

The Implementation of the Competency-based Approach in the Teaching and Learning of English as a Foreign Language in the Algerian Secondary Education

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Many Linguistic researchers, such as Nunan , Willis, Harmer , Careless , Legendre, Roegiers Perrenoud and others , have been moving towards more learner-centred approaches to teaching, leaving away the teacher-centred methods that prevailed over centuries . This is why, the Competency- Based Approach (CBA) has imposed itself in the sector of education as a means to meet the new generation needs and integrate into the world community . This pedagogy was adopted by the developed countries in their educational systems a long time ago because of its multiple advantages on the individual's life in all fields (social , economic , political ,etc.) . Consequently , the prosperity of any country is no longer measured by its material richness or its natural resources , but rather by its possession of brains and intellectuals .

So , it was necessary for Algeria to invest these energies and to deal with them in the educational system by adopting a reform project and designing new curricula . In this context , the Minister of National Education Aboubakr Benbouzid affirmed :

“ Education must be in perpetual renewal since the world today undergoes several changes in all domains : social , political , cultural , scientific and technical field .As a consequence we must do our best so that our educational systems can meet the needs of the development and take up the technological challenge which is the only way to have access to the twenty first century. ”
(*L'éducateur* ,2004:6).

We have to point out that the school curriculum knew a light modification during the academic year 1996/ 1998 , where certain subjects were left out and others were integrated in other levels . Nevertheless , the schoolbook has not been modified since 1981 i.e. during 22 years the schoolbook did not know any changes ; from 1981 to 2003 the lessons were presented in a mechanical way (routine and practice) with the absence of teachers' guide.

The design of a new curriculum was then a necessity and an immense project that concerns the society as a whole and takes into consideration all the functions of education . The new curriculum laid out by the National

Curriculum Committee of the Ministry of National Education has multiple objectives ; among which one can quote : detecting the individuals' interests and gifts , explaining the concept of citizenship to them and educating young people to become free , responsible , thoughtful and enterprising citizens in the future (Programme d'Anglais de Deuxième Année Secondaire , 2006 : 88). Future schools are , therefore , appealed through the new textbooks to ensure a good teaching to all pupils in order to enable them to have a general culture and gather and assimilate both theoretical and practical data .

It is worth mentioning that the previous textbooks were designed according to the Objective -based Approach (OBA) which was the first pedagogical approach to put emphasis on the pupil who is at the centre of the school syllabus concerns .

Unfortunately , its implementation at schools revealed its limits and led to its failure because it was largely concerned with acquiring knowledge and memorizing facts , and its objectives were multiple and not related to each other. Such unrealistic and ambitious goals can be a burden for the learners , in terms of what they need or are likely to achieve within a certain time (Scrivener ,1998 : 54) . The approach , which was principally form- based , and the classroom activities that were leading to a language learning goal proved to be rather uninvolving , monotonous and sometimes boring as :

“ what is consciously learned is not necessarily incorporated into spontaneous language production ” (Willis , 2001 : 173) .

Therefore, the pupil had to learn the structure without taking into consideration the context or even its use in everyday life or the relationship it may have with it , he was also not allowed freedom to create his own composition .A typical illustration of that failure , which is due to the use of inappropriate teaching methods , is the low achievement in foreign languages learning namely English reflected in the poor results in the National Examination , so the communicative approach seems to have been adopted in name but not widely implemented in the classroom (Careless, 2004: 640) .

The drawbacks and inadequacies of OBA and its failure were basically reflected in the pupils' low level and bad results in official examinations .This is why, the Algerian school undertook a process of innovation concerning the teaching methods and techniques so as to issue a new curriculum and new textbooks and to improve the quality of teaching and its relevance to meet the needs of today's Algerian society

(Rogiers,2006:12-13) that of individual learners and teachers as well as the whole

Educational System of the country and the world wide requirements in general .

