

Oral-Competency : A drawback of CBLT in Algeria

(Secondary Education, Bechar)

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Abstract :

Algerian Educational System has been constantly revised in order to cope with the continuous requirements exposed by the new world of technology and innovation. Accordingly, a deep reform had been launched by Algerian Education Authorities as a response to the political, social, cultural, linguistic and pedagogical needs. In fact, Competency-Based Teaching had been 'quickly' introduced in Algerian School as an effective and convenient approach to hold on these preoccupations and successfully reach the final objectives of the curricula. However, Algerian School failed to improve the oral-competency due to various factors as far as English as a Foreign Language Teaching /learning is concerned. This paper is an attempt to look for the reasons behind this drawback. A survey, then, is conducted as a methodological tool for data collection. It is addressed to Secondary Education English teachers of Bechar. Moreover, an analytical study of some exams and tests especially Final Official exams is another data collection method used in this study. The latter shows that although oral-competency is one of the outstanding outcome of CBLT, failure to enhance it is accounted for by time allowed to English teaching in S. E. S and most importantly to the total absence of oral-competency account in the Testing System. Administered exams and tests especially the final official BAC exam (baccalaureat) don't give any account to the oral competency, the fact that often results in demotivated learners to produce orally in English.

Key words : Oral-competency- drawback- CBLT- Testing- Secondary Education.

CBLT : Competency-Based Language Teaching

S.E.S : Secondary Education School

BAC : Baccalaureate

Introduction :

As a reform of the whole Algerian educational system, Competency-based teaching was introduced. Theoretically, the approach is widely advocated only because it complies with the final goals of the Algerian School embodied through the different subject curricula. Aiming at training Algerian student charged with autonomy, independence and creativity, the approach has been exposed to be the locomotive of the educative reform launched by the Algerian education authorities. As far as English is concerned, the approach is likewise introduced to cure the injuries of the Objective-based approach that 'felt short of expectation' in the foreign languages teaching. Indeed, successful English teaching and learning covers the different aspects of language amongst the language skills. According to the functionalist scholars, language is used to fulfill communicative roles only either orally or in writing. In fact, it is agreed upon that communication is the reason of language birth, therefore, CBLT stresses on the use of language in its real context and learners out to be prepared enough for that. However, Algerian School has not yet given the oral aspect of language its real status merely because testing system totally ignores to test student in their oral competencies, both official and ordinary administered exams don't give any account to it. Accordingly, students become more pragmatic to focus mainly on writing and to lesser extent on reading.

2-Competency-Based Approach :

In the scope of teaching and learning of languages, the approach is rather Competency-based Language Teaching (CBLT). It is the application of the principles of Competency-Based Education to language teaching. (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p.141)

This approach adopted recently in teaching languages like other approaches had received much support being a powerful and positive element of change.

Docking (1994:15, cited in Richards and Rodgers ,2001) explains the power of the approach in relation to teaching and assessment. Competency –based approaches "to teaching and assessment offer teachers an opportunity to revitalize their education and training programs. Not only will the quality assessment improve, but the quality of teaching and student learning will be enhanced by the clear specification of expected outcomes and the continuous feedback that competency-based assessment can offer. These beneficial effects have been observed at all levels and kinds of education and training, the primary school to university, and from academic studies to workplace training".(page 142)

The close relationship that characterizes the process of language teaching and learning and assessment is extremely taken into account to reach effective and successful teaching. Thus, Competency-based language teaching should go hand in hand with Competency-based assessment where assessors and teachers assess students' competencies including knowledge. Accordingly, syllabuses and programs are designed on the basis of competencies that involve in addition to learners' knowledge, their attitudes, behaviors and skills. Moreover, the notion of performance is highly considered when it comes to teaching and assessing language learners' outcomes.

