

The CBLT in Algeria: facts and findings

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Despite a growing tendency in Algeria among syllabus designers, textbook writers, teachers, university lecturers and other actors in the educational field, and a de facto recognition amongst higher level decision makers that changes must be brought urgently (cf. the successive ministerial instructions, TV and radio debates, ministerial speeches and recommendations (The Minister of National Education and the Minister of Higher Education and Research), together with the most recent debates on schooling and education, the current educational system in Algeria remains essentially based on courses scheduled to last for a given period of instruction (School / University). This means that learners in various fields of study like maths, physics, or languages are involved in courses that supposedly, and erroneously, prepare them for a profession that will integrate as white collar staff in society. Progress in these school courses is time-based (1st year English, 2nd year English, 3rd year English, 4th year English, etc.). This means that during this learning phase, the teacher is supposed to have given an amount of knowledge and reached a particular step in the textbook or the course content. This in turn entails that the learner is supposed to learn at the pace “imposed” by the teacher, the text-book, or the course itself. Yet, we know today that not all learners learn at the same pace, nor is

the teacher's output necessarily the same as the learner's input (Krashen, 1995). Tests are scheduled on a periodic basis to determine the input of the learner and scores are compared to check his/her progress in the course. In case of failure remedial work is worked out and conducted, but it has never been based on the individual. The failing student rarely obtains individual assistance. This is a typical feature of a time-based teaching programme as it requires from the teacher that he moves on to the next lesson or the next unit in order to comply with the schedule imposed on him by the teaching programme.

Time-based teaching has proven successful at times over the years and in specific teaching environments (sandwich courses, for instance). Nevertheless, such approaches to education have also proven to be inadequate if the course objective is to lead the learner to perform a number of tasks on the basis of the knowledge he acquired during the learning phase. A point in case would be our 'Licence d'Enseignement de Langues'¹ which has produced over the years teachers who have been poorly prepared for *teaching* (rather than for the teaching profession) mainly because the programmes, knowledge and training given in our universities are inadequately designed for performing the task of a teacher of a foreign language. Similarly, the school learner knows basically how to perform an addition, a multiplication, a subtraction or a division in class, but he fails to apply this knowledge in real situation simply because he learnt it to return it back for assessment. This entails that knowledge in such cases remains confined to the classroom envi-

¹ . It is no more called so. The cover label "Licence" is a global term for what is taught in the BA in Languages.

ronment and for evaluation purposes both for the teacher, the learner, and the school institution.

What lacks in the case of the teacher and that of the learner above is the opportunity, or at least the adequate environment where the acquired knowledge becomes dynamic rather than static by putting it to work in terms of skills and capacities, how it is re-invested in terms of performance of a task, the individual strategies that are called for, a behaviour, and most of all the feeling of having achieved something on the basis of what was learnt.

No doubt, a time-based educational system as expounded in our schools and universities is not appropriate for such an achievement. The answer would rather be teaching and training based on competencies that are acquired during teaching, learning and practice. This new vision of teaching has come to be called a Competency Based Approach (henceforth, CBA) and extended to the Competency Based Language Teaching (CBLT).

1. The Teacher's Entry and Exit Profile

For comparison purposes, we shall use the eighties as a demarcating line to show changes in the teacher's (of English) profile.

- Prior to the 80's

Teaching as a profession was *motivation based*. The would-be teacher (of English in this case) be it at the secondary school or at university level was undoubtedly someone who, for various reasons (cultural, vocational or otherwise) *wanted to be a teacher* and considered it as a respected and respectable profession in the city. He stood as the source of knowledge inside as well as outside the

classroom and he represented somehow the Authority with due respect. He was integrated into a teacher-training program (ITE) for a better practice and management of his profession.

Teaching was *a profession* then and creativity in terms of cultural and scientific activities had a place of pride. Suffice here to mention educational reviews such as Forum to which most teachers of English used to subscribe, theatre plays, movie sessions, lab sessions, even tape recorders etc. which constituted teaching aids and materials that helped the learner. The relationship teacher-learner was based on mutual understanding, and parents or relatives (even at university level) were part of the game and worried about their children's behaviour at school or university, their progress and their results.

One may venture to say that teachers were professionals as they were aware of how to handle a class and they represented an honourable profession.

By the end of his/her career, the teacher had an exit profile of someone who had mastered know-how that can be used and improved by future generations. Teaching was teacher-oriented but this is not the issue at stake here.

- After the 80's

Teaching has become a *trade* i.e., a transaction for a particular job or task to perform or *a business of buying, selling, or exchanging goods and services*, (Longman, p. 1173) rather than a *profession*, i.e. *a form of employment, especially one that is respected in society as honourable and is possible only for an educated person and after*

training in some special branch of knowledge (Longman, p. 874).

