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Voices in Tension: A Complexity Perspective on Conflicting Curriculum Stakeholder Views

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Abstract

This paper examines the persistent tensions and lack of consensus among key curriculum stakeholders, policymakers, teachers, industry players, and learners, about what curriculum should be, what it should include, and how it should be developed. These disagreements become especially visible within dynamic educational contexts and during periods of reform. Drawing on a qualitative study of three translator training institutions in Ghana, the research brings together perspectives of 28 participants to examine how these conflicting views emerge and play out in practice. Using complexity theory as an analytical lens, the study argues that such divergence should not be seen as evidence of dysfunction. Rather, it reflects the inherently adaptive and evolving nature of curriculum systems. By framing stakeholder tensions this way, this article offers a fresh theoretical lens for understanding curriculum development, not as a linear top-down process, but as a dynamic and interdependent system shaped by multiple actors in constant interaction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Curriculum serves as the central pillar of formal education, yet its precise definition and content remain a source of considerable academic and practical debate. From its historical roots as a "track or racecourse" (Bobbitt, 1918) to later interpretations encompassing all learning experiences (Tyler, 1949; Yavuz, 2012), the concept is inherently complex. This complexity is further intensified by the intricate contexts and often conflicting priorities of diverse stakeholders (Frost, 2018; Islam, 2019; Law et al., 2022). As educational institutions attempt to respond to ever-evolving global and local demands, tensions frequently surface among policymakers, teachers, industry players, and learners, particularly during curriculum reforms.

In Ghana, this challenge is evident within universities offering translation programs. Despite efforts to review and align curricula with labour market demands, industry representatives continue to express concerns about graduates lacking essential competencies. Similarly, students frequently report dissatisfaction with their training.

This article addresses the challenge of understanding the nature of these conflicting views by exploring why they exist and how they manifest in practice. Unlike previous studies that have largely focused on simply identifying these tensions (Law et al., 2022; AgnewAgnew, 2021) or suggesting a compromise

(Frost, 2018; Mosia, 2020; Mniča & Demyen, 2018), this research provides a new analytical lens—that of complexity theory—to reframe stakeholder divergence. Rather than viewing such tensions as a problem to be solved, we propose that they be understood as an inherent, adaptive, and emergent characteristic of complex educational systems. This perspective offers a more nuanced and holistic understanding of curriculum development processes, especially in a dynamic context like Ghanaian translator education.

To achieve this, the article first clarifies the scope of "curriculum" as it is used within this study. It then delves into complexity theory and its application to education and translation curricula. The article proceeds with a discussion of the paper's methodology, presents its key findings, discusses them in detail, and concludes with a summary of the implications for curriculum design.

2. CONCEPTUALIZING CURRICULUM

Curriculum serves as a foundational element of formal education, profoundly shaping its success. Deriving its etymological roots from the Latin word currere, meaning "to run or move quickly," and later from "track or racecourse" as articulated by John Franklin Bobbitt in his seminal 1918 textbook The Curriculum, the concept has undergone significant evolution. This evolution has been driven by shifts in intellectual thought and prevailing sociological factors. Despite the widely acknowledged relevance of curriculum, a precise and universally agreed-upon definition remains elusive among researchers and educators. Conceptualizations vary considerably, ranging from narrower interpretations, such as a specific program of study (Programme d'étude in French), a course, or a syllabus, to broader views. Some theorists define it as a structured plan or guide for teaching (Beauchamp, 1972; Johnson, 1969; Wood & Davis, 1978), while others extend its scope to encompass all learning experiences, whether planned or unplanned (Aron-Salvacion, 2023; Bobbitt, 1918; King, 1986; Tyler 1949; Yavuz, 2012). Johnson (1969, p. 3) attempted to clarify this definitional ambiguity by proposing three distinct conceptualizations: (a) an arrangement of selected and ordered learning outcomes, (b) an arrangement of selected and ordered learning experiences, and (c) a scheme for planning and providing learning experiences. The persistent confusion surrounding the term often stems from the interchangeable use of certain words or the varied grammatical functions assigned to them within different contexts (Johnson, 1969). Consequently, this section delves into the multifaceted conceptualization of curriculum, aiming to establish a clear understanding of the purpose of this study by analysing existing approaches before adopting a tailored definition.

2.1. Curriculum as Product

Several perspectives view curriculum as a product, emphasizing it as the outcome of a deliberate process of selection and organization. In this sense, curriculum is often understood as a set of educational objectives or a formal document (Johnson, 1969; UNESCO-IBE, 2016; Beauchamp, 1968, 1972; Brady, 1995). Some scholars conceptualize it as a series of courses (Beauchamp, 1972; Wood & Davis, 1978), while others see it as a comprehensive plan or a dynamic framework that guides teaching and learning (Taba, 1962; McKimm, 2007; Marope, 2013). However, King (1986) argues that conceptualizations reducing curriculum solely to a plan or instructional strategies (e.g., Johnson, 1969; Beauchamp, 1968, 1972; Brady, 1995; Wood & Davis, 1978) fail to encompass other crucial elements of the educational process. This has led scholars to broaden their definition.

