

## ***The Competency-based Approach in Higher 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 show that 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, is appropriate to the purposes of the reform and to the new demands of life including job requirements.

### **المُلخَص:**

رغم الإصلاحات التربوية التي تمت على مستوى التعليم العالي، لم يلاحظ أي تغيير في ما يخص تدريس اللغة الانجليزية، بل لو نرجع للتغيير في البلدان الأخرى على سبيل المثال في الدول الأوروبية نجد أن منهج المقاربة بالكفاءات يلقى اهتماما كبيرا من طرف الأساتذة والباحثين في التعليم العالي .

يهدف هذا المقال إلى إظهار مدى صلاحية وملاءمة منهج المقاربة بالكفاءات للتعليم العالي كونه يمثل منهجا يعتمد على التركيز على تكوين المتعلم في الحياة العصرية وزمن العولمة ومن بينها مجال الشغل بدلا من التعليم التقليدي الذي يعتمد على التلقين.

## **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 learner's competency acquires importance. It is defined by many factors because in the opinion of many international experts it 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.

In 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 rationale of implementing such an approach in higher education, but before doing that we find it necessary to examine the concept 'communicative language competence' on which current approaches in language teaching rely.

### **Communicative Language Competence**

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<sup>1</sup> 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<sup>2</sup> 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 '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<sup>3</sup> 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. He 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. He 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<sup>4</sup> 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 intersentential relationships. Therefore, 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<sup>5</sup>, 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<sup>6</sup>. 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 defines it, 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 used 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. 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. We can also add that Richards<sup>7</sup> contributes by saying that ‘communicative competence includes the following aspects: knowing how to use language for different purposes and functions, knowing how to vary our use of language according to the participants...knowing how to use language appropriately for written as opposed to spoken communication, knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts ... and knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one’s language knowledge (e.g., through knowing different kind of strategies). In addition to this Armstrong<sup>8</sup> clarifies this by saying that ‘competence as a fully attribute has been reduced to competencies – a series of discrete activities that people possess, the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding to engage in effectively’.

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

### **The Competency- Based Approach**

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 (ELT articles)<sup>9</sup> 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. The competency-based 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 (ELT articles)<sup>10</sup>. 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 than 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)<sup>11</sup>. It has also been argued that the American forces in the 1950s, influenced by Frederik Taylor, one of the founders of industrial psychology, who elevated job analysis to a science, first developed and trialled the competency-based approach as we know it today. Some commentators have argued that the competency-based approach developed in ways that were influenced by more than one narrow approach to learning. For example, Harris et al <sup>12</sup>, like Bowden and Master<sup>13</sup>, 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.

The competency-based education 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. Richards (ibid) highlights the characteristics of the competency-based approach by saying that CBLT is an approach based on functional and interactional perspective on the nature of language. It seeks to teach language through relation to the social context in which it used. Language occurs as a medium of interaction and communication between people for the achievement of specific goals and purposes... It also shares

with behaviourist views of learning the notion that language can be inferred from language functions; that is, certain life encounters call for certain kind of language. Thus CBLT takes a mosaic approach to language learning...

We can simply say that the competency-based education is an outcome-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.

### **Teacher's Role in the Competency- Based Approach**

Since the competency-based approach is learner- centred, it does not require teachers' subservience. As it is action-oriented, it requires teachers in action, teachers who will draw on their professional skills in subject matter, methodology, in decision-making and in social skills in order to enable the learners to be 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 provides him or her to 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.

### **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 learner to revise his prior knowledge and his 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 balance between his previous and newly acquired knowledge. The reflection of the learner will operate on his own learning processes, assure the quality of his acquisition and facilitate his retention. It is also essential to note that cooperation and negotiation are important aspects of a socio-constructivist classroom. They unite teachers and students in a common purpose. Another quality of a constructivist classroom is its interactive nature.

### **The Rationale of implementing 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 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 the competency-based approach as it is based on socio-constructivism, it encourages the development of independent learning skills, critical thinking and self-direction in learning. As learning in all subjects areas involves inventing and constructing new ideas, educators 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. The competency-based approach 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 higher education to attain the goals set, which are to form a socially mature person as it is supported by Lobanova, T & Yu Shunin<sup>14</sup> who argue that the development of a person as a subject of activity necessarily includes the factors which form a socially mature person and which are: development of intelligence, development of positive thinking and positive attitude,

development of autonomy, responsibility, development of motivation leading to self- development and self-realization.

### **Conclusion**

Educational reform in many parts of the world is expressed in terms of competencies to develop in learners whether in higher education or in other levels. 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 is a cognitive approach indebted to Bloom's taxonomy<sup>15</sup> according to which the learner achieves lower-order objectives before he/she can achieve higher-order objectives. Besides it is a problem solving approach because it places the learner in situations to test or check his/her capacity to overcome obstacles and problems. Moreover, the competency- based approach is social constructivist in that it regards learning as occurring through social interaction and it encourages the learner to be creative by using newly constructed knowledge through the process of social interaction. Furthermore, it claims that learners should mobilize their values, knowledge, attitudes and behaviour in a personal way to address today challenges successfully. The stated principles of the competency-based approach are the things needed to be applied in teaching in high education in order to help students become autonomous and thus able to rely on themselves either in the field of work or in social life, in other words to equip them with the necessary qualifications to compete in the globalized world is the main objective of high education.

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