Language Programs are also designed on the basis of CBLT where competencies are at the core of the teaching and learning process. Like the Competence that learners are required to master, Performance is also of vital importance as far as language is concerned, language programs are based on " *a performance outline of language tasks that lead to a demonstrated mastery of language associated with specific skills that are necessary for individuals to function proficiently in the society in which they live*".(Gronnet and Crandall 1982: 3, cited in Richards and Rodgers,2001, p. 142)

The notion of subject knowledge upon which many syllabuses are designed, the competency based language teaching, however, is designed on the basis of the notion of competencies which " *consist in a description of the essential skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors required for effective performance of a real-world task or activity. These activities may be related to any domain of life, though have typically been linked to the field of work and to social survival in a new environment*".(Richards and Rodgers ,2001,p.144).Docking (1994 :16) sets forth the notion of competencies which are the grounds of teaching languages in comparison to the subject knowledge, CBLT " *by comparison is designed not around the notion of subject knowledge but around the notion of competency . The focus moves from what students know about language to what they can do with it. The focus on competencies of learning outcomes underpins the curriculum framework and syllabus specification, teaching strategies, assessment and reporting. Instead of norm-referenced assessment, criterion-based assessment procedures are used in which learners are assessed according to how well they can perform on specific learning tasks*".(Docking 1994 :16, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p.144)

3- Evaluation and Assessment

3-1-Evaluation

Pauline and Kevine (1992) set forth that "evaluation is an intrinsic part of teaching and learning. It is important for the teacher because it can provide a wealth of information to use for the future direction of classroom practice, for the planning of courses, and for the management of learning tasks and students". (Page 3)

According to them, evaluation is not restricted to only the context of evaluation, it is a part of every day life.They say that Evaluation is a natural activity and related to many areas and fields starting from education, innovation, management, and context. (Pauline and Kevine ,1992)

The purposes of Evaluation are different, they can be divided into two broad categories, general and specific; topic-related purposes.

The general evaluation purposes are undertaken for three fundamental reasons; first, accountability; second, curriculum development and betterment; third, self-development:teachers and other language teaching professionals. (Pauline and Kevine ,1992)

3-2-Assessment :

"Assessment has the power to change peoples' lives" (Shohamy, 2001, cited in Penny Mckay, 2006, p. 18). Its role is very crucial in education as a whole and particularly in teaching and learning process. Its effect

may be positive or negative, depending on various factors, starting from the way the assessment procedure or test is built, to the way it is used. *"Effective assessment procedures are assessments that have been designed to ensure, as far as possible, valid and fair information on the student's abilities and progressit gives educators feedback in the teaching and learning process, informing the next teaching decision and giving guidance on how students should be optimally placed, for example, in the next grade....provides valuable information to administrators on the achievement cohorts of students and on whether schools are successfully delivering the curriculum"*(Penny McKay, 2006, p. 18-19)

Assessment is able to establish power relationships (between teachers and students; between administrators and principals) that become established and habituel. (Foucault, 19979, cited in Penny McKay, 2006, p. 19)

4-Types of Assessment :

The decisions that will be made determine the purpose of assessment procedure and then determine the kind of information that is needed from the assessment procedure. According to Bachman(2004), there are two kinds of decisions, low stakes and high- stakes decisions.

Low-stakes decisions are decisions made on the grounds of assessment results. They are relatively minor and easy to correct. High-stakes decisions; however, are decisions which are likely to affect students' lives and they are difficult to correct. (Cited in Penny McKay, 2006, p.20)

Rea-Dickens and Garnet(2000) note that not only formal tests are high-stakes, instead , many assessment procedures are more high-stakes for students than we think, since various decisions that teachers and assessors in general make have a cumulative effect on students' futures. (Cited in Penny McKay, 2006, p. 20).

4-1-Formal and Informal Assessment :

Broadly, assessment can be divided into two main types being procedured in formal setting and for formal purposes and in other times it is done for informal and unconscious intentions.

A-Formal Assessment : It usually refers to assessment that is planned, administered and carried out following formal procedures. (See Penny McKay, 2006)

The procedures of assessment may be classroom-based or external procedures. Classroom assessment is usually prepared and conducted by teachers in classrooms, whereas external assessment is often preped and administered by those outside the classroom .Sometimes an external test is procedured by those in a central education office and administered by schools. (Penny McKay, 2006)

B- Informal Assessment: It usually refers to classroom assessment including teachers' classroom observation, gestures, attitudes and facial expressions. It doesn't require measurement or scoring. It only aims at assessing learners' performance or behavior during a course. It aims also at correcting learners' work and participation in the course as well as motivating learners for further work.

4-2-Formative and Summative Assessment :

A-Diagnostic Assessment :

For many experts in the domain of assesment, formative assessment doesn't include diagnostic assessment, rather it is another dependent type of assessment which aims at diagnosing the student' weaknesses and/or strengths.It often takes place in the beginning of a course, a term, a year, or a whole educational cycle upon which decisions about course content, programs, syllabyses,curriculumms and even teaching approaches, methods and techniques as well as teaching materials are to be made.

