The Competency-based Approach in High Education

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Abstract

In spite of the reform undergone in higher education in Algeria, there is no real change in English language teaching. But if we examine the changes in other countries including European ones, we shall find that the competency-based approach causes a lot of interest among practitioners of higher education. This paper aims to analyse the concepts ' competence' and 'competency' before examining the competency-based approach as an approach based on socio-

constructivism which provides a shift from the traditional focus on teacher-centred delivery to learning outcomes and learner-centred educational objectives. It also intends to show this approach as appropriate to the purposes of the reform and to the new demands of life including job requirements.

Introduction

Modern society is characterized by rapid changes in all spheres of life. Changes take place quickly due to the factors which stimulate the economy and industrial development, affect the international relations and especially they impact upon information usage and particularly the field of education. At the present time the concept of a learner's competency acquires importance. It is defined by many factors because in the opinion of many international expertsit is the very indicator, which makes it possible to determine readiness of a learner and a graduate for his/her further personal development and active participation in social life.   Being oriented to the modern labour market, education considers that one of the priorities at present is the ability to operate such technologies and knowledge, which meet

the requirements of informational society and prepare young people to play a new part in society.

n the last two decades developed countries such as Great Britain, Canada, Germany, France and New Zealand started discussion on how to equip a person with necessary knowledge, skills, competency in order to ensure his/her harmonious interaction with a quickly developing technological society. Educational experience in many countries shows that one way of updating the content of education is the orientation of the training programmes towards the competency-based approach. Scientists in European countries consider that knowledge, skills, working habits acquired by young people if transformed into competencies would enable intellectual development of an individual and the formation of the ability to quickly respond to the demands of the time. Thus, it is essential to understand the very concept of 'competency' in addition to the principles of the competency-based approach and its implementation in high education.

I. **The Notion of Competence versus Competency**

Over the last two decades the discourse around education and training has shifted. We now tend to use a pseudo-commercial language of markets, investment and products. The interest in competence and competency has been part of this move. These two terms remain difficult to define in a satisfactory way. The former is the quality of being adequately or well qualified physically and intellectually, or the ability to do something well measured against a standard, especially the ability acquired through experience or training.

In the business dictionary, it is defined as 'a cluster of related abilities, commitments, knowledge and skills that enable a person (or an organization) to act effectively in a job or a situation in comparison to competency (ies) which refers to a cluster of abilities relating to excellence in a specific activity'. Competence indicates sufficiency (state of being good enough) of knowledge and skills that enable one to act in a variety of situations because each level of personality has its own requirements.

DeSeCo (definition of selected competencies) defines competence as 'a system of internal and external mental

structures and abilities assuming mobilization of knowledge, cognitive skills and also social behavioural components such as attitudes, emotions for successful realization of activity in a particular context'. In this respect competence can be understood as a dynamic, organizing the structure of activity characteristic allowing a person to adapt to various situations on the basis of gained experience and practice.

Hedge (1996, quoted by Hyde, p.4) defines a competency in term of 'superior performance. It is a skill or characteristic of a person which enables him or her to carry out specific or superior actions at a superior

level of performance'. However, we can say that competency is not the same as performance, but it is what enables performance to occur. Armstrong (1995, p.45) supports this by saying that 'competence as a fully human attribute has been reduced to competencies – a series of discrete activities that people possess, the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding to engage in effectively .

We can also add that the term competency varies from a school of thought to another. The behaviourists use it to design an observation and measurable behaviour resulting from a certain training. The constructivists use this term to illustrate the construction of capacities acquired from an interaction between individuals engaged in the same situation.

Many other definitions have been suggested in the field of education such as in the QEP

(Quebec Education Programme, p. 4) in which a competency is defined as 'a set of behaviours based on the effective mobilization of a range of resources. The set of behaviours refers to the capacity to use appropriately a variety of resources both internal and external, in particular learning acquired in school or in everyday life. The concept of resources refers not only to everything that students have learned at school, but also to their experiences, skills, interests, etc…Students may

rely on many resources, such as their classmates, their teacher, documentation…'

Another definition among many others has been provided by ELT articles about English teaching in Algeria and which considers a competency as 'a system of conceptual and procedural parts of knowledge organized into schemes that help identify a problem

task and its solution through an efficient action within a set of situations. And also, a competency is a know -how to act process which integrates and mobilizes a set of capacities, skills and an amount of knowledge that will be used effectively in various problem-solving situations in circumstances that have never occurred before. In other words, a competency may be simply defined as the ability of a student or worker to accomplish tasks adequately to find solutions and realize them in real life situations. Besides, competencies are the various skills learners have to be taught ; this may lead them to acquire the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in an interactional way to be able to use them later on either in their jobs or the demanding daily life. On the basis of Schneckenberg and Wildt (2006) The terms ' competence' and 'competency' has been analyzed as a kind of process in a form of an ascending ladder.

