextualize by adding Myanmar traditional extreme sports or Myanmar young people interests to help the students to be able to relate the lesson to their real life context. Nunan (1991) pointed out that it is crucial to enhance the students own personal experience as important contribution element to classroom learning and Nunan also emphasized on using authentic materials in language teaching-learning situation in his idea of features of CLT approach.

There is another significant issue from this research study: it is the number of students who failed the school achievement test from Level 4 classroom. As there are thirteen students in Level 4 classroom, only 6 students out of thirteen (46 %), who have been attending the target school from Level 1 to Level 4 continuously, passed the school achievements test. The students who failed school achievement test are the students who were directly sorted to enter into the Level 4 classroom according to their entrance test score. Thus, the quality of the course of Level 4 can be interpreted as ‘Unsatisfactory’ in the results from the findings. For these reasons, it is obvious that the attending continuously all the classes from Level 1 to Level 4 can guarantee to achieve the communicative language ability as the two administration staff and teachers recommended in their responses of the interview.

Moreover, lack of syllabus and lessons in long range written form for Level 4 also negatively effect on the students’ school achievement test results. According to Wilkin (1981) syllabi are specification of content of language teaching which have been submitted to some degree of structuring or ordering with the aim of making teaching and learning to be more effective process while Breen (1984a) defined syllabus as ‘a plan of what is to be achieved through our teaching and our students’ learning’. Thus, there is another issue which needs to be considered. It is important to have syllabus and its lesson plans in written form for Level 4 in this situation since there is no long range lessons plan and syllabus in written form but only unit topics for Level 4 classroom. Plus, it is also likely to question the reliability and validity of the target school placement test.

## Conclusion

As the present study also aimed to help in improving and implementing the curriculum in the future, the following aspects are suggested to consider adding in implementing the curriculum the target school:

- conducting formal needs analysis
- using authentic materials for all language skills
- preparing syllabus and lessons plans in written forms for all classes
- emphasizing time management of each class

Conducting formal needs analysis plays vital role in implementing a curriculum as the course decisions was made by the information from needs analysis activities and these decisions will serve as the basis for developing curriculum (Brown, 1995). Since using authentic materials in the language learning situation is one of the five features of communicative language teaching (CLT), it is suggested to consider adding in implementing the curriculum. Lack of syllabus and lessons plans in long range written forms effective negatively on the students' communicative language achievement, thus it is also another suggestion to add in implementing the curriculum. Finally, shortage of teachers' time management ability can also effect negatively on the attainment of curriculum goals and objectives, thus it is the last aspect to consider adding in implementing the curriculum.

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