The teacher has become a knowledge supplier. He stands, in some cases, as a seller of *grades* and *marks* for *Evaluation* and *Testing* which are hardly ever conducted as they should be. In spite of the massive program for higher studies abroad of the eighties whose aim was to provide qualified national teaching personnel, the teacher has become a better knowledge holder to some extent but he / she remained more a knowledge provider than a professional as it were. The exception being the very few cases where individual initiative has been stronger than the environmental pressures and routine of the teaching at university (handouts, consultation, personal contribution, etc.). The teaching of English and other foreign languages in Algeria boiled down to individual initiatives with inadequate teaching material and documentation (cf. the state of our university libraries for example).

Within the same department, a given module is taught differently from one teacher to another. The teaching staff is fully national and trained locally. The exit profile of a teacher by the end of his career was that of someone looking for part-time jobs to survive. At best, he /she will be lucky to do extra hours and get paid for them as a trader more than a professional. The teacher who used to be a model for English language and culture doesn't hold that place of pride anymore. His teaching has become routine work with the same modules being taught over the years without keeping on a par with new theoretical trends. This is mainly true for content modules. Even the topics in oral expression, reading comprehension and listening comprehension are the same year in year out.

The lack of teaching material, documented literature, teacher training courses, adequate teaching programs etc. does not help to overcome this vacuum where social tensions undermine the teaching itself. In fact, the whole question on the teacher's attitude to English and his motivation towards teaching a foreign language remains open to debate.

2. The Student's Entry and Exit Profile

- Prior to the 80's

- The student's profile was that of a baccalaureate holder with an above average in English and a strong motivation to learn this language and its culture. Socially, the father was a skilled worker living in an urban area.

Some of the freshers came from mixed secondary schools. Their motives for English language studies were more *integrative* and *cultural* than *vocational*. They were dictated somehow by the environment in the city (American and English folksongs, films, the British Council, The Afro-American Institute, etc.). The teaching staff was partly national and partly expatriate (UK, US, Australia, New Zealand, and India). Algeria was then a promising oil and gas producer heading for socio-economic prosperity.

- After the 80's

Today's students do not seem to 'worry much' about what or how knowledge in general and learning in particular may help them shape their personality and prepare them for a future integration into a profession. They worry more about an overall average of 10 out of 20 (or a

pass equivalent) in the exams. The student comes from a mixed urban / rural background. In most cases, the students are weak in English and almost ignorant of the culture of the language. The motives for a BA in English have become more instrumental than cultural. Attitude and motivation towards the target language (English in this case) have changed substantially in twenty years or so. Attitude here refers to the student's general state of apprehension towards the target language and culture.

Motivational props at the family and university levels are scarce for the student nowadays. This appears in his basic need in ELT that is to get a degree for a job (rather than teaching as a profession). It is clearly summarised in expressions used among students and produced in the mother tongue. These may be translated as: « I want to *lock* the module» (I want to get a pass mark), «I only need half a point to *close* my module», «I don't think I'll be able to *close* the module this year ».

These characteristics of the student are closely linked to environmental characteristics for ELT. On the whole, direct contact with the native speaker does not exist. Programs such as «Follow me» and «On we go» that used to be shown on Algerian TV have disappeared from the screen. This may be due to a shortage of supplies in the series. It may also be the result of a dictated language policy. The only contact then, remains through networks such as the Web, the satellite dish and scarcely through written literature available on the spot, i.e. in our university libraries and perhaps in some bookshops in town. Both the TV channels and the book represent a uni-directional contact that is not always very motivating for the student to learn about culture. When the student

reaches university, he comes with a cultural background in his own language (Arabic, Berber, etc.), perhaps some cultural knowledge in French and a rather poor knowledge of English language and culture. This background knowledge made of a mixture of Arabic (including Berber) culture and French culture constitutes the common layer on which his learning is based.

3. The Current Situation

As it stands, the quality of L2 instruction is not effective enough to achieve an adequate teaching/learning that not only allows the student to cultivate himself for a better cross-cultural communication but also to preserve his own 'forces propres' and cultural identity. No adequate responsive educational or pedagogical programs have been suggested this far. The BA curriculum dates back to the 1980s (perhaps prior to this date) and no substantial amendments have been made in spite of the drastic changes in the socio-economic picture of the country.

The teacher lacks qualified ELT professionalism despite new ELT methodologies and approaches that proliferate in the market. The teaching is often conducted hastily with no suitable teaching material or adequately trained instructors. EFL methodologies and approaches are often made available to the teacher once they are outdated and they most of the time leave him bewildered and intimidated in the performance of his task.