2.2. Curriculum as Experience

Beyond its traditional conception as a structured plan, curriculum is also viewed as an experience. Pioneering scholars such as Bobbitt (1918) and Tyler (1949, in Aron-Salvacion, 2023) significantly expanded this understanding, though they differed on its scope. Bobbitt (1918, p. 43) offered an inclusive definition, encompassing the "entire range of experiences, both undirected and directed," while Tyler (1949, in Aron-Salvacion, 2023) narrowed his focus to only "all learning experiences

planned and directed by the school." This ongoing ambiguity highlights the dynamic interplay between planned and unplanned outcomes in the educational process (King, 1986; Yavuz, 2012).

2.3. Curriculum as a Complex Process

From a complexity perspective, curriculum is a dynamic and emergent process shaped by interactions among participants. King (1986) significantly broadened the conceptualization, likening curriculum to a grand opera with both a staged aspect and an element of improvisation. This perspective, adopted by scholars such as McKimm (2007), Yavuz (2012), and Saban (2021), views curriculum as an event emerging from the dynamic interaction between teachers and students. To address the distinction between planned and unplanned elements without blurring the lines between curriculum and instruction, as cautioning Beauchamp (1968), scholars often differentiate between what is formally documented and what remains unwritten. A useful way of framing this is through the threefold model—formal, non-formal, and informal—outlined by La Belle (1982), Mulenga (2018), and Johnson & Majewska (2022). Building on this perspective, Klimkowski (2015, pp. 67-83) argues that translation programs should deliberately include non-formal activities, such as professional seminars and internships, to better bridge the gap between academic training and real-world practice. This view is reinforced by comparative research on European Master's in Translation (EMT) programs conducted by Torres-Simón & Pym (2017), which found that coordinators intentionally integrated non-formal activities to prepare students for the industry despite the lack of formal courses.

2.4. Operational Definition of Curriculum

Given the inherent complexity in conceptualizing curriculum, this study adopts a nuanced operational definition to clarify its specific scope and purpose. For the context of this research, curriculum refers to all systematic educational experiences provided to students, whether consciously planned or unconsciously conveyed, aimed at achieving situated, desired learning outcomes. These experiences foster individual growth and are intended to equip students for life and contribute to the common good within an ever-changing society. Conscious curriculum decisions are planned, while unconscious ones are implicit.

3. COMPLEXITY THEORY

Having analysed the conceptualizations of curriculum as a product, an experience, and a complex process, this study now turns toward a theoretical framework that can effectively account for these multiple dimensions: complexity theory.

3.1. Complexity Theory and Education

Complexity theory within the educational domain provides a conceptual framework for understanding educational systems not merely as linear and predictable constructs, but rather as dynamic, interrelated, and adaptive ecosystems wherein outcomes are frequently emergent and difficult to predict (Davis & Sumara, 2006; Morrison, 2006). It contests conventional reductionist perspectives that endeavour to dissect educational phenomena into discrete components or simplistic cause-and-effect linkages. Complexity theory presents curriculum as an evolving system of interdependent agents.

The fundamental principles of complexity theory as it pertains to education are:

- **Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS):** Educational settings, including classrooms, schools, and even entire educational programs, are seen as CAS. These systems consist of many interacting "agents" (such as students, teachers, administrators, policymakers) and "elements" (such as curricula, resources, policies), with nonlinear, continuously evolving interactions (Sammut-Bonnici, 2014).

- **Self-Organization:** In these systems, order and patterns can naturally emerge from the local interactions of agents, without centralized control or top-down directives. Systems can reorganize and adapt in response to these internal dynamics (Fahim & Abbasi Talabari, 2014; Pycroft, 2014; Sammut-Bonnici, 2014).

- **Emergence:** New properties, behaviours, and understandings develop from the interactions of the individual components, which cannot be predicted simply by putting their parts together. Learning, viewed from a complexity perspective, is often considered as an emergent process rather than a predetermined outcome (Pycroft, 2014; Fahim & Abbasi Talabari, 2014; Sammut-Bonnici, 2014).

- **Nonlinearity:** Minor changes or interventions within a complex system produce disproportionately large and often unpredictable effects (the concept of "butterfly effect"). Outcomes are not always predictable (Fahim & Abbasi Talabari, 2014; Pycroft, 2014; Sammut-Bonnici, 2014).

- **Interactions and Feedback Loops:** The continuous, recursive interactions among agents and elements, along with various feedback loops (both positive and negative), lead to evolution and adaptation within the system (Fahim & Abbasi Talabari, 2014; Pycroft, 2014; Sammut-Bonnici, 2014).

- **Nested Systems:** Complex systems exist within other complex systems and are made up of them. For example, a classroom is nested within a school, which is nested within a district, etc. with interactions occurring across these layers (Fahim & Abbasi Talabari, 2014; Pycroft, 2014; Sammut-Bonnici, 2014).

- **Far from Equilibrium:** Complex systems are marked by constant change and activity and rarely attain a stable state. This dynamic nature allows for continuous adaptation and growth (Fahim & Abbasi Talabari, 2014; Pycroft, 2014; Sammut-Bonnici, 2014).

In essence, complexity theory provides a way of understanding learning and educational change as dynamic and often unpredictable, shaped by the interaction of multiple, interconnected factors. It highlights the need for adaptability and flexibility, and for creating conditions that support emergent learning rather than relying on rigid control (Rowe, 2024).

