

American Pragmatism and the Teaching of English in Algeria: a case in point**Le pragmatisme américain et l'enseignement de l'anglais en Algérie: un exemple**BELMIHOUB Amel¹Mohamed BENAHMED²

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Reçu le:05./11/2019 Accepté le:25./11/2019 Publié le:05./01/2020**ABSTRACT**

This paper presents some reflections on the impact of the American pragmatist Dewey's vision of society and the nature of the human being as a member of society. It highlights how a pragmatist syllabus and teaching can be beneficial for the student of English as a foreign language and it develops some suggestions on how Education can prepare and shape a future citizen in a democratic society.

Keywords; American pragmatism; CBLT; Dewey; Teaching; Algeria

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente quelques réflexions sur l'impact de la vision de la société par le pragmatiste américain Dewey de la nature de l'être humain en tant que membre de la société. Il montre comment un programme et un enseignement pragmatiques peut être bénéfique pour l'étudiant en anglais en tant que langue étrangère et développe quelques suggestions sur la manière dont l'éducation peut préparer et former un futur citoyen dans une société démocratique.

Mots clés ; le pragmatisme Américain. CBLT. Dewey. Enseignement. Algérie

1. Introduction:

In general terms, pragmatism is a philosophy of 'practicality'. As a school of thought, pragmatism entered history under the banner of modernism with the rejection of historical and metaphysical truths and its essence on science, scientific rigour, scientific evolution and progress.

Pragmatism is a trend in philosophical thinking. It was developed by a number of well-known American philosophers and scholars such as its forerunner Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). It was then developed further by William James (1842-1910) and his associates John Dewey (1859-1952) and George Herbert Mead (1863-1931). The works of these thinkers was then extended and expanded by W.V.O Quine (1908-2000), Hilary Putnam (1926-2016), and Richard Rorty (1931-2007). The thinkers Peirce, William James and Dewey are referred to as the classical pragmatists. They developed ideas and views on thought and knowledge.

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2-Dewey and Democracy

According to Pragmatists like Dewey (1902) for example, the democratic tradition is a self-correcting tradition. As such, the social heritage of the past is not the focus of educational interest. Rather, the focus is for the good quality of life in the present and in the future. The standard of social justice is constantly being tested and evaluated through changing experiences. Therefore, Education stands as one of the basic factors to safeguard democracy.

Democracy is dynamic by nature. It is an ever changing process which results from continually undergoing reconstructive experiences. However, the reconstruction does not require or include total, sudden changes or social upheavals. Only the most immediate or long term social problems in a given society should be re-examined in order to find new solutions. In this respect, the questions to be raised in this paper are as follows:

- a) Should there be a consensus with the school actors (teachers, pupils, parents, etc.) for a smooth change and transition?
- b) Do reforms like the LMD - as implemented in Algeria today - aim at changing the structure, the form and function of the Algerian educational system with the view of developing a democratic spirit at school, at university and in society as a whole?
- c) Or, should we first examine the nature and causes of the schooling and the educational problems in Algeria, the reason or reasons behind them and try to solve them together as the Pragmatists suggest for the building of democracy in a given society?

Under a pragmatist perspective, the curriculum must not be set apart from the social context where it is implemented. The subject matter of education is the tool for solving individual problems and as the individual learner improves or reconstructs himself and his behavior towards his fellow citizens and institutions, society improves in a similar way. Therefore, social matters and issues in a democratic society must form the basis of the curriculum. Consequently, the means to solve the problems of democratic institutions must also be included in the curriculum. Manzoor-ul-Haque (1998) argues along these lines that there must be a social basis to the curriculum, an opportunity to practise democratic ideals, democratic planning at every level of education.

With his democratic belief and principles on societies and education, Dewey (1859-1952) argues that the purpose of democracy is to educate people in an interactive manner, in order to give them a better understanding of their society from social, political and economic perspectives. He also suggests that to give people a better understanding of the environment where they live, study or work - Education in our case - is to give them the ability to criticise and therefore to suggest new solutions which will be taken as a group rather than as an individual. We notice in the case of the Educational system in Algeria, ministerial instructions and orientations are taken at a high decision level where neither the teachers (practitioners) nor the pupils (or the students) are ever consulted or involved in the decision making procedures.

Dewey's political philosophy was said to be a combination of the stubborn perseverance of the New England Farmer with the zeal of a reckless liberal¹. In his *Creative Democracy –The Task Before Us* (1939), Dewey announced or propounded democracy as a way of life. He writes:

Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature. Belief in the Common Man is a familiar article in the democratic creed ... irrespective of race, colour, sex, birth and family, of material or cultural wealth.

Although Dewey's perception was mainly oriented towards the American society of his time, we must notice that the reference he makes on race, colour, sex, birth and family does not actually apply in the case of the Algerian educational system as public schooling is free and discrimination on gender or origin does not represent an issue at stake.

He adds:

“Democracy is a way of personal life controlled” not only by “faith in human nature in general but by faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgement and action...”²

And he argues, further that:

Americans like him did not invent this “faith” but acquired it from generation to generation. Moreover, it is [...] a personal faith controlled by personal day-to-day working together with others. In short, he sees it as “the belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness”³.