On the basis of Dirk Schneckenberg & Johannes Wildt (2006)
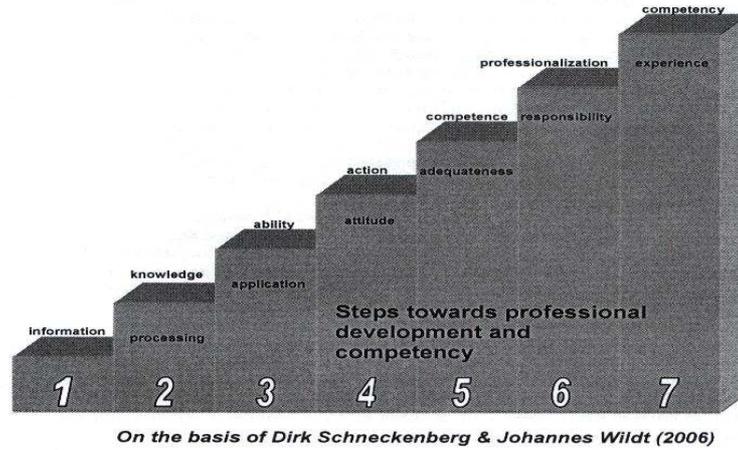
According to them, the process begins with perception of information. The information by means of semantic assimilates, accommodates and adapts in mental structures and leads to the second step i.e. to knowledge. If this knowledge is applied in a certain context, it can reach ability step (mental ability). Ability should be combined with a certain attitude which presupposes a value and motivational orientation and is finally realized in the activity performance. If at the fifth step the activity is adequate to the required level then this adequate action leads

to competence. As we see, a variety of resources will be mobilized in activity for competence realization on the way to competency achievement.

As we have already emphasized, competence is a dynamic, objective characteristic which is strongly rooted in experience and situational practice. Through activities in various situations a person constructs competency. Consequently, competency is 'a cumulative personal quality. We conclude that competency as a realization of a need for self-development and self-actualization, is a basic component of a social mature person.

The meaning of the term 'competency becomes clearer than before and confirms the definition relating it with superior performance or ability relating to excellence in a specificactivity. We also find it interesting to define the nature and the essence of communicative language competence because we are concerned with the didactics of foreign languages.

II. Communicative Language Competence

As mentioned above competence is developed only through activity in contextual situations. So, we will attempt to define the nature and the essence of communicative language competence.

Many linguists enrich the contents and features of communicative competence. The idea of communicative competence is originally derived from Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance. By competence Chomsky means the shared knowledge of the ideal speaker-listener set in a completely homogeneous community.

Such underlying knowledge enables a user of language to produce and understand an infinite set of sentences out of a finite set of rules. Performance, on the other hand, is concerned with the process of applying the underlying knowledge to the actual language use. However, performance cannot reflect competence except under the ideal circumstances because it can be affected by such variables as memory limitations , distractions, shift of attention and interest, errors and some other variables. Hymes (1972) finds Chomsky's distinction of competence and performance too narrow to describe language behaviour as a whole. He points out that the theory does not account for socio-cultural factors. Hymes deems it necessary to distinguish two kinds of competence, linguistic competence that deals with

producing and understanding grammatically correct sentences, and communicative competence that deals with producing and understanding sentences that are appropriate and acceptable to a particular situation. Thus he coins a term' communicative competence' and defines it as ' a knowledge of the rules for understanding and producing both the referential and social meaning of language'. Developing his theory of language teaching and learning, he considered language as social behaviour as well as the integration of language, communication and culture. The core of his theory constitutes a definition of what the user of language has to know to be a competent communicator in a social group.

According to Widdowson communicative abilities have to be developed at the same time as the linguistic skills; otherwise the mere acquisition of the linguistic skills may inhibit the development of communicative abilities. Widdowson (1978) strongly suggests that we have to teach communicative competence along with linguistic competence. He also distinguishes two aspects of performance: 'usage' and 'use'; He explains that ' usage' makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his knowledge of linguistic rules, whereas   'use' makes evident the extent to which the language user demonstrates his ability to use his knowledge of linguistic rules for effective communication. Widdowson suggests that grammar must be based on the semantic concepts and must help a learner to acquire a practical mastery of language for the natural communicative use of language.