3.2. Curriculum as a Complex Adaptive System

Curriculum as an evolving system of interdependent agents

The complexity perspective reframes curriculum not as a static plan, but as an evolving system of interdependent agents. Consequently, understanding who and what these agents within this system are becomes paramount. A key issue in curriculum design concerns which stakeholders should be involved in the design process. While some scholars advocate for the expertise of curriculum specialists, others emphasize the importance of amplifying the voices of diverse stakeholders.

Bobbitt, in his seminal work (1918, p. 43), argues that the first step of designing a curriculum is to discover the total range of habits, skills, abilities, forms of thought, valuations, ambitions, etc., that its members need for the effective performance of their vocational labours; likewise, the total range needed for their civic activities; their health activities; their recreations, their language; their parental, religious, and general social activities. For Bobbitt, the responsibility of identifying skills and abilities that will form the basis of educational goals lies with a specialist, referred to as a "curriculum discoverer". With a notebook and pencil, the specialist(s) engages with a specific discipline, talks to professionals, observes them and discovers the knowledge needed. Bobbitt's assertion limits the responsibility of

designing a curriculum to the specialist(s). Bobbitt's position appears to reflect a top-down approach, where the curriculum is primarily designed by national authorities.

In contrast, Li (2000, pp. 289-299) advocates a bottom-up approach that actively incorporates student perspectives. According to Li, student involvement is critical if translation institutions want to remain attractive to and meet the needs of students. Yet, the design of curricula of many translation programmes is not based on the needs of students, as it should be, but rather on "the academics' in-house theorizing and philosophizing, based on their own experiences of learning languages and translation and on their particular beliefs about the teaching of translation" (Li, 2000, p. 128). Other studies (Li, 2002; Shahri & Farimani, 2016) show that when student voices are not considered, there is usually a gap between what the students want and what is offered, which demotivates students. Li (2002), who advocates a student-centred curriculum, argues that learning becomes more effective when students participate in shaping their own learning objectives in line with their needs.

Alsebai (2016, pp.106-107), for his part, posits that teachers' opinions and ideas should be incorporated into the curriculum for development, as teachers are the implementers of the curriculum and have first-hand knowledge of what goes on in the classroom. According to Alsubaie, teachers can contribute collaboratively and effectively by working with curriculum development teams and specialists to arrange and compose material, textbooks and content. Teacher involvement in the process of curriculum development is important for aligning the content of curriculum with student needs. Alsubaie argues that, despite the very pivotal role teachers play in bringing life to the curriculum, teachers are, in some cases, not qualified and lack the necessary skills to participate in curriculum development. Consequently, it is difficult for teachers to participate in the process. Nevertheless, one sure way to improve student learning is to actively involve teachers in the design process; those who lack the requisite skills should be provided with appropriate knowledge and skills to help them effectively contribute to the curriculum development process.

Scholars such as Li (2000, 2007), Klimkowski (2015), Gümüş (2017, p. 8), Mniča & Demyen (2018), and AgnewAgnew (2021) specify that all stakeholders of translator education must be involved in matters concerning training. The stakeholders of translator training are not limited to trainers and students, but include administrators of translation services, employers, graduates and professional associations; Li (2000) even adds users of translation services. By covering this broad base of stakeholders, translation programmes will be better placed to identify the real societal and market needs of and for translators and help translation graduates navigate the complex relationship between academia and the rest of the world. Hussain et al. (2011) and Marope (2013) share the views of Li and Gümüş, acknowledging that a credible curriculum process must be inclusive and consultative and must garner the support of a broad base of stakeholders. Stakeholders must have a sense of ownership towards the process. Because curricula have a telling effect on the future of individuals, Marope highlights the need for consultation to cover all levels, from professional/specialist to local and national to global representatives. To the list of stakeholders mentioned, Marope adds development specialists because curricula have the potential to contribute to national development.

While Hussain et al. (2011), like Marope, propose a horizontal approach to broad-based consultation, they advocate for the curriculum to be sanctioned by a group of experts. The idea of having a horizontal approach to curriculum design, as suggested by Li (2000, 2002), Shahri and Farimani (2016) and Alsubaie (2016), was taken up by Saban (2021), who emphasizes that curriculum designers should be persons who are actively involved in the education process and can understand and recognize curriculum problems. Although Saban does not explicitly mention the persons referred to here, we can assume that he refers to teachers, university administrators and students. If this assumption is correct, then his claim excludes global stakeholders, as recommended by Marope (2013) and the other stakeholders suggested by Li (2000, 2007), Klimkowski (2015) and Gümüş (2017, p. 8). Doing so

would, in this view, be limiting and risk producing a curriculum that does not meet the needs of industry, society and the international world. Because this study uses the complexity theory framework, it adopted the broad consultation suggested by Li (2000, 2007), Klimkowski (2015) and Gümüş (2017, p. 8).

Curriculum as a contextually-driven (nested) system

A curriculum is a complex adaptive system that continuously adapts to various socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts, with this adaptation occurring across global, national, and local scales.

