Writing in the competency based approach
Secondary School Teachers' beliefs about project workshops

MEZIANI Sadia and Doctor Mahieddine Rachid
Department of English
University of Ahmed DRAIA - Adrar- Algeria

Abstract: This paper reports on both quantitative and qualitative studies which investigated the beliefs of some secondary school teachers' beliefs about the implementation of project workshops in English language teaching. The results of this study which were collected through a questionnaire and interviews indicated that the majority of the participants dealt with projects with their students despite the fact that they were not convinced of the benefits they might have; that their students were not competent enough to undertake such type of activities; that they adapted the projects' themes to the students' own cultural milieu in order to motivate them and got them more involved in the task.

الملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف رأي بعض اساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية للتعليم الثانوي لولاية أدرار من تطبيق أحد أسس المقاربة بالكفاءات و المتمثلة في المشاريع البيداغوجية. لتحقيق هدف هذه الدراسة، تم استخدام استبيان مع20 استاذا تم اختيارهم عشوائيا من بين مجموع الثانويات المتواجدة في ولاية أدرار ومحاورة 04 أساتذة و أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن أغلبية الاساتذة يقومون بالمشاريع البيداغوجية رغم عدم اقتناعهم بفائدتها نظرا لعدم كفاءة التلاميذ كفاية للقيام بذلك

Introduction

After more than a decade of Competency Based Approach implementation in the Algerian educational system, we find it important to evaluate one of its principles which is embodied in the project workshop activities. Among the objectives of CBLT in EFL in Algeria is the establishment of three competencies:

1.   Oral interaction
2.   Interpret authentic oral and written documents
3.   Produce simple oral and written documents (messages)

 In this study, we have attempted to find out whether the teachers are convinced of the necessity of implementing such activities in EFL classrooms, and whether they consider the secondary school students as being competent enough to undertake project workshops which are mainly based on their writing abilities?

1.   Approaches to teaching writing

Different approaches to L2 writing and learning have been evolved since the emergence of ESL/ EFL as an independent area of research in the 1980s. Each one views writing depending on its own distinctive focused aspect. Richards has provided as with some aspects around which L2 writing teaching may be focused such as language structures, text functions, themes or topics, creative expression, composing processes, content and genre and context of writing. In this research, we consider only three major approaches which put emphasis on the final product, the process the teachers go through, and a particular genre all of which are embodied in the product approach, the process approach and the genre based approach respectively.

1.1.   The Product Approach

This approach lays heavily on both structural and behavioural views of language which account for language learning being accuracy based and habit formation. For Richards, 'learning to write in a foreign or second language' under this approach 'involves linguistic knowledge and the vocabulary choices, syntactic patterns, and cohesive devices that comprise the essential building blocks of texts.'(3 : 2009).

The learners should imitate   and manipulate writing models provided by their teachers, following four basic stages which are familiarization, controlled writing, guided writing and free writing. The model text is first analysed taking into consideration some aspects such as the structure of grammar, content, sentences' organisation, and rhetorical patterns. After manipulating all those aspects, learners are given a new topic and asked to imitate the model text so as to come up with their own compositions.   This approach is watered down as formulating well-formed sentences is not enough to better students' writing , and writing is no more seen as surface structures but beyond this 'written texts are always a response to a particular communicative setting'(Richards , 5 : 2009). Then it is so crucial for both teachers and learners to consider the purposes and contexts of their writing.

1.2.   The Process Approach

The process approach's main focus is the steps involved in creating a piece of work. It came as a reaction to the product approach in which writing is seen as a mechanical activity of imitating ready-made texts. This approach gives some room to 'basic cognitive processes' and consider them' as central to writing activity and stressing the need to develop students' abilities to plan, define a rhetorical problem, propose and evaluate solutions' (Richards , 10 :2009). Scholars have identified five salient steps that process writing goes through: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. In the prewriting stage, students brainstorm relevant ideas to the topic, collect data, take notes, etc. While drafting, they put their ideas into a written form and it is the first version of their composition which will be amended later. At the revising step, students 'read through what they have written to see where it works and where it doesn't' (Harmer, 5: 2004), they may probably add, omit or change words, paraphrase ambiguous sentences etc. As for editing, it is considered as the final version of the draft, more attention is given to spelling, punctuation, grammar, and handwriting. Contrary to the product approach which imposes many restrictions on learners by providing a model to follow and seeking accuracy, the process approach

enhances learners' creativity by allowing them generating their own ideas without worrying about mistakes at the early first stages of prewriting and drafting since it is based on fluency rather than accuracy.