The new approach (CBA) , which differs from the traditional methodology aiming at accumulating knowledge , is an interactive learner centred approach and project geared . It tends to apply the pedagogy of integration and define a number of essential competencies in each stage of learning . It is not limited to the combination of acquired knowledge but it aims at reinvesting the latter to solve problems through problem solving situations , therefore , we can say that teaching by integration is summarized in this idea " The whole is not the result of the addition of parts ". The textbooks , as one of the teaching materials in SE , are based in their turn on the new approach .

CBA is concerned with the development of processes of learning as well as competencies whose components are: know-how (savoir), know-how to do ((savoir-faire) and know-how to be (savoir-être).It aims at focusing on meaning rather than form and at equipping the learner not only with knowledge , but more importantly with proper primary , social and intellectual skills to use that knowledge in real life situations by providing the learner with "*a natural context for language use*" (Larsen-Freeman , 2000:144) .

The new Algerian English Language Curriculum of SE which was designed by a team appointed by the Ministry of National Education to meet the principles of CBA is considered as being a categorical change for our educational system as far as the curriculum , the teacher's and the pupil's roles and the teaching methodology are concerned . As mentioned earlier , the Algerian educational system was appealed to rehabilitate and enrich its curricula by taking into account the teachers' suitable training in order to enable them to apply the new approach in good conditions since they are the direct applicators of the new curriculum, syllabus and textbook . Algeria has chosen to engage in a deep revision of its educational programs in its different levels . Its final objective is to put those levels in conformity with the doctrine known as < Competency- Based Approach >.

The revision of these programs , in particular that of the Secondary Education(SE) , involved different changes in the textbooks content as it is said to be an effective agent of change (Hutchinson and Torres , 1994 : 323) , the methodologies to be followed ,teachers training and inspectors interests as well .

The reform of the educational system is based on three major elements (teacher , learner , curriculum) and puts emphasis on the teacher as being the applicator of this reform in the practical field . It aims mainly at changing and

modifying continuously and progressively school curriculum and textbooks by inserting the new technologies of information and communication , which are increasingly introduced in the world , and also by adopting a new teaching pedagogy “ The Competency-Based Approach ” which is centered on the learner , his needs and interests .

The new curriculum which was designed in 2005 determines the missions and objectives of teaching and learning in the secondary education and gives more interest to the teaching of foreign languages in general and English in particular . The teaching of the latter as EFL2 is introduced in the Algerian Educational System from the Middle School , and it is considered as an important linguistic tool that provides the learner with the possibility to have access to science , technology and universal culture . The learner can therefore develop an open-minded , critical and tolerant spirit .

Being the second foreign language (EFL2) after French which is the first foreign language to be taught (FFL1) ,the teaching of English covers seven years of studies

(four years at Middle School level and three years at Secondary School level) . The teaching of English language aims at developing communicative , linguistic , cultural and methodological competencies which would enable the learner to communicate orally and in writing taking into consideration his future needs and those of the society where he lives .

“ Language proficiency is not a unidimensional construct, but a multifaceted modality consisting of various levels .”(Shuman ,1997:10).

Before illustrating the goals and objectives of the new Competency - Based Curriculum addressed to the teacher , we should state the three complementary competencies favoured by the Algerian Competency - Based Curriculum as they appear in SE2 Teacher’s Book. These competencies are implemented thanks to the skills (know –how) as follows:

a-Interact orally in English:

The learner should produce oral messages by using appropriate intonation , pronunciation , structure , and vocabulary related to a specific communicative situation .This competency will enable the learner to interact , negotiate , persuade, and give opinions through collective “ brainstorming ” of negotiations and problem solving situations .

b- Interpret oral and written messages :

The learner should treat and interpret oral or written messages in order to get information , answer questions , and justify answers in a given communicative situation .

c-Produce oral and written messages :

The learner should be able to produce a written message in order to inform, describe, relate, and prescribe by using the different types of discourse and the already acquired knowledge in a given communicative situation. (Teacher's Book Getting Through, 2006:4).