Canal and Swain (1980) believe that the socio-linguistic work of Hymes is important to the development of a communicative approach to language learning. Their work focuses on the interaction of social context, grammar and meaning (more precisely, social meaning). However, just as Hymes says that there are values of grammar that would be useless without rules of use, Canal and Swain maintain that there are rules of use that would be useless without rules of grammar. They strongly believe that the study of grammatical competence is as essential as the study of socio-linguistic competence. They define the communicative competence as integrating at least three main competences: grammatical, sociolinguist and strategic competence. Grammatical competence includes knowledge of lexical items and of rules of

morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar and phonology. They point out that grammatical competence will be an important concern for any communication approach. Sociolinguistic competence is made up of two sets of rules: sociolinguistic rules and rules of discourse. Knowledge of language alone does not adequately prepare learners for effective and appropriate use of the target language. They must have knowledge which involves what is expected from them socially and culturally.

Besides EFL learners must develop discourse competence, which is concerned with intersentencial relationships. Therfore, effective speakers should acquire a large repertoire of structures and discourse marker to express ideas, show relationships of time and indicate cause, contrast and emphasis. Finally, strategic competence, which is 'the way

learners manipulate language in order to meet communicative goals' (Brown, 1994,p.228), is perhaps the most important of all communicative competence elements. It is made up verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient grammatical competence.

The discussion of communicative competence is mainly based on the recent version from Bachman (1990). He divided communicative competence into: organizational competence, pragmatic competence and strategic competence. Organizational competence consists of two types of abilities: grammatical and contextual. As Bachman (1990, pp.87-88) defines, grammatical competence comprises the competencies involved in language use, while textual competence includes the knowledge of joining utterances together to form a unit of language by applying the rules of cohesion and rhetorical organization. All this can be generalized as linguistic competence. Pragmatic competence includes the knowledge of the pragmatic conventions to perform acceptable language functions as well as the knowledge of the sociolinguistic conventions to perform language functions appropriately in a given context. Pragmatics is a set of rules that enable us to match the functions with linguistic structures in certain contexts in which we are operating. To sum up, language competence consists of two types of competence, organizational and pragmatic. Having the competence means the learners are capable of applying the knowledge of grammatical rules and the

cultural patterns or codes to a particular context to achieve particular communicative goals appropriately, effectively and successfully. Finally, strategic competence is regarded as an important part of all communicative language use by Bachman. He added that strategic competence is considered as a general ability (a technique or a tool) to make the most effective use of available abilities to carry out verbal and non-verbal tasks (Ibid, p.106). It can be considered as a technique or a tool to make the most effective use of verbal or non-verbal tasks as he said

After having clarified such concepts and how they are related to language teaching, let us now examine the competency-based approach.

III. The Competency- Based Approach

There are different models of curriculum development, some focusing on knowledge transmission and assessment of such knowledge and others more on skills and personal development. The competency-based approach is a very popular approach which focuses onmeasurable and useable knowledge, skills and abilities. It consists of teachers basing their instructions on concepts expecting to foster deeper and broader understanding. According to QEP, the competency-based approach consists of organizing the content of a curriculum in terms of the development of competencies using specific pedagogical practices that correspond to the main orientations of QEP (p. 11).

The competency-based approach has become a privileged topic in curriculum discourses as it claims that learners should mobilize their values, knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours in a personal, independent way, to address challenges successfully. Challenges are present everywhere and they can be academic, but also practical and life- oriented. This new approach in education and learning requires a focus not only in input, but also on outcomes or results. Such results, however, do not pertain only to the academic knowledge, as in traditional testing where rote memorization of pre-fabricated knowledge is required. Competencies are not just skills as opposed to knowledge, but represent a complex articulation of knowledge, attitudes and skills that learners can use whenever they are needed not just in examination. CBA curricula fostering learner-friendly teaching and learning strategies, could engender a shift from sheer memorization to the development of higher order intellectual

skills and life skills, including communication, social and emotional and other relevant skills .Competencies could be seen as opposed to labour market and the society.