1.3.   The Genre Approach

This approach draws mostly on the theory of syntactic functional linguistics developed by Halliday. He regards language as being not merely a set of norms but as norms which are tightly related to social functions that may be used to convey meanings. i.e., it is through language that we reach some goals and that it goes hand in hand with specific cultural and social contexts out of which it cannot be understood appropriately. Martin (1992) quoted in Richards (2009: 19) regards genre as ' a goal oriented-staged social process'. It is centred around a social context in which pieces of writing are produced to achieve certain goals. Some genres which are identified in this approach are exposition, argument, narration and description with other sub types such as definition, cause and contrast etc.

2.   Writing Under Competency Based Approach

2.1.   The Underpinning of The Competency Based Approach

Competency Based Approach is a learner's based approach, it stresses teaching a language in relation to the social context in which it is used. It views language as a means of interaction and communication for the achievement of given goals. As Richards and Rodgers point out 'competency based education (CBA) focuses on the outcomes of learning. It addresses what the learners are expected to do with the language' (2001: 141) rather than on what they are expected to learn about. They have stated its goals as 'the knowledge, skills, and behaviours students should possess at the end of a course of study' (ibid. 141). In this approach, the learner is seen as an active participant in the learning process. Learning is not considered as the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the learner but the latter should be creative in using the acquired knowledge through the interaction with other learners.

Three basic competences are triggered in English language learning in the secondary education:

- **The first competence as it is stated in the first year programme, 'produire un énoncé oral en adéquation avec la situation de communication en utilisant les schémas intonatifs et les temps qui correspondent à cette situation.'(2005 : 10).**
- **The second competence lies in ' Traiter et interpréter les informations essentielles contenues dans un message pour s'informer, répondre à des questions et pour justifier une réponse.**
- **The third competence is ' produire un énoncé pour informer, décrire, raconter, argumenter en utilisant les types d'écrits et les ressources acquises.**
It is clearly stated that writing is used to communicate a message both through the product and process approaches, CBA combines both approaches in the writing skill. It appeals to the product oriented approach since the students are always provided with a model of a written text or dialogue to imitate. Before being involved in the written task, teachers focus on the final product of the students in matters of form, coherence, accuracy etc. As for the process oriented approach is the fact that teachers make their learners aware of the different steps they have to go through so as to accomplish the writing task (prewriting, drafting, revising, editing and publishing). They are too required to comprehend a document and to produce written texts of different types in which they may inform, describe, narrate, argue etc. Being part of the writing skill, project work is implemented to better enhance students competencies.

2.2.   Definition of Project work

A project ,as it is defined by Harmer, is the description of ' pieces of work which extended over a period of time, and where the final product may be the result of considerable research'. (2008 : 103). Beckett defines it as 'a long-term (several weeks) activity that involves a variety of individual orcooperative tasks such as developing a research plan and questions, and implementing the plan through empirical or document research that includes collecting, analysing, and reporting data orally and/or in writing' (2002: 54)(retrieved from http: // clil.pedagog.uw.edu.pl). Another definition is that provided by

Fried-Both who considers a project work as a learner's centred and collaborating activity when he points out that 'Project work is student-centred and driven by the need to create an end-product[…] The route to the end-product brings opportunities for students to develop their confidence and independence and to work together in a real-world environment by collaborating on a task which they have defined for themselves and which has not been externally imposed" (2003: 6).From the previously mentioned definitions, a project work may be considered as a group work in which a number of students are involved mainly to achieve collaborative ends rather than competitive ones.

2.2.1. The Process of Project Work

Papandreou quoted in Aimer (26/ 27), identifies 6 stages as a framework for an effective project work:

1. Preparation: at this stage, the topic is introduced by the teacher; the students may discuss the topic further with their teachers.

2. Planning: in which students agree upon the different elements that constitute the project, they determine the sources and data gathering methods.

3. Research: learners gather information from different sources either in groups or individually. They may use some methods of data gathering such as questionnaires and interviews.

4. Conclusion: The students draw a conclusion after analyzing their data.

5. Presentation: This is the stage where the students represent their work to their classmates in the classroom.

6. Evaluation: the students are evaluated by their teacher.

3. The study

3.1. Methodology

Participants

The total number of informants who participated in this study was 20 secondary school English language teachers. The informants were selected randomly from six secondary schools in Adrar.

Data Collection

This study is positioned in a mixed methods approach in which the qualitative and the quantitative methods complement each other. As Dorneyei has pointed out "the strengths of one method can be utilized to overcome the weaknesses of another method used in the study" (2007: 45). He adds that "it has been suggested by many that we can gain a better understanding of a complex phenomenon by converging numeric trends from quantitative data and specific details from qualitative data. Words can be used to add meaning to numbers and numbers can be used to add meaning to words" (ibid:45). For instance with respect to this study the data drawn from the teachers' questionnaires and interviews. Both the questionnaires and the interviews are based on open-ended questions that require mostly a qualitative analysis though some other questions are analysed quantitatively. As Cohen et all have stated clearly" open questions enable respondents to write a free response in their own terms, to explain and qualify their responses and avoid the limitations pre-set categories of response" (2005: 248). Open-ended questions are compatible with" smaller scale research" and it is their "responses that might contain the 'gems' of information that otherwise might not have been caught in the questionnaire" (ibid: 255).