Globally, curricula adapt to international trends and demands. Economic needs for new knowledge and technology drive the adaptation of curricula to incorporate specific skills (Kress, 2000; Marope, 2013). In translation, technological innovations such as CAT and machine translation tools have forced curricula to adapt by integrating IT and critical thinking skills alongside traditional linguistic competencies (Tan, 2008; Albir, 2007). Historical shifts, including global population growth, also compel curriculum adaptation toward systems-oriented approaches addressing broader social issues (Plate, 2012).

Nationally and locally, a curriculum must adapt to specific regional needs. Global trends influence, but their varied impact necessitates unique adaptation measures (Saban, 2021; Kress, 2000). An effective curriculum must be contextually relevant, adapting to local history, values, and constraints (Calvo, 2015; González-Davies & Enriquez Raído, 2018; Kress, 2000; Marais, 2011; Neema-Abooki, 2017). This is evident in comparative studies of translation programs, where variations in curricula are attributed to socio-cultural backgrounds (Afzaal, 2021). Marais (2011, 2014) further advocates for curriculum adaptation in Africa to address continent-specific developmental factors (Tymoczko, 2007).

Curricula also evolve at the institutional level. Nationally prescribed frameworks are often adapted by individual institutions and teachers to address specific contexts and needs (Brady, 1995). For example, institutional requirements led to modifications in programs that aligned with the European Master's in Translation (EMT) framework (Torres-Simón & Pym, 2017). Furthermore, geographical location influences content and language pairs offered (Rachman, 2003). Crucially, curricula adapt to learner needs, identified through needs assessments (Li, 2000, pp. 289-299). This is illustrated by how community beliefs and expectations function as an adaptive force on curriculum priorities (Li, 2002).

It is evident that at various levels, from global to institutional, curricula are not static but continuously adapt to specific internal and external pressures. From teachers modifying mandated guidelines (Brady, 1995) and institutional requirements shaping program focus (Torres-Simón & Pym, 2017), to geographical influences on language offerings (Rachman, 2003), and the crucial adaptation to learner needs (Li, 2000) and community beliefs (Li, 2002), these micro-level forces highlight the dynamic and responsive nature of curriculum as a complex adaptive system.

3.3. Complexity Theory and Translation Curriculum

Building upon the understanding of curriculum as a complex adaptive system that evolves through the interplay of interdependent agents and diverse contexts, this section delves into the application of complexity theory within the domain of translation curriculum. While the preceding discussion established how curricula adapt to various external and internal forces, this section explores how complexity theory offers a powerful lens to understand the inherent dynamism, unpredictability, and emergent nature of translation learning itself. It will examine key theoretical contributions that advocate pedagogical approaches fostering adaptability and problem-solving in translation students, contrasting these with more traditional, transmissionist models.

From a complexity perspective, Kiraly (2000, 2012) argues that the translation process and profession cannot be fully understood through the rote memorization of fixed rules. Instead, he views it as an

emergent process, shaped by the dynamic interaction of linguistic, cultural, cognitive, and contextual factors (Kiraly, 2013). This perspective suggests that the application of knowledge is intrinsically context-dependent; therefore, translators must have adaptable skills to manage a wide array of options and address diverse reader needs, as the best approach is rarely strictly predefined.

Kiraly advocates for a project-based approach to translator education that fosters independent, problem-solving translators who are able to operate effectively beyond the classroom. He argues that students should develop these crucial competencies by engaging with authentic, complex translation projects, ideally sanctioned by real clients, right from the outset. In this model, projects are approached holistically, compelling students to identify and acquire the necessary competencies as they emerge from the task itself. This contrasts sharply with curricula that list "content" to be merely "covered"; instead, the curriculum's starting point becomes real-life activities and the emergent learning purposes of the students (Kiraly, 2000, 2012).

Building on this argument, Del Mar Haro-Soler and Kiraly (2019) contend that knowledge and student empowerment are most effectively fostered in dynamic, even chaotic, learning environments. They emphasize the importance of balancing structure with flexibility in translator education, providing both guided learning and ample opportunities for independent exploration, creativity, and critical thinking. This approach contrasts sharply with traditional, teacher-centred approaches, which prioritize rigid structure and conformity, which can potentially undermine students' confidence and imagination.

Kiraly's (2015) work further critiques conventional task-based and competence-based approaches, labelling them as "transmissionist." He argues that such methods often prioritize teacher-led content selection and predetermined competencies, which can limit the curriculum's ability to reflect the complexity and emergent challenges of real-world translation practice. Conversely, Calvo (2015) highlights the importance of communities of practice for knowledge production, suggesting a scaffolded approach where novice members begin with simpler, low-risk tasks and gradually advance. This involves simulating real-world scenarios in the classroom, allowing for text selection that matches the student's learning stage while providing robust scaffolding to support their development. While this represents a task-based approach that identifies and focuses on specific problems or skills, with all elements geared towards a defined outcome, its efficacy in translator pedagogy is supported by various studies employing quantitative or qualitative methods (Alenezi, 2020; Inoue & Candlin, 2015; Li, 2013; Muluneh, 2018; Stankě & Begonja, 2021). The core emphasis from a complexity perspective, therefore, is on pedagogical models that foster adaptability and equip students to navigate the inherent dynamism of the translation profession.