Competency-based education focuses on outcomes of learning. It addresses what the learners are expected to do rather then on what they are expected to learn about. It refers to an educational movement that advocates defining educational goals in terms of precise measurable descriptions of knowledge, skills and behaviours students should possess at the end of a course of study (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

CBE is a functional approach to education that emphasizes life skills and evaluates mastery of those skills according to actual learner performance. It was defined by the U.S. Office of Education as a performance-based process leading to demonstrated mastery of basic life skills necessary for the individual to function proficiently in society .We can simply say that the competency-based education is an out come-based instruction and is adaptive to the changing needs of students, teachers and the community. Competencies describe the ability to apply basic and other skills in situations that are commonly encountered in everyday life. Thus CBE is based on a set of outcomes that are derived from an analysis of tasks typically required of students in life situations.

II. 1. A Brief History of the Competency-Based Approach

It is appreciated that some would agree that the differences in the values of different

systems of education are what is worth exploring rather than historical details because we

need to make values explicit. Values are, however, relative things and one person's

construction of the inherent values of any educational system or curriculum offering may not ring true for another.

The concept of CBE is both old and an evolving idea, details of which are still been

worked out. The notion of CBE was first introduced in the USA in the late 1960s and

evolved through applications to other professional education programmes in the USA in the

1970s, vocational training programmes in the UK and in Germany and many others in the

1980s and vocational professional skills recognition in Australia in 1990s.

It has been argued that the theoretical roots of the CBA lie in the behaviourist models of

human psychology from the 1950s.This is based on the view that CBA is about making

inferences about competency on the basis of performance.

It has also been argued that the American forces in the 1950s, influenced by Frederik

Taylor (1947), one of the founders of industrial psychology, who elevated job analysis to a

science , first developed and trialled CBA as we know it today.

Some commentators have argued that CBA developed in ways that were influenced by

more than one narrow approach to learning. For example, Harris et al. (1995, p.36), like

Bowden and Master (1993), have argued that : In the 1970s there were five related to the design of CBE teaching. These were: mastery learning (Bloom 1974), criterion-reference testing (Propham, 1978), minimum-competency testing (Jaegan, 1980), competence in education (Burke et al 1975) and programmed learning (Skinner 1952). These movements shared three things in common: modules design and assessment around a list of observable behaviours and the concept of mastery (Harris et al. 1995, p 396)

III.2.Characteristics of the Competency- Based Approach

CBA is characterized by the following (ELT articles: what is CBA?):

- It is action oriented in that it gears learning to the acquisition of know how embeddedin functions and skills. These will allow the learner to become an effective competent user in real- life situations outside the classroom.
- It is a problem-solving approach in that it places learners in situations that test/ check their capacity to overcome obstacles and problems , make learners think and they learn by doing.
- It is social constructivist in that it regards learning as occurring through social interaction with other people. In other words, learning is not concerned with the

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transmission of pre-determined knowledge and know-how to be reproduced in vitro, but as a creative use of a newly constructive knowledge through the process of social interaction with other people.

- Finally and most importantly, the CBA is a cognitive approach. It is indebted to Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, B et al. Taxonomy of Education Objectives, vol 1, The Cognitive Domain in vol 2 and the Affective Domain in New York, 1964).Bloom has claimed that all the educational objectives can be classified as cognitive (to do withinformation) and affective (to do with attitudes, values and emotions) or psychomotor (todo with bodily movements …). He said that cognitive objectives form a hierarchy by which the learner must achieve lower order objectives before he/she can achieve higher ones.

One of the most distinctive features of CBA is its integration of project work as part of learning strategy. Over all, if CBA expands on the communicative approach, it is in the sensethat it seeks to make the attainment visible, i.e, concrete through the realization of projects .It also make co-operate learning a concrete reality and opens new avenuesfor action interactionand the construction of new knowledge. In short, it is only through carrying project work that we and our learners can live basic principles of CBA.

III.3. Teacher's Role in the Competency- Based Approach

Since CBA is learner-centred, it does not require teachers' subservience. As it is actionoriented, it requires teachers' in action, teachers who will draw on their professional skills insubject matter, methodology, in decision-making and in social skill to enable the learners tobe achievers. This also requires a style based on reflection on what, why and how to teach fixing objectives and adjusting teaching strategies to learning strategies. Their role is to facilitate the process of language acquisition through the development of appropriate learning like hypothesis making or hypothesis testing. We can also say that the teacher in a classroom is a researcher ; an important aspect of his job is watching, listening and asking questions in order to learn more about how they learn so that teachers may be more helpful to students. At the same time that we teach children they also teach us because they show us how they learn. We just have to carefully

watch them and listen to them. This kind of watching and listening may contribute to teacher's ability to use what the classroom experience provide him or her create contextualized and meaningful lessons. The ability to observe and listen to our students and their experiences in the classroom contributes to his or her ability to use a constructivist approach. Paradoxically, a constructivist approach contributes to our ability to observe and listen in the classroom. Thus, the process is circular.