We have this far failed to develop appropriate curricula. As teachers, we still use English as an educational end (i.e., leading to a BA degree). We do not always see it as a means to an end, i.e. a language that opens up ways to global communication and modernity. The ques-

tion often raised is where does the problem actually lay? Some teachers and course designers see it in the dissimilarity that exists between L1 and L2 which affects language instruction, while they agree that the cultural background (Arabic/French) of the learner may help bridge this gap. Others see the ‘cloisonnements universitaires’ and the ‘malaise social’ as the prime factors that hinder the development of a proper English language curriculum where culture understanding and learning should be implemented. Others still blame the student himself whose motivation has become purely instrumental. In any case, they all agree that the lack of internal support (governmental funds) and external material and moral support have a direct impact on the quality of L2 instruction in Algeria. This issue remains open to debate.

4. Some Views on the CBLT

We shall not embark here on the various shades and shapes of a Competency Based Approach (CBA). The proliferation of definitions of this fairly new approach to teaching and training pushes us to select what we consider as the most appropriate ones for this talk and for the Algerian educational system. We shall thus present some typical European definitions of the term then expose one or two anglo-saxon definitions of a competency.

A prime distinction between what we were used to in terms of teaching and learning practices and this new approach is that while a time-based teaching is teacher-oriented (centred) and progression is essentially based on a time unit (teaching/learning schedule or programme), Competency Based Language Teaching is learner-oriented (centred) and based essentially on progression in

terms of the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills² to perform tasks. The key concept is obviously the concept of ‘*competency*’.

An overall definition of the concept of competency is that it encompasses a ‘know-how-to-do’ and a ‘know-how-to-act’ combined together and acted out under specific conditions. However, these two factors have been subject to debate³ for a long time. Perrenoud (2000) rejects the factor of ‘know-how-to-do’ as elements of a competency which he defines as:

La compétence n'est pas un état ou une connaissance possédée. Elle ne se réduit ni à un savoir ni à un savoir-faire. Elle n'est pas assimilable à un acquis de formation. Posséder des connaissances ou des capacités ne signifie pas être compétent. On peut connaître des techniques ou des règles de gestion comptable et ne pas savoir les appliquer au moment op-

² . A skill is enveloped in a task or tasks that the learner performs within a given competency e.g. interact orally. It usually requires cognitive and motor functions such as performing a form of address in the foreign language with the necessary behaviour and the required greeting forms. It is knowledge- and attitude-based in this case. In the technical field, a skill is easily detected during the manipulation of instruments or equipment, e.g. mantling / dismantling a tool or a machine (a drill, an engine, a fridge, etc.)

³ . The term ‘savoirs’ is often used as a blanket term for “knowledge”. It was then divided into ‘savoir-faire’, ‘savoir agir’ and ‘savoir-être’. This in turn was split out into ‘savoir-redire’ and ‘savoir-refaire’ that belong more to a skill than to a competency (cf. De Ketele, 1989, in Xavier Roegiers, Une pédagogie de l’intégration, De Boeck, 1999, pp. 55-56)

portun. On peut connaître le droit commercial et mal rédiger des contrats. (Perrenoud, 2000 : 45)

Perrenoud insists, as it were, on the fact that a competency does not boil down to knowledge per se, nor is it a know-how-to-do on its own. It is rather a manifestation of some skills in particular circumstances and at a particular time.

For a clearer definition, De Ketele (1996) attempts to break out a competency into its basic constituents. He defines as:

... un ensemble ordonné de capacités (activités) qui s'exercent sur des contenus dans une catégorie donnée de situations pour résoudre des problèmes posés par celles-ci.
(Xavier Roegiers, 1999 : 65)

The key concepts that envelop the general concept of competency, according to De Ketele, are 'capacités' (skills), 'contenus' (contents) and 'situations' (contexts). It stands as an integrating concept in comparison to specific objectives of the former approaches to teaching. It envelops at the same time the contents of the course in terms of acquired knowledge, the activities that are subsequent to this content, and most of all the situations in which these activities are put to work.

Johanne Myre (2000) also spells out what she considers as prime features of a competency. Accordingly, a

competency emerges when the following characteristics appear in the learner:

- elle se démontre par des résultats observables;
- elle fait appel à plusieurs habiletés;
- elle a une valeur sur le plan personnel, social ou professionnel;
- elle est associée à la réalisation d'activités que l'on retrouve dans des situations réelles;
- elle permet de mettre à profit des habiletés.

In other words, Myre (2000) argues that a competency is demonstrable in terms of observable facts (performance of the participant-learner / student). It requires various skills, it represents a personal achievement in actual situations and contexts and it helps to make use of the skills of the performer (learner / student).

Gillet (1991) argues along the same lines:

La compétence est un des principes organisateurs de la formation. Elle s'inscrit dans une logique d'organisation de la formation qui supprime la logique d'exposition des contenus. La définition des contenus est imposée par la compétence et non par le développement expositif de la discipline. C'est elle qui est le maître d'œuvre dans la composition d'une formation.