While King (2017) agrees with the emphasis of del Mar Haro-Soler and Kiraly on a complexity perspective, his focus is specifically on the translation profession rather than pedagogy. He challenges the traditional linear progression narrative of the translation profession by emphasizing its dynamic and unpredictable nature. King (2017) states that instead of the generally held linear progression of a graduate's career—graduating, entering the market, working as a practitioner—the translation graduate's career development is not linear but chaotic and influenced by chance, opportunity and changes in circumstance.

This section has explored how complexity theory provides a framework for understanding translation curriculum, moving beyond traditional, linear approaches. It highlights that effective translator education fosters adaptability and empowers students through dynamic, often unpredictable, learning environments, highlighting the need for a balance between structured guidance and independent exploration (Del Mar Haro-Soler & Kiraly, 2019). This perspective considers translation itself as an emergent, context-dependent process that demands flexible, problem-solving translators (Kiraly, 2000, 2012, 2013).

4. MATERIALS AND METHODS

4.1. Design and Procedures

A qualitative study allowed examination of curriculum design for translator education in its natural setting and interpretation of how different stakeholders understand it. This made it possible to present a report that includes participant voices, along with reflections and interpretations of the problem and suggestions for adaptation (Creswell, 2005). This approach enabled a deeper exploration of the complexity involved in designing a relevant, human capability-centred curriculum—something that would not have been possible using quantitative methods.

4.2. Case and Participant Selection

The study's cases were Ghana's three public universities offering full-time translation programs at the time of the research: the University of Ghana (UG), recognized for its Master's in Translation; the Ghana Institute of Languages (GIL), the nation's first translation school; and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), which pioneered a PhD in translation studies in Ghana.

Data was collected through in-depth interviews with a diverse group of 28 participants, comprising 12 graduates from the selected programs, 4 professional translators, 5 curriculum designers, and 7 lecturers. The selection of stakeholder groups was intended to reduce potential subjectivity often associated with qualitative research and to support a more in-depth and detailed analysis. Participants were chosen for their extensive knowledge and experience in the subject area. Participants and universities were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

4.3. Data Collection

The data collection process involved conducting interviews with curriculum designers, lecturers, graduates of the selected institutions and professional translators. The interviews were conducted between March and May 2023. Face-to-face interviews were audio-recorded, while virtual interviews were recorded using the built-in recording function of MS Teams. The goal of recording was to ensure accurate reporting and to avoid losing data. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes each.

An interview guide was developed and validated by three experts: two translation research experts and one Ghanaian research expert, before submission for ethics clearance. The interview guide can be grouped into three sections that relate to the research questions and objectives, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Categorized Interview Guide

Purpose	Data Collected
Curriculum	1. Design process (stakeholders involved) 2. What knowledge is selected from the translator, and why and how it expands capabilities.
Capabilities	3. What industry players, lecturers, students and decision-makers see as valuable capabilities in order to find common ground 4. How those capabilities are enhanced
Adaptation	5. Suggestions for improvement of the selected curricula to enhance student capabilities

Open-ended questions such as, "How does your program prepare students for the job market?" "How would you change the program if you could?" "Are you involved in designing the curriculum?" were used to encourage participants to reflect deeply and express their views in their own words.

4.4. Data Coding

The data were analysed using a thematic approach, supported by NVivo 14 and guided by the key areas in the interview guide—curriculum design, knowledge selection, valued capabilities, and curriculum

adaptation. Initial coding focused on identifying recurring ideas in participant responses, which were then grouped into broader themes by comparing patterns across interviews.

To ensure credibility, the themes were carefully checked against the full dataset to confirm they accurately reflected participant views. Peer debriefing was also used to reduce bias and strengthen the overall interpretation.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

The study followed established ethical standards for scientific research. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time. An information letter and informed consent form outlining the aims, potential risks, time commitment, and the possible publication of the study were provided before the online or face-to-face interviews. This ensured that participants had a clear understanding of the study and the implications of their participation before giving their consent.

5. RESULTS

This section presents the key findings from the qualitative interviews and discusses them through complexity theory, in relation to the research problem of conflicting stakeholder views in translator education curricula in Ghana.

The results section will begin by presenting the emergent themes from the data, followed by a discussion that interprets these findings, links them to existing literature, and elaborates on their implications from a complexity perspective.

5.1. Description

Four tensions were identified. These tensions were rooted in issues relating to the conceptualization of curriculum, perceived gaps in curriculum content, pedagogical approach, and stakeholder participation in curriculum design.

5.2. Emergent Themes from Stakeholder Views

5.2.1. Conceptualization of Curriculum

All stakeholders acknowledge the curriculum as a guiding framework. There was a consensus that the curriculum, at its core, provides a structured blueprint for what should be taught and learned within a translator education program.

However, while this broad understanding exists, significant differences emerged in the depth and scope of how curriculum was conceptualized by different groups:

- **Lecturers/Curriculum Designers:** These stakeholders often defined the curriculum more formally, primarily as a "product" or "plan." Their conceptualization typically centred on official documents such as syllabi, course outlines, program handbooks, and regulatory frameworks. For them, the curriculum represents a set of prescribed learning objectives, content modules, teaching methodologies, and assessment criteria that are formally approved and delivered. They viewed it as a blueprint or a structured set of instructions that guides their teaching practice and administrative oversight. The emphasis was on the intended and documented aspects of the educational offering.