In addition to the competencies that should be developed in the learner, a statement of overall goals is provided in the official curricula designed by the Ministry of National Education Curriculum Committee. The purpose is to inform teachers about the principles of CBA. The goals of the new English language curricula for SE insist on allowing more communication opportunities for the students to help them acquire the necessary skills to engage in a relationship with their environment.

As for the accompanying documents of SE curricula of English, another summary of the broad goals of the English language curriculum is provided for the teachers. The goals are more focused than the ones stated in the official curricula as they indicate the primary language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and secondary skills. These goals target what the learners should be able to do at the end of a didactic unit and not what the teacher should do.

Teaching English in Algeria from MS1 (Middle School: Year 1) all through to the third year of the Secondary Education (SE3) is based on the policy of teaching English as a foreign language in the country. It aims at building up the learners' linguistic competence and develop their performance to use English effectively, fluently and accurately through practising the four language skills (listening / speaking / reading / writing). Teaching English goals in Algeria comply with the teaching goals of the other subjects and emphasize:

- Correlation to other school subjects.
- Communicative competence.
- Fluency and accuracy.
- Self-Learning (Proramme d'Anglais de Deuxième Année Secondaire, 2006 : 90).

The purpose of this is to develop the learners' characters and expand knowledge that would qualify them (at the end of the Secondary Stage) to pursue their higher education and face the constantly changing world and have access to a future society; a society that gives more importance to knowledge and intelligence and provides each citizen with the right to and the opportunity to learn without limitations except those related to his aptitudes (Adel, 2004 :4). To achieve this target, the objectives are set to develop the

different language skills taking into account the learners' abilities , needs , interests and tendencies .

The teaching of English in SE2 and SE3 aims at consolidating , deepening and developing the knowledge and the competencies acquired in the first year SE1 . In accordance with the general goals set to the teaching and learning of foreign languages in our country which state that the learner should achieve communication in all its dimensions , four main categories of goals are mentioned in the curriculum :

A/ Linguistic and Communicative Objectives :

-Provide the learners with the necessary assets and linguistic basis (grammar , vocabulary , pronunciation , mastery of speaking and writing) that would enable them to further their university studies in English or would help them in their future professional career.

- Develop the learners ' abilities to use the English language as a means for understanding and communicating with others .

B / Methodological / Technological Objectives :

-Develop the learners ' autonomous learning strategies (learning how to learn) so

that they can deepen and enlarge their knowledge , and call upon learning skills

gained for future challenges .

-Learn the use and mastery of up-to-date technological tools which are necessary for any research such as the computer and internet .

-Reinforce the knowledge and the way of thinking acquired previously in Middle School .

-Strengthen the learners' mental and intellectual skills like analysis , synthesis and evaluation.

-Encourage the thinking process in all learning stages .

C/ Cultural Objectives :

-Encourage the learner to explore and understand the culture of other nations especially the English one .

-Get the learners involved in the process of social interaction and promote in them international understanding and co-operation .

D/ Socio-professional Objectives :

-Enable the learners to benefit from the different documents written in English language (scientific documents , technical , economic , literary and cultural ones. (Ibid:90-91)

The above goals seem to advocate one of the most important requirements of learning which stimulates communication in the target language (Careless,2004:642). These objectives could be reached through the development of mental abilities and skills which should be catered for by all the subjects included in the curriculum (Arabic , mathematics , and sciences as well as history and geography and other social sciences) because these skills are the basis for any efficient acquisition of knowledge .They are :

- Knowledge : state , recall , reproduce .
- Comprehension : predict , identify , explain , illustrate .
- Application : predict , select , use , construct .
- Analysis :select , compare , break down .
- Synthesis : summarize , argue , organise , conclude .
- Evaluation : judge , select , support , attack , evaluate .

As stated before , the general aim of the new syllabus is to provide the learners with the language necessary to communicate efficiently in a normal social and / or working situation both orally and in writing . At the same time , it aims at enabling those of them who go on further studies to use the foreign language as a tool or as a means to acquire extra information about their field of study (degree in English language , translation , or journalism) and those who join the job market to exploit by themselves documents , leaflets , notices related to their jobs . The ultimate objective is to make them self-sufficient in exploring and exploiting materials that are linked to their field of study by providing them the basic linguistic tools .Of course , the amount of knowledge communicated will vary according to the time devoted to the learning of English . As an orientation takes place at the end of the first year of Secondary School Education , the specificities of the studies they are expected to follow must be taken into account .