However, Penny McKay thinks that diagnostic assessment is a part of formative assessment. *"Formtive assessment often involves diagnostic assessment, when teachers analyse learners' specific strengths and weaknesses.Diagnostic assessment can also be planned and carried out through a special diagnostic procedure.Commercially prepared diagnostic procedures are often used to,for example, with young learners to assess their reading strengths and weaknesses."*(Jenny McKay, 2006, p. 22)

B-Formative Assessment :

This type of assessment aims primarily at teaching new points within a course. It is usually followed by a remedial work in order to correct the weakness and to reinforce the strength. *"Formative Assessment is ongoing, usually informal assessment during teaching and learning.Formative assessment gives teachers information about how well the student is doing.The teacher makes constant decisions about how to respond, based on the student's response or the student's work so far.The teacher is the one most interested in the results of formative assessment; the data collected helps him or her to make further decisions about teaching."* (Penny McKay, 2006, p. 21-22)

Formative assessment is predominantly used for certain pedagogic purposes; however, over time, teachers are required to tackle constant observation on learners' performance in order to come out with a summative report, that's why, it is a remarkable shift from involving low-stakes decisions to more high-stakes decisions.(Jenny McKay, 2006)

Breen(1997) refers to informal, instruction-embedded assessment that is formative in purpose and procedured by teachers in classroom by the term *on-the-run assessment*.It involves teachers in observation and followed by immediate feedback(remedy). *Planned-assessment* is also considered to be formative assessment merely because it helps the teacher to target specific observation and/or plan language use task to check up learning objectives' acheivements along the way.(see Penny McKay, 2006).

C-Summative Assessment :

This type of assesment always takes place at the end of a course, a term, a year or even an educational cycle; aiming at being aware of the progress of students during a period of study in order to come out with final judgement about the students' learning acheivements.

The information is required primarily by teachers to know to what extent the students have progressed and other partners like school administration, parents of students, Education Department, Central Government Authority that may make it public and a matter of comparison between the past and future results.

5-Language Testing :

As far as language assessment is concerned, language test is regarded as one of the important formal types of assessment. In language teaching and learning, a clear understanding of language test is highly recommended.

Indeed, the reasons behind the necessity to develop an obvious understanding and the need to tackle language test *"which seeks to find out what candidates can do with the language provides a focus for purposeful, everyday communication activities. Such a test will have a more useful effect on the learning of a particular language than a mechanical test of structure."* (Heaten J.B, 1988, p. 5)

6. Findings :

6.1. Teachers' questionnaire :

In the same context, informants were requested to give their points of view about if the BAC exam responds to the criteria of a good test. 43.47% answered that the BAC exam was reliable and 30.43% asserted that the BAC exam was valid whereas only 13.04% were with the washing back criterion. The informants' points of view concerning the validity of the BAC exam in terms of conformity with the objectives of the CBA was the second question of the questionnaire. The majority of the teachers questioned (60.86%) answered that it was valid and only 34.78% found it invalid. Reasons behind the invalidity of the BAC exam were also surveyed in the third question where the informants were asked to give their opinions. 34.78% said that it lacked content, 21.73% answered that it lacked shape, the same percentage 21.73% declared that it lacked both; finally 21.73% chose any "other" which means they were with neither of the items given. The questionnaire also gives an opportunity in the fourth question for teachers to give their visions about the ability of the BAC exam to test learners' competencies (not competences). In fact, the majority of teachers asked (69.56%) said that the BAC exam could test learners' competencies and a minority of (30.43%) answered that it couldn't. The fifth question of the questionnaire is to see the teachers' opinions about the written form of the BAC exam : 56.52% were enthusiastically with the written form of the exam whereas 39.19% said that the BAC exam shouldn't be only in the written form, Oral competency should be primarily tested .

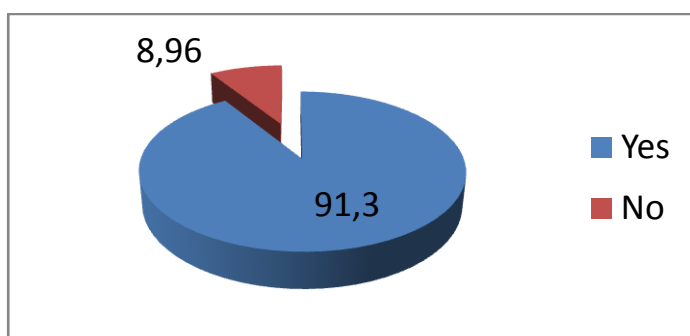


Figure01 : Informants' opinions about the need to apply CBA.