Dewey's democratic ideas were taught in different continents such as Europe and Asia together with his teaching in America. In fact, his pragmatist ideas were perceived differently according to the cultural, educational, economic and political contexts where they have been applied. The case may be that Algeria can envisage applying Dewey's pragmatist teachings on the basis of its own socio-economic, cultural and political vision and adapt it to the educational system of the country under the form of syllabuses and teaching methods. Dewey (1900:28) also argues that learning under a Pragmatist environment and educational settings is fundamental.

First, education and learning are always considered as individual matters. Teachers should not try to pour knowledge into the learners' minds, because such efforts would be fruitless and this seems to be the rule in our educational system in Algeria. Second, what each learner learns depends on his own personal needs, interests and motivation. In other words, the content of knowledge is not an end in itself but a means to an end. There are various methods, approaches and techniques in this respect, i.e., approaches which are inspired by pragmatism or based on it. They aim at making the learner feel responsible in front of a given task inside or outside school. He/she may act on the basis of the knowledge he/she has received and acquired at school.

3- CBLT and Pragmatic Competence

One such method or approach that encourages the learner to re-invest knowledge in problem-solving situations (i.e., a pragmatic approach) is the Competency Based Approach (CBA) or the Competency Based Approach to Language Teaching (CBLT) for the case that interests us here, i.e., Foreign Language Teaching with particular reference to English Language Teaching (ELT). Thus, a learner who faces a problem may be able to reconstruct what he has learnt in class in terms of knowledge re-investment so as to be able to solve his problem under the form of a problem solving task. We, as teachers, have the duty to install in the learner competencies such as the know-

how-to-do, the know-how-to-act and the know-how-to-be, among other cross cultural and transversal competencies. We should not limit ourselves to teaching a given subject matter without reference to other subject matters and knowledge that the learner may use in society. To help him, the teacher must provide experiences that increase his motivation. Field trips, films, records and guest experts are examples of activities designed to awaken the learner's interest in a problem-solving situation.

The Competency Based Approach to Language Teaching (CBLT) has become a frequent approach in curriculum design and implementation. It claims that learners should mobilize their values, knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviour in a personal independent way. A competency based approach to education focuses on what the learners are expected to produce in a pragmatic way (i.e., in real situations) rather than focusing on what they are expected to learn about and reproduce it during the assessment test or the exam under the LMD to get a mark. Under the CBLT, the role of the teacher is limited and it mainly involves guidance and assistance of the learners in the classroom.

The first observation that one can make about the teaching situation in Algeria is that progress is based more on a pass mark than on the investment of knowledge in real life situations. This applies from the beginning of the schooling. It also occurs at university. It is still in use today despite of the principles of the LMD where the student is supposed to get credits in the different subject matters of the BA degree in which he/she is registered. This means that progress is time-based rather than knowledge based. The student goes from one year to another on the basis of a given yearly average out of twenty (for example, a pass mark of 10/20 and above). If he / she fails to reach the average, then a makeup exam is scheduled to give him/her a second chance to get the average. This is clearly not the spirit of the LMD system which requires credits acquired as the course develops. Moreover, classes are overcrowded and the teacher cannot concentrate on every individual learner. He has a program to follow and to finish by the end of the year.

The idea that one must consider in the first place is: "What is a competency?"

Various definitions are proposed. We shall select some definitions which we believe are related in one way or another to a pragmatic vision of Education.

Perrenoud (2000) writes:

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

Which we translate as:

A competency is not a state or an acquired knowledge. It is neither reduced to a given knowledge nor to know-how. It is not comparable to a training acquisition. To have knowledge or capacities does not mean to be qualified. One may know techniques or rules of accountancy management and not know how to apply them in a given task or situation. One may know the laws on trade and commerce and write badly contracts).

It is clear then that what we should consider as teachers of a particular module or subject matter (Literature in this case) is how to train our students to acquire the necessary tools, the skills and capacities and a specific knowledge in order to reach a competency in reading and understanding a literary text on American literature or civilization for example. We often observe that our students are given a literary text without even putting the text into its context. The student is then faced with expressions and a literary style which he ignores or doesn't have any idea about

why, where and how the text was written and why the chosen text illustrates the objective of the lesson on American Literature for instance.

De Ketele (1996), on the other hand, tries to divide a competency into its main components. According to him, a competency is:

... 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)

Which we translate as:

... an ordered set of capacities (activities) which are applied on contents in a given type of situations to solve problems arising from those situations.

What De Ketele points at is the idea of trying to present the learner with real life activities (pragmatism) in order to help him acquire skills on content and context. In the case of teaching a literature module or subject matter, we should as teachers first introduce the general context of a literary text before we concentrate on its content. In other words, it is not sufficient (as we often do as teachers in class) to ask the students to look up for difficult words in a dictionary, to explain the body of a text in terms of where is the introductory paragraph, where is the developing paragraph and where is the concluding paragraph. This is in fact helpful for the student but it is insufficient.