- **Graduates/Professionals:** In contrast, these groups tended to conceptualize the curriculum more broadly as an "experience." For graduates, the curriculum encompassed not only the planned, formal modules but also unplanned learning occurring through internships, self-study, practical challenges faced outside the classroom, and even informal interactions with peers and mentors. Professionals, drawing from their industry experience, emphasized the development of practical skills gained outside formal modules and the overall journey of becoming a translator capable

of meeting real-world demands. Their view highlighted the lived curriculum—what was actually learned and applied—rather than solely the prescribed curriculum. This often included adaptive strategies for problem-solving, client management, and niche specialization, not explicitly detailed in formal course descriptions.

5.2.2. Perceived Gaps in Curriculum Content

This section details varying perceptions of curriculum content gaps among stakeholders, highlighting both points of agreement and significant areas of tension.

All stakeholder groups broadly agreed on the importance of linguistic proficiency as a fundamental outcome of translator education. This common ground underscored the shared understanding that strong language skills are non-negotiable for effective translation practice.

Despite this consensus on linguistic foundations, notable divergences emerged concerning the adequacy of the curriculum in preparing graduates for the practical demands of the professional market.

- **Industry Professionals:** These stakeholders strongly emphasized a significant lack of practical, market-relevant skills. They specifically highlighted deficiencies in areas such as CAT tool mastery, project management, marketing for translators, niche specialization, and crucial soft skills like client communication. As Abugri succinctly put it, there is a need for a translator "who can really use the CAT tools to be able to meet the demand of the market because of the translation memory that we have to build up all the time." Mabel further underscored this entrepreneurial gap, stating, "One of the major things we need to learn as translators, because mostly we are trained to become freelancers and not work for organizations, is the entrepreneurial skills because most of us don't even know how to start a business, and the translation job is a business." While acknowledging the necessity of technology, Destiny cautioned against over-reliance, noting, "Now there are a lot of CAT tools that people use now… They forget their human part of it, so they produce the machine translation for you. When you read it, it is not original [it does not sound natural in the target language]… But that human touch must always be there." This suggests a desire for balanced training that integrates technology with human qualitative output.

- **Lecturers:** While acknowledging some curriculum gaps, lecturers often cited resource constraints, time limitations, or a primary focus on foundational academic knowledge as underlying reasons for the current content. Asamoah and his colleague Ebenezer both admitted, "In the curriculum, we lack courses on translation technology, which is extremely, extremely important". Richlove corroborated this, stating, "for the technical IT aspects and all that, it does not really prepare them at all, so I think that is where we are lacking." Richlove further highlighted practical barriers, explaining, "My school is not really resourced in terms of the translation program… What I really prefer to do is really introducing them to, for example, Trados. But you know, for such an application you have to buy it." Interestingly, some lecturers also felt that equipping students with broader soft skills rather than overly specific technical skills would offer wider employment opportunities, emphasizing adaptability over narrow specialization.

- **Curriculum Designers:** These stakeholders tended to view the current programs as effectively preparing students for a broad range of opportunities, focusing on developing adaptable graduates. Dr. Morrisson asserted, "Currently, the program prepares our students for any market." Dr. Darko expanded on this, noting, "If they don't find themselves just within that area, they'd be able to think outside the box to identify other opportunities or other avenues using the skills they've acquired in the program." Ebenezer echoed this, suggesting students

acquire "knowledge that can be fundamental in, you know, diverting their career path." Dr. Pete highlighted the program's ability to produce graduates who are "ready to be refashioned to suit the growing economy," capable of "readapt[ing] to any situation" and "easily retrained… to fit in other sectors of society." Regarding technology, while acknowledging recent introductions of CAT tools, Ebenezer admitted, "it's not been that effective." Dr. Pete also expressed concerns that over-reliance on readily available machine translation tools might hinder students' development of core linguistic skills.

- **Students:** Students consistently expressed frustration over feeling unprepared for the realities of the translation market despite completing their studies. Furthermore, they perceived the curricula as too limited to translation, lacking sufficient focus on other specific areas they wished to explore, such as interpreting. Kuuku bluntly stated, "None. None at all. None. If it's GU training, then none," when asked about preparedness for other jobs. Similarly, Gameli cautiously remarked, "Aside from translation, cautiously I will say none," with Emma adding, "Honestly, the training, apart from translation, I don't know any other jobs that it really prepared me for." This highlights a significant disconnect between student expectations and the perceived breadth of skills acquired.

5.2.3. Ideal Pedagogical Approaches

This section explores stakeholder perspectives on the most effective pedagogical approaches for translator education, revealing a shared desire for interactive learning but significant differences in preferred implementation, particularly regarding the balance between theory and practice.

There was a general desire for more interactive learning among all stakeholder groups. This indicated a shared recognition that passive, lecture-based methods alone are insufficient for developing the practical competencies required in translation.

Despite this convergence, marked divergences emerged concerning the ideal balance between theoretical foundations and practical application, as well as the integration of technology.

- **Lecturers/Administrators:** These stakeholders often leaned towards structured, teacher-led instruction, citing constraints such as bureaucracy, stringent assessment requirements, or established academic traditions. From their perspective, a strong theoretical foundation was crucial. Dr. Anderson, for instance, articulated a desire for students to have "knowledge in the foundations of translation," describing translation theory as forming "a building block for students' future career development." This aligns with the understanding that some programs, like the one at BU (as clarified by Dr. Osei), aim to train "trainers of translators" rather than solely practitioners, thus justifying a greater emphasis on theoretical underpinnings.