III.4. Student' s Role in the Competency-Based Approach

As the programme is based on socio-constructivism, the learner should go through a process of personal appropriation, questioning his own convictions. This leads the learnerto revise his prior knowledge and its scope to compare his own representations with those of his classmates, to search for information and validate it through consulting various sources of documentation and people in possession of information. In doing so, the learner will appeal to cognitive, affective and motivational strategies in order to set a balance between his previous knowledge and his newly acquired knowledge. The reflection of the learner willoperate on his own learning processes, assure the quality of his acquisition and facilitate his retention. It is also essential to note that negotiation is an important aspect of a constructivist classroom. It unites teachers and students in a common purpose . Another quality of a constructivist classroom is its interactive nature .

IV.   The   Competency-Based   Approach   in   Higher Education

The transformational processes observed nowadays in social life concern all fields of social activity and existence, in particular the field of education as a basic component of the formation of a person's world outcome. Over the last decades the requirements placed upon education systems have been influenced by rapid progression often unpredictable processes of public transformations, disintegration of states, changes in the geopolitical map of the world, scientific discoveries and their implementations.,

The world which is being formed due to a collision of new values and technologies, new geopolitical relation, new life styles and communication requires brand new ideas and analogies, classification and frameworks. This concept reflects the modern

paradigm of public life and is a basis for the re-formation of educational goals in both the developed and developing countries. It is why education at present is subject to great changes taking place in modern society. The development of education was influenced by such features of social development as globalization, democratization, disintegration of the
union of the nuclear power blocs and the formation of a unified information space.

In this respect, first, students need to be able to use a wide range of tools for interacting effectively with the environment: both physical ones such as information technology, and socio-cultural ones such as the use of language. Second, in an increasingly interdependent world, students need to be able to engage with others and since they will encounter people from a range of backgrounds, it is important that they are able to interact in heterogeneous groups. Third , students need to be able to take responsibility for managing their own lives, situate their lives in much broader social contexts and act autonomously

Where there has been significant interest in innovative educational development towards education for change, much of formal education remains traditional and disempowering to learners. Traditional educational approaches are generally teacher-centred, Fostering transformational education means moving from a situation where the teacher exercises power and control over the learner to where teaching becomes the facilitation of learning and the learner develops control and responsibility of learning. There needs to be a balance between facilitation, authority and students' autonomy. Developing a learner-centred focus requires to understand and accept that learning is a very individual experience. Learners have individual learning styles and are
motivated by their own unique values and circumstances and bring to the learning situation their own personal experiences and world view. Redefining education with learner focus requires commitment to innovate and find an alternative approach.

As mentioned previously, educational experience in many countries shows that one way of updating the content of education is through the implementation of CBA as it is based on socio-constructivism, it encourages the development of independent learning skills, critical thinking, self-direction in

learning. Hyde and other commentators tell us that learning in all subjects areas involves inventing and constructing new ideas. They suggest that the constructivist theory be incorporated into curriculum and advocate that teachers create environments in which children construct their own knowledge.) A constructivist approach is recommended to be used to create learners who are autonomous, inquisitive thinkers who question, investigate and reason. CBA emphasizes education for change, focusing on what learners need to know and be able to do so that they can participate in a changing world. It is concerned not only with what they learn but also how they learn and the context of their learning. In addition to that it encourages creativity, originality and high order competencies. This kind of learning is characterized by the capacity for autonomous learning and motivation towards learning. This leads us to say that these are the real objectives of the reform in high education to attain the goals set.

Conclusion

Educational reform in many parts of the world is expressed in terms of competencies to develop in learners whether in high education or other levels. As defined previously competencies are attained after various activities to reach excellence in doing specific skills enabling young people to adapt to the changing world. One of the approaches seen appropriate to the educational content is the competency-based approach - an outcome based approach- which focuses on measurable and useable skills and abilities. It claims that learners should mobilize their values, knowledge, attitudes and behaviour in a personal way to address the challenges successfully.

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