Getting Through , At The Crossroads and New Prospects are the English textbooks designed for students in their first , second and third year of Secondary Education in 2005 , 2006 and 2007 respectively . They implement, as stated in the Teacher's book , “ the National Curriculum for English issued by the Ministry of National Education in December 2005 ”(Teacher's Book *Getting Through*,2006:3). It is a translation of the curriculum in terms of objectives , methodology , content and evaluation . They follow the guiding principles which frame the curricula and which take account of the social and educational background of our learners , as well as the cultural values of Algeria . They also rely on CBA which is both learner-centred and project oriented .The textbooks can , in fact ,make the syllabus more manageable because of their pedagogical importance . On one hand they help the learners

memorize knowledge , information and skills and on the other hand they testify the accomplishment of tasks and lessons in class . Indeed , the process of knowledge acquisition which requires an intensive intellectual interaction of the learners with the pedagogical content of the lessons (Zico , 1974:38).

A major aim of these textbooks is to make both the teacher and the learner come to a fruitful interaction . This does mean that the appropriate attitude should be taken by the instructors to make learners a responsible party to the successful completion of their studies . Indeed , the textbooks are the material representation of that philosophy . They offer activities likely to stimulate and develop individual competencies in a vital stage when knowledge and skills are reinforced , following the four-year course received at the Middle School. As a textbook design is said to be influenced by an adopted approach (White, 1991:3), the same principles of CBA to be found in the first four textbooks of Middle School have been applied in these textbooks . The three competencies described in the National Curricula are being developed at all stages of these books , through various tasks and activities .

Furthermore, the secondary education is the stage when students are “specialising” in different streams (science , maths , technology , etc.) . This is taken into consideration , through the fact there are teaching units in the courses more particularly addressed to “ science and technology ” streams , or “arts and foreign languages” streams .

The textbooks are organised in didactic units . Each unit deals with a specific topic suggested by the curricula designers . Units contents are presented at the beginning of the textbook in the **Book Map** which is provided in a linear form . As said earlier , in each unit , the student will have many opportunities to develop the three competencies of **interaction** , **interpretation** and **production** , as a variety of tasks and activities are designed to lead and contribute gradually to the building of the project .

Each unit of the textbook turns around a broad topic selected for its general interest and for the functional language it generates . The learners explore the issues in relation to skills , functions , related strategies and language forms that fit in with the topic of each unit . Naturally , the emphasis in all units falls on skills since the statement of outcomes in the syllabus is formulated in terms of what the learners can do with the language . But before approaching each unit , the learner will consider a section which introduces the new vocabulary that will be used . It also aims to brainstorm students and get them to tell what they

know about a specific topic . This is an important part in which the learners contribute their own knowledge and connects it with that contained in the text .

As far as the degrading of content is concerned , the learners can assimilate some language items before others because of their degree of simplicity .In these textbooks , we notice that the given tasks become relatively more complex and more challenging to the students as each unit develops (i.e. from oral to written language, and from guided language practice to free communicative use).

They are action-oriented in the sense that the development of skills holds a central position in it . The concept of *skill* is regarded as being synonymous with *know-how* and a translation of the French concept *savoir-faire* used in the syllabus . Two types of skills are distinguished in the textbook : on the one hand , we have the *primary skills* (listening , speaking , reading and writing) , and on the other hand the *social skills* which need the mobilization of the former for the learner to accomplish everyday life concrete actions such as reading a newspaper article , reading and interpreting a map , writing business and personal letters .