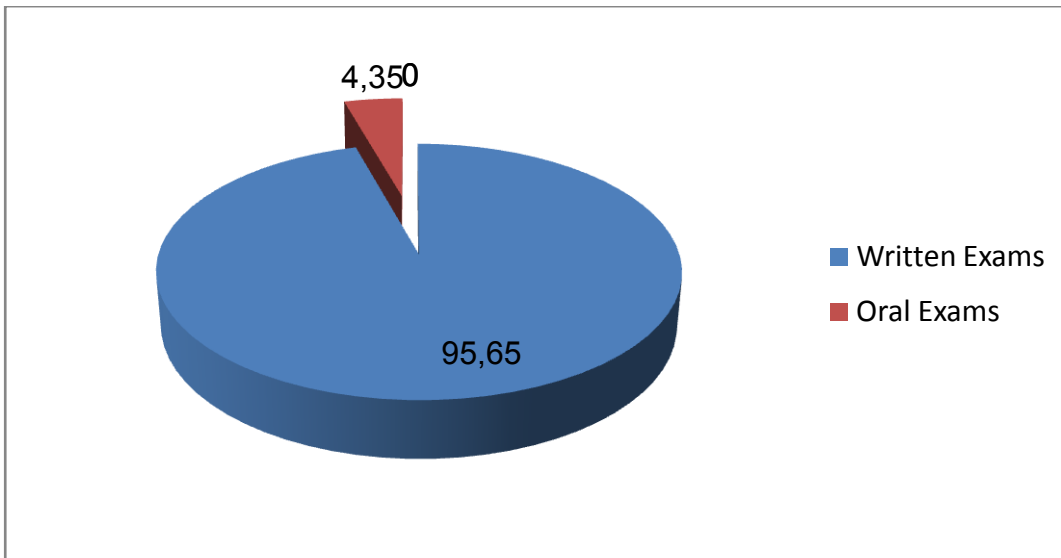


Figure02 :Informants' use of the written and/or oral exams.

6.2. Analytical study of BAC exams Samples

BAC 2002	BAC2012
<p>Section one: Reading Comprehension</p> <p>It starts with a text of 295 words divided into 4 paragraphs. This section consists in six activities (questions), they are about:</p> <p>Question 1: Whether or not there are direct questions in the text, if there are how many.</p> <p>Question 2: Forming questions to the answers from the text (four different sentences from the text).</p> <p>Question 3: Reference words (2 words with the number of their paragraphs)</p> <p>Question 4: Matching 4 given titles with their corresponding paragraphs (a table to fill in)</p> <p>Question 5: Filling a table with words from the text. The table is composed of 3 columns with a given example.</p> <p>Question 6: Also in a form of a table, the testees are asked to match words with their appropriate definitions (4 words and 4 definitions).</p> <p>Section two: Mastery of Language</p> <p>Question 1: Supplying punctuation and capitals when necessary in a selected passage.</p> <p>Question 2: Deriving verbs from given nouns (4 verbs to</p>	<p>PART ONE: Reading</p> <p>It is composed of two sub-parts:</p> <p>A) Comprehension:</p> <p>It begins with a text of 246 words divided into 4 paragraphs.</p> <p>This sub-part is composed of 5 activities (questions) the answers of which are to be found from the text.</p> <p>Question 1: It is true or false question where the testee writes T or F next to the letter corresponding to the statement.</p> <p>There are four statements from letter a to d.</p> <p>Question 2: The second question starts with the instruction of filling the table from the text. The table is composed of two columns, the first one is about reasons of doping whereas the second one is about the results of doping.</p> <p>Question 3: It is about answering three questions according to the text. The first two questions (a and b) are WH questions, and the third question (c) is Yes/No question.</p>

be derived)

Question 3: Combining two clauses to make one sentence using the connector "if". There are two sentences to be made.

Question 4: Filling in the gaps with 4 words from their owns so that the text makes sense.

Question 5: Rewriting sentence 'b' so that it means the same as sentence 'b'.