We must present the general context of where and when the text was written, make a general presentation of the writer's biography and, if possible, why he/she produced such or such a piece of writing. This must be done well before the presentation of a literary text to the students rather than ask them to find difficult syntactic structures and vocabulary.

In a pragmatist perspective, the teacher must observe if a given competency (e.g., to know-how to approach a literary text) is mastered by the student. If not, then remedial behaviour of the student in terms of approaching a literary text must be performed. So, the competency in question should lead to observable results rather than being based on a mark or a grade in the test or the exam.

Similarly, by observing and supervising the student's activity in front of a text, we must, as teachers, check the abilities or the strategies that the student uses when facing a text. By asking him /her to tell us what he /she is doing in front of the text, we may detect some strategies that would be useful to his peers. On the contrary, if the student approaches the text erroneously, then, his/ her peers may make him aware of the 'bad' or 'inadequate' strategy or strategies he/she is using. In case of no feedback from his/her peers, the teacher can act then as a 'supervisor', an 'advisor' or simply as a member of the group in class in order to demonstrate (verbally or in acting) how the text must be approached. It is only in such real life situations and simulation in class that the learner can feel that he/she has achieved a task that he/she values for himself/herself. This leads to an increase in his motivation during a literature class.

To summarize the pragmatist perspective under the CBLT above, we suggest that the teacher has to re-evaluate his teaching approach and behavior in class. The teacher can easily find ways such as techniques, procedures etc. to create a motivating environment in a literature class. On the other hand, the learner should realize that he/she is in class to act on a task rather than to 'swallow' what the teacher gives in terms of knowledge. We often see situations where while the teacher is teaching or writing on the board, the students are more concentrated on taking notes than on trying to understand the content and the context of a given literary text. This is inevitable because the teacher has been trained or taught to follow a time-based syllabus or program and the students has been trained to learn to get a pass mark. The LMD system is by definition a system of acting

(projects, presentations in class, etc.) rather than a system of getting pass marks. Unfortunately, the implementation of the LMD system in Algeria, has not - so far- prepared the learner to work in terms of credits, in terms of transversal competencies and in terms of knowledge investment in real life situations.

One of the most advantageous aspects of the Competency Based Approach to Language Teaching and is that it gives a chance or an opportunity to the student to realize that he/she has been successful in achieving a given task such as getting a better understanding of a literary text, being aware of the context in which it has been written, eventually comparing it to his own knowledge of literature and most of all sharing his/her experience with other students. As a result of a good or adequate teaching under the CBLT within the LMD system, students will then acquire the necessary competencies required in the performance of their future jobs.

Conclusion

As teachers, we should be justified to our student's use of literature as one of the best ways to teach a language, to the culture of a specific speech community. We, as teachers, can help students by showing them how to approach reading of different text genres, how much time they devote to reading, when and where they do it. The CBLT prevents students from learning by heart and reproducing almost word-for-word what they have learnt in class. In short, the CBLT is a reaction to the traditional teaching approach which teaches lessons without a definite real-world situation or with an approach which provides real life skills in lessons on Literature and Civilisation for example. Today, the CBLT is used in many countries around the world for teaching language in general and teaching language for adults in particular (e.g. at university). The CBLT focuses on what students are able to perform in real-life situations rather than what to learn and how to learn it. Richards and Rodgers (2001) argue that the CBA addresses what the students are expected to do with the language rather than learn the language *par se* (Grammar and Vocabulary)⁴. Lessons under the CBLT are organized in terms of a 'list of performances' which Van EK (1977) refers to as 'behavioural syllabus'. In general terms, the CBLT requires instruction which is developed in specific contexts (activities and field work). Finally, we may say that the role of the teacher in a competency-based framework is not defined by specific terms. The teacher must provide positive and constructive feedback to help students improve their skills. She / he must be aware of the needs of the learner so that everyone feels at ease in the classroom. Thus, the teacher must give clear orders and explanations to ensure that each student understands the task he is going to tackle. However, the teacher should not push the student to the extreme because he/she has a lesson to finish in a given period of time (Time-based syllabi). On the contrary, progress and behaviour of the student in a task-based situation must be taken as the most important aspect of his/her teaching under a CBLT syllabus and a pragmatist vision of Education.

4-Conclusion

We conclude this article by stressing on the fact that the Pragmatists had a significant impact on the development of the American Society and other countries around the world. John Dewey (1859-1952), has influenced in many ways educationalists around the world as to the impact of American pragmatism in the socio-educational field. His educational thoughts and writings gave a new direction to teaching at the turn of the century. The objective of contemporary education outside the United States is to focus no more on what you learn but rather on how you learn and apply your new knowledge in society. In other words, following Dewey's pragmatic educational philosophy, learning is doing (knowledge performance) rather than acquiring rules of thumb and memorizing knowledge (rote knowledge and rules of thumb).

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¹ Scott London, « *Organic Democracy: On the Political Philosophy of John Dewey* », Dec. 2000.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Op cit, p.141