CBA implies , among other things , a process of apprenticeship involving a transfer of skills from a coach / teacher to the trainee/ learner . Of course , a transfer of skills cannot take place instantly and as a whole block . These skills appear in the syllabus as ‘ fragmented ‘ into verbalised operations keyed to a certain number of language functions (formulated in terms of specific objectives in the syllabus) and language forms .

However , the implementation of the new approach divided educators into two categories : advocates and opponents . Its advocates affirm that it is a revolution for teaching that will improve our pupils ’ level and particularly the results of the Baccalaureate Examination .As for the opponents , they think that CBA is so difficult to be applied in our schools especially that we do not have the means to do it .

Whatever the experience the teachers had in the field of education , they have found themselves in an ambiguous situation facing difficulties to apply the new methodology .When investigating the new approach and programs ,and trying to get feedback from teachers who are the real applicators of the new teaching approach ,we have felt this destabilization that we estimate as a natural reaction when innovation takes place .Teachers wonder continuously about the manner of teaching on the basis of CBA .

The analysis of the new curriculum reveals that there is variety in themes, texts and activities taking into account the development of primary skills (listening, speaking , reading and writing) , in addition to the secondary skills

(word building, sentence building , etc.) . Learners are also provided with various learning modes

(individual , pair, group and whole class work) which lead them to accomplishment of the project .

However , EFL teachers in various Secondary Schools in Algeria claim that there are difficulties in implementing the Competency-Based Approach as insufficiency of time allowance, overcrowded classes, lack of teachers' training and lack of teaching aids and technological tools in schools . As for assessment, teachers need more than what the official documents provide as assessment procedure is not clear enough and is still debatable .

Indeed , the teachers are willing to adapt to the new changes brought by the educational system in general and CBA in particular , the majority of them appreciate the new approach which has completely modified their aptitudes as well as that of learners who become rather autonomous in their learning and able to read fluently and correctly through interaction and exchange of ideas in English and in relation to their needs and interests . However, they state that CBA has to be perfected in the following years because of the difficulties they face in implementing it in their teaching which is due to their insufficient training and the lack of the pedagogical and technological means which are not available in their schools and can have a negative impact on the teaching and learning process .

Therefore , we estimate that the new approach introduced recently in our Educational System in general and the Secondary Education in particular can be implemented progressively and successfully as a solution to the problems stated before, but only if some conditions are provided because there are some inadequacies in its implementation and therefore it needs some remedial changes so as to achieve the target objectives in the Algerian school .

To conclude with , we can say that the analysis and evaluation of SE English curricula and textbooks reveal to what extent CBA can be efficient in improving the quality of the teaching and the learning process , but teachers find difficulties to implement it in their classes which is mainly due to the inadequate classroom environment in Algeria . For helping them adjust their teaching on the basis of CBA principles , Possible suggestions are given in the hope that they could contribute positively to the development of EFL teaching methodology and make it easy for the teachers of English language to apply the new approach and use the available teaching aids and tools and most importantly the means of direct communication and information such as the computer and the web which are important in promoting motivation and language acquisition :

“ The information society will be a new type of human society completely different from the present industrial society...”(Carnoy, Daley and Loop, 1987:133)

So , for better implementing the Competency-Based Approach and for creating an appropriate environment for the teaching/learning process we suggest the following :

- improve teachers’ pre-service training ;
- ensure continuous training and inform the teachers about any other changes in the curriculum;
- ensure occasional in-service training workshops for the teachers who are ready to devote some of their free time to learn more about the evolution of their subject as well as CBA ;
- organize seminars that would help teachers pinpoint their shortcomings and offer them plenty of opportunities to meet other teachers and exchange personal experiences about the application of CBA in their classes .
- train teachers , especially those who exceeded 20 years of service, and help them a clearer picture of the new curriculum and its implementation and the exploitation of the textbook;
- take into consideration teachers ’ opinions and suggestions when designing a curriculum or stating teaching objectives
- provide schools with the necessary materials and the new technologies of information and communication so that the teachers can get through the new approach easily;
- reduce the number of pupils per class to 20 pupils because class size (overcrowded classes) is an inconvenient factor to implement CBA properly .

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