(P. Gillet 1991: 72)

Gillet stresses on the fact that in terms of teaching programmes, the contents are dictated by the competency(ies) that are going to be installed. This view diverges from the traditional approach in teaching programmes whereby the contents of the course are prior to the skills to be attained by the learner. This is paramount for syllabus designers and text-book writers who must think in advance of what competency (ies) must be installed in the first place before they think of the content of the discipline. This is far from what we used to find in text-books in terms of the lesson followed by some practical exercises and drills to make sure the learner has grasped the content of the lesson. In fact, this approach requires that the learner puts into practice and acts out the knowledge he has received in problem solving tasks.

In the Programme d'Anglais (2ème Langue Etrangère (3ème Année) of the Ministry of Education (2001), competency is defined in these terms:

***La compétence** est un savoir-agir qui intègre et mobilise un ensemble de capacités, d'habiletés et de connaissances utilisées efficacement dans des situations problèmes, circonstances variées qui peuvent ne jamais avoir été rencontrées.*

5. The Teacher / Learner under the CBLT

- The Teacher

The teacher should reconsider his teaching behaviour and procedures, his techniques and motivations in order to create a new environment for himself and his learners

under the CBLT. In fact, it is no more a situation where he/she should spend hours teaching a given subject while his learners try to store as much as they can for future evaluation in class. The teaching will be based primarily on putting the learner in several situations and contexts which become increasingly complex as the course develops. The teacher should train his learners to follow procedures which help them carry out tasks to discover new situations. This requires the need to put the learner in authentic and increasingly complex situations. The teacher must check the performance of a task and the knowledge which is necessary for the performance of a particular task. This is mainly true when we, as teachers, ask the learner (who has carried out a task almost to the perfection) the question why he/she used such or such a procedure, or why he/ she started with a given procedure and finished with another. In most cases, the learner would not be able to answer these questions. This is in fact due to his / her meta-knowledge where several processes based on his own experience are put to work and gathered to carry out a task. Basically, the learner acts by using his primary knowledge (knowledge not necessarily acquired in class) with that which he/she learnt in class.

He must be led to feel that he has to organize his knowledge to perform a task.

- The Learner

The learner can interpret and produce verbal and nonverbal messages of average complexity in English.

He can use personal working methods and share it with groups (negotiation, exchange of ideas, etc.). He is equipped with strategies to face problem situation and he

has some knowledge of the cultures of the Target Language. He can interact in real situation inside and outside class. He can interpret authentic documents of average complexity with a certain degree of autonomy. He can hold an informal talk in simple and correct English. He can exploit and interpret authentic documents of average complexity and produce oral messages and relatively elaborate writings.

As an exit profile, the learner is supposed to have consolidated pre-required language material with some methodological procedures to perform a task (mémoire, Magister, etc.). He is able to interact in real situations by using transversal competencies on a wider scale (intercultural contacts). He can interpret more complex authentic documents in a rather more autonomous way. He is ready to re-invest acquired knowledge for professional purposes. He is able to act adequately in English with fluency, accuracy and a relative spontaneity.

His motivation increases as the task of problem solving he has been trained to perform can be projected in real life situations. He gets the feeling of giving significance to the task rather than prepare for a test or an exam.

During the presentation of a task the learner feels the need to put to work his knowledge and know-how.

Knowledge and the know-how the learner acquires during a problem solving task and its realization can in turn be put to work (completely or partially) to carry out other similar tasks or more complex ones. The teacher checks if a given competence is installed as the learner chooses for himself the procedures he knows. The teacher should also check if these procedures are adequate for the performance of the task in question.

We conclude this paper with some steps to follow under the CBLT. These steps are landmarks for discovery, observation, application, reformulation and control. They allow the learner to:

- To observe
- To discover what he is being trained for.
- To analyze a given problem solving task
- To get involved in targeted exercises and activities that are part of his training
- To be evaluated.

One of the primary advantages of CBLT (CBA) is that the focus is on the success of each participant. Watson (1990) states that the competency-based approach “*appears especially useful in training situations where trainees have to attain a small number of specific and job-related competencies*” (page 18). Norton (1987) includes benefits of CBLT and identifies in the following terms:

- Participants will achieve competencies required in the performance of their jobs.
- Participants build confidence as they succeed in mastering specific competencies.
- Participants receive a transcript or list of the competencies they have achieved.
- Training time is used more efficiently and effectively as the trainer is a facilitator of learning as opposed to a provider of information.

- More training time is devoted to working with participants individually or in small groups as opposed to presenting lectures.
- More training time is devoted to evaluating each participant's ability to perform essential job skills.

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