- **Students/Professionals:** In stark contrast, these groups strongly advocated for more project-based learning, simulations, real-world case studies, and collaborative environments that mirror professional practice. The responses of some students highlighted a perceived imbalance, where the theoretical knowledge acquired was seen as primarily academic and disconnected from practical application. Robert said, "We talk about Vinay, Darbelnet, Catford, Newmark, Catherina Reiss, and all those things. We talk about them. But we couldn't use those theories in any documents." This perceived lack of balance between theoretical foundations and practical training notably affected students' confidence in handling professional work.

A significant point of contention for graduates was the lack of technological integration. Nii explicitly stated, "We are not given a chance to incorporate IT in our work. Mind you, up till now, they still write [translation] exams on paper." GU graduates found this reliance on pen and paper frustrating, given the job market's heavy reliance on CAT tools. They uniformly expressed feeling unprepared due to this

disconnect: "You are not allowed to use translation CAT tools… then you are done with school, and you realize that, oh, they use CAT tools… and they ask you whether you know how to use Trados?… you're like, ohh, I did not know" (Kuuku).

Even the utility of immersion programs at GU was questioned. Gameli pointed out that "the immersion program is a waste of time, the value added is minimal… not useful… for students… it does not improve your English-speaking abilities as expected because the program seems to focus on grammar and pronunciation drills instead of on advanced language skills." This highlights a skills gap impeding professional development.

5.2.4. Stakeholder Involvement in Curriculum Design

This section examines the varying perspectives on the role of different stakeholders in curriculum development, revealing a convergence on the need for involvement but significant divergence in the extent and effectiveness of actual participation.

There was general recognition that multiple stakeholders should be involved in the curriculum development process. This suggests a shared understanding of the importance of diverse perspectives for creating relevant and effective programs.

Despite this agreement on the principle of inclusion, the actual experiences and perceived levels of influence varied significantly among stakeholder groups.

- **Curriculum Designers/Lecturers:** These stakeholders described formal consultation processes, such as workshops and committees, designed to gather input. However, they frequently perceived industry and student input as limited or difficult to integrate fully, citing practical constraints within the academic structure. Lecturers at the three universities, for instance, reported informally seeking student opinions, with Drs. Darko and Pete adopting a "student-centred approach," acknowledging curriculum boundaries but remaining flexible to student needs in lessons. While some lecturers actively participated in designing entire programs, others, like Asamoah and Dr. Anderson, had more limited involvement, with Asamoah even stating that he was not aware the curriculum at his institution had been changed until school resumed and he was assigned new courses to teach. Such lecturers primarily focus on creating course outlines or providing feedback for predesigned curricula. Lecturers like Richlove and Edmond expressed frustration with their institutions' current curriculum and a lack of opportunities to provide input.

- **Industry Professionals/Graduates:** These groups largely felt that their input was often sought but not always genuinely incorporated, leading to a tangible sense of disconnect between academic offerings and market needs. This perceived limited industry involvement directly translated into student challenges, as curricula at institutions like GU and BU, according to student reports, "fail to equip students fully with the skills and knowledge demanded by the job market, thereby hindering their job prospects." Students also reported feeling that feedback mechanisms, such as opinion questionnaires evaluating lecturer performance, did not provide an avenue for them to express preferences regarding course content or curriculum structure. Daniel stated, "You can only be involved in the course module's activity, and that is more or less like two products, because the lecturers have designed the programmes." George echoed this, saying, "For the designing of the curriculum, no. The curriculum was designed before we were enrolled and that's what we use, but for the class activities, yes, we were involved in some courses." This led to a feeling among students, as Steph phrased it, that "you are here to study this," implying they were passive recipients of information.

6. DISCUSSION

Interpreting Tensions Through Complexity Theory

This section applies complexity theory to interpret the identified tensions. Each point of tension is explained as an example of how the curriculum functions as a complex adaptive system (CAS).

6.1. Curriculum as an Emergent and Adaptive System

The differing ways stakeholders understand curriculum—as a formal "product" to a lived "experience" (see Section 5.2.1)—do not point to a "broken" system. Instead, they reflect how a complex adaptive system (CAS) works in practice. In the data, this divergence is visible in how lecturers tend to focus on planned content and structure, while graduates and industry professionals emphasise how learning is experienced and applied.

These differences show that curriculum exists at multiple levels. While the formal curriculum sets out intentions, the "curriculum-in-practice" emerges through everyday interactions between students, teachers, and professional contexts (King, 1986; Yavuz, 2012). In practice, this means that what students learn is shaped by course design, but also by how knowledge is interpreted, applied, and extended beyond the classroom.

Importantly, the gap between intended design and lived experience drives adaptation. When graduates highlight mismatches between training and professional demands, they generate feedback that reveals areas where the curriculum needs to evolve. In this way, the tension is not a sign of failure, but a mechanism through which the system learns and adjusts over time.

These misalignments become even more visible in the perceived gaps in curriculum content and the calls for new pedagogical approaches (see Sections 5.2.2 and 5.2.3). Participants consistently pointed to shortcomings in practical and technological skills, particularly in relation to industry tools and workflows. These gaps show what is missing, but also how the system is being pushed to respond to changes in the external environment.