Question 6: Reordering sentences to make a coherent paragraph (sentences a to f. One sentence must be left)

Question 7: Classifying words according to the pronunciation of their final 'ed' in a table that consists in 3 columns /t/, /d/ and /id/.

This section is composed of 7 activities ordered as follows:

- 1- Spelling (question 1)
- 2- Morphology (question 2)
- 3- Grammar (question 3)
- 4- Discourse (question 4)
- 5- Grammar (transformation question 5)
- 6- Discourse (question 6)
- 7- Phonology (question 7)

Section three: Written Expression

In this section, testees are given two topics :

Topic one:

Testees are given a conversation between A and B to complete it.

Topic two:

Testees are asked to write a composition of about 150-200 words on the given topic. (argumentative text).

Question 4: This question is about putting the sentences given which are four in the order they appear in the text after having read carefully the text.

Question 5: It is the last question in this part of comprehension and it is exclusively for this stream. It concerns giving a title to the text.

The second sub-part is :

Text Exploration:

This part is often dealt with the linguistic items through different activities connected in meaning to the text.

It is composed of five activities and can reach six activities to this stream in particular. It is ordered as follows:

Question 1: Finding the opposites of the words given from the text. They have been given three words with their paragraphs.

Question 2: Giving the opposites of the given words keeping the same root. This means adding the appropriate prefix which requires from the testee to be aware of the meaning of the different prefixes.

Question 3: Rewriting the sentences given (a) keeping the same meaning (b)

-The first sentence is about the transformation of active sentence to the passive voice.

-The second sentence is about logical connectors of cause and effect

-The third sentence is about the direct and reported speech.

-The fourth sentence is about expressing wish and regret.

Question 4: It is about classifying the four words given according to their stressed syllables in a table that contains four columns;

the first is devoted to the first syllable, the second to the second syllable, the last to the third syllable.

Question 5: Filling the gaps with only FOUR words from a list of words of six words to make the text meaningful, this requires from the testee to be aware of the semantic and grammatical implications of linguistic items. The paragraph given is not a very long one. It is composed of forty words regardless of the four gaps.

The activities are ordered as follows:

- Lyxic (question 1)
- Morphology (question2)
- Grammar (question3)
- Phonology (question4)
- Discourse (question5)

The testee in this part is asked to choose one topic from two topics given. The difference between the two topics is that the first is guided and the second is free.

Topic one: Giving clues to use in writing, the candidate is requested to write a composition about 120-150 words in which s/he urges the athletes to show the sense of fair play and avoid doping in competitions.

In fact, it is clearly noticed that this topic has a close relation with the idea discussed in the text and accordingly it should have a connection with a unit dealt with in the programme.

The testee has to follow the guideline given in order not to be out of subject. This doesn't mean s/he is strictly limited by the guideline's ideas; instead it is preferable to use her/his

	<p>ideas to take the mark of excellence.</p> <p><i>Topic two:</i> This topic does not contain a guideline which means the testee is required to use her/his own ideas. This topic is about writing a composition of 120-150 words on advising a classmate who cheats in the exams to have higher grades to refrain from behaving in such a way.</p>
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Table n°1: Similarities and differences between the two BAC exam Samples' Contents (Oral-competency account)

The comparative analysis shows that oral competency account in testing objectives is totally absent. This means that learners' capacity in using the language for communicative purposes is no longer important. The question that is, therefore asked is why the reform of the teaching method is launched since students are tested the same way of that of the Objective-based Approach. The exam is purely in written form, the content is slightly modified and most importantly oral competency is not at all tested.

7. Conclusion :

The study shows that teachers do apply Competency-Based Teaching Approach in teaching but don't apply it when testing their students nor does the administration in the official exams. The absence of competency-based approach is accounted for by the ignorance of oral competency testing account in the different exams. Both the questionnaire and the critical analysis of official exams asset this fact. The application of CBA, then, is handicapt. This drawback ought to be taken into a serious consideration by Algerian Education Authority. Urgent reform should be addressed to the cope of testing in order for the CBA and the School in general to reach its designed purposes, otherwise, teching outcomes are not objectively evaluated therefore, School function is questionned.

Oral testing should be valued in the different testing occasions mainly the official ones. Thus, including the oral competency testing in the yearly assessment and official testing would motivate learners to practise the language in its oral side and would increase their care to produce the language orally. This result is regarded to be of primary imprtance of CBA teaching.

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