Questionnaire

The aim of the questionnaire was to investigate and elicit teachers' beliefs of the implementation of the project workshop activity with their students. The questionnaire is designed using open-ended questions, it is composed of two parts, while the first part is about the demographic information of the participants such as the gender and the working experience, the other part is about 6 open questions. The questionnaires were distributed to 30 teachers. Only 20 teachers returned them back.

Interviews

The interviews were conducted to explore the matter under investigation further. So as to find out more insights about the teachers' beliefs about the project workshop activities, 4 teachers were interviewed. Their working

experience ranging from 6 to 22 years. The interviews were not recorded but the researcher only took notes.

3.2.   Results and Discussion

Collected data were analysed first quantitatively to get statistical description of the teachers' beliefs, then qualitatively to get more comprehensive explanations of some of those beliefs.

The statistical analysis of data revealed that the majority of teachers (95%) stated that they implement project workshops with their students, while only (5%) of them do not (only 1teacher). As for the second question, more than two thirds (75%) thought that project work activities are not compatible with overcrowded classrooms whereas (25%) of them thought that such activities can be applied regardless of the overcrowded classrooms; the fact which is wrong since one of Competency Based Education's underpinnings, is that the project work activity may be well operated with non crowded classrooms. This proportion of teachers thought so because of their limited teaching experience which ranges from 2 to 6 years and the ineffective or lack of training.

 Concerning this question" Are you convinced of the importance and benefits that project work may have or you do them because they are just part of the programme?", (65%) of the teachers voiced their dissatisfaction with this type of activities and they confirmed that they did them because they had to do so but not convinced of their importance at the level of improving the student' writing abilities. Some of them argued that their students were not really interested in doing research and efforts to learn the language. Others added that the majority of their students just copy-pasted readymade works and submitted them sometimes without even reading them. In fact, this latter finding aligns with that of Bendala who regarded doing projects as a business in which learners collect money and "go to cyber café, an internet space, ask a person to copy-paste the research topic from the internet and print it, then give it to the teacher without even reading it" (161: 2013). Furthermore, some of them argued by the overcrowded classes with which is nearly impossible to deal with projects. The

remaining of the teachers (35%) thought that projects were effective and they were convinced of potential benefits that they may have. This is due partly, as they stated, to the fact that projects are group tasks in which students of various levels may well cooperate to produce a final composition.

On one hand, the majority of teachers (70%) argued that their students were incompetent and weak at the level of grammar and vocabulary. Therefore, they could not come out with acceptable paragraphs or whatever other forms could be. Some of them added that there were a considerable number of students who did not dare and try to write mainly in exams due to their very low level and feeling of frustration. On the other hand, (30%) of the participants considered that though the learners' level played a crucial role in implementing writing activities, it was the teachers' responsibility too to create appropriate atmospheres to work in pairs or/and groups, motivate them and encourage them with constructive feedback so as to improve their writing abilities. All the teachers (100%) who deal with projects said that they adapted the project workshops' topics to their student' own local and cultural milieu in order to facilitate the job for them and to get them more involved and motivated.

As far as the qualitative analysis of the data is concerned, the same themes as those discussed in the questionnaires have emerged from the interviews which are based on structured open-ended questions. Interviews are used so as to get further insights of the teachers' beliefs on the issue under investigation. All the interviewed teachers were women, the sampling of the participants depended on their professional circumstances. Therefore a convenience sampling strategy was adopted.

Regarding the interviews, they have been analysed qualitatively and the interviewed teachers have advanced the following arguments for not being convinced with the projects: All the teachers have agreed on that the first pitfall was the overcrowded classrooms. They focused on the fact that doing projects appropriately necessitated the teachers' assistance and guidance, something which is hard if not impossible with overcrowded classes. In addition to this, they added that the

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majority of the students were not motivated, and did not show interest in learning English. A fact which, according to them, was due mainly to their low level in writing though they had previously had English for four years in the middle school. More than this, one of them highlighted the outstanding role of training. She said that most teachers didn't hold enough training concerning how to deal with projects. Another one suggested dealing with ordinary written expressions as an alternative instead of projects.

Conclusion

The current paper was designed to determine the beliefs of some secondary school teachers' about the implementation of the project activities in their classes. The results of this investigation showed that the majority of the participants dealt with projects in their classes despite the fact that they were not convinced of doing so; that the majority of their students were passive and incompetent to undertake such activities; that teachers were in a need of continuous training. However with a small sample size, caution must be applied, as the findings might not be generalised and be transferable to other teachers.

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