However, the way the system responds reveals how adaptation is shaped—and sometimes constrained. Institutional limitations, such as a lack of specialised expertise or slow decision-making processes, delay formal curriculum changes. As a result, adaptation often occurs informally. Lecturers introduce practical elements on their own initiative, using personal resources and improvising within existing constraints. This shows that change does not always happen through formal reform, but through small, local adjustments that accumulate over time.

The tension between traditional teaching and demands for more practical, project-based learning, therefore, becomes productive. It creates space for experimentation, where different approaches are tried, adapted, or abandoned. Through this ongoing process of feedback and adjustment, the curriculum evolves in a non-linear way.

Crucially, how effectively this adaptation takes place depends on how stakeholders interact and how feedback circulates within the system (see Section 5.2.4). The data suggests that while formal consultation structures exist, they often operate in a top-down manner. Lecturers reported difficulties in having their input translated into actual curriculum changes, while graduates and professionals felt their views were "sought but not always genuinely incorporated." Students, in turn, described a largely passive role in their learning.

These patterns point to weak or constrained feedback loops. Although input is collected, it does not consistently feed back into decision-making in ways that produce timely or meaningful change. This limits the system's ability to adapt, as feedback is slowed down or disconnected from action.

At the same time, these tensions highlight the system's interdependence. Curriculum development depends on continuous interaction among lecturers, students, and industry actors. When feedback remains largely formal and infrequent, adaptation becomes rigid and delayed. In contrast, more ongoing, informal, and multi-directional exchanges would allow the system to respond more quickly and effectively to emerging needs, making the curriculum more anticipatory and less reliant on reactive adjustments.

Taken together, these dynamics—divergent understanding, perceived gaps, and patterns of interaction—show that curriculum development is not a linear or fully controlled process. Rather, it is a continuous, negotiated, and evolving system shaped by feedback, interaction, and emergence.

6.2. Implications for Translator Education Curriculum Design in Ghana

Based on the discussion informed by complexity theory, which views stakeholder tensions as inherent feedback loops and adaptive pressures within the curriculum's CAS, this section outlines practical implications that point towards how translator education in Ghana can be intentionally designed to support continuous evolution rather than periodic reform.

- Designing for emergence: Curriculum design should go beyond focusing only on predefined learning outcomes to intentionally create space for emergent learning. As the graduates highlighted (5.2.1), important practical and adaptive skills are developed outside formal modules. This calls for flexible frameworks that support spontaneous learning, creativity and student self-organization.

- Building adaptive capacity: Institutions must build internal mechanisms that allow them to respond quickly to changing market demands. Addressing the skill gaps identified (5.2.2), particularly in technology and entrepreneurship, requires flexible course modules, ongoing investment in software and infrastructure, and continuous professional development for lecturers. As Richlove mentioned, keeping up with specialized IT knowledge and industry trends is essential if programmes are to remain relevant and competitive.

- Enabling distributed agency: Universities must move away from rigid, top-down structures and instead foster distributed agency by recognizing both lecturers and students as active agents within the learning ecosystem. The frustrations expressed by lecturers and the passivity expressed by students point to the need for more participatory structures. Granting lecturers greater pedagogical autonomy and creating space for student co-creation of learning experiences would better harness their insights, promote shared ownership, and enable more responsive, bottom-up adaptation within the system.

- Embedding continuous feedback loops: Effective curriculum design must incorporate ongoing, multidirectional feedback among stakeholders. The current reliance on formal infrequent consultation (5.2.4) limits responsiveness. Designing for continuous dialogue among academic departments, industry, and students would allow for feedback that will inform change in real time, making the curriculum more anticipatory rather than purely reactive.

- Balancing structure and flexibility: Finally, curriculum systems should be designed to maintain a dynamic balance between stability and adaptability. While theoretical foundations remain essential, they should be integrated with flexible, practice-oriented, and technology-driven learning opportunities. This balance allows the system to remain coherent while still adapting to emerging professional demands.

7. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the tensions and divergences among curriculum stakeholders in Ghanaian translator education are not signs of a "broken" system but rather natural and necessary features of a complex adaptive system. These tensions—whether in how curriculum is understood, where gaps are perceived, or how stakeholders interact—function as mechanisms that both reveal misalignments and create opportunities for change.

Taken together, the findings highlight the need for a shift in how curriculum development is approached. Rather than viewing curriculum as a fixed product, it should be seen to be continuously shaped through interaction, feedback, and practice. This calls for a move from reactive reform to intentional design for emergence.

In practical terms, this means creating flexible curriculum structures that allow learning to evolve, embedding continuous and multidirectional feedback loops, strengthening the institution's adaptive capacity, and enabling greater participation from lecturers, students and industry actors. Such an approach recognises that valuable capabilities are not fully predetermined but emerge through ongoing engagement with real-world contexts.

Ultimately, adopting a complexity-informed perspective shifts the focus from controlling the curriculum to enabling its evolution. By designing for adaptability, responsiveness, and co-creation, translator education in Ghana can move towards more resilient and future-oriented programmes that are better equipped to prepare graduates for the changing demands of the profession.

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