

Competency-Based Language Teaching

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Abstract: Competency-based language teaching (CBLT) is an application of the principles of competency-based education. It concerns accountability, management and quantification. CBLT focuses on the competencies and outputs. If teaching competencies becomes an end in itself, stakeholders become the object rather than the subjects of the educational process. On the other hand, if competencies are seen as tools to enable learners to act for change in their lives, critical thinking will be promoted. After a brief history, this article introduces competency-based language teaching. Then it will be followed by how it will be evaluated. Finally the pros and cons of this kind of instruction are elaborated in details.

Introduction:

Instruction takes different forms depending on its goals and objectives. Some emphasize input, while others focus on output. Some take objectives as behaviors whereas others take them as performance. This paper focuses on competency-based language teaching. After a brief history, competency-based language teaching is introduced. Then it will be followed by how it will be evaluated. Finally the pros and cons of this kind of instruction is elaborated in details.

Background:

Competency-based education can be traced back to the philosophy of experimentalism and to the work of John Dewey in the early 1900's. Its antecedents include vocational education and progressive education (Flowers 1990; Stoffle & Pryor 1980).

Nunan (2007) reviews ESL instruction over the last twenty years and states that standard-based approaches to instructional design developed within a behavioral paradigm. These approaches include the objective movement, competency-based education and the standards movement. In the objectives movement, objectives were defined in terms of performance by which output were emphasized rather than input. Behavioral or performance objectives describe what the learner rather than the teacher is to do. They also specify observable learner behavior. According to Nunan (1988) performance objectives include three elements. First, there is a performance component which states what the learner is to be able to do. Second, a condition component specifies the circumstances and conditions under which learners are to perform the task. The third element is a standards component which indicates how well the task is to be performed.

In the 1970s objectives-driven curricula were criticized. Critics assert that the important outcomes of education were under-emphasized. Furthermore, they believe specification of objectives a priori prevents teachers from taking advantages of opportunities occurring unexpectedly in the classroom. In addition, it was argued that outcomes rather than behavior change are important in education. Another problem was that there were hundreds of details to be taken into account in curriculum development.

These pitfalls gave rise to the competency-based movement during 1980s as an alternation to the use of objectives in program planning.

Competency-based Language Teaching:

Before considering competency-based language teaching, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by competency. Mrowicki (1986, as cited in Weddle, 2006) defines competencies as follows:

Competencies consist of 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. (p. 2)

Richards and Rodgers (2001) cite Docking (1994) who defines competency as

An element of competency can be defined as any attribute of an individual that contributes to the successful performance of a task, job, function, or activity in an academic setting and/or a work setting. This includes specific knowledge, thinking processes, attitudes, and perceptual and physical skills. (p. 145)

Therefore, competency might be a task, a role, a function which changes over time, and will vary from context to context. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), competency-based language teaching (CBLT) focuses on outcomes of learning. CBLT addresses what the learners are expected to do rather than what they are expected to learn about. This approach originates from competency-based education (CBE), an educational movement emerging in the United States in the 1970s. CBLT advocates defining educational goals in terms of precise measurable descriptions of knowledge, skills, and behaviors students should possess at the end of a course of study. Nunan (2007) adds that

standards are important to CBLT. Competency-based language teaching lies within behavioral tradition and competencies have a strong resemblance to performance objectives in that it focuses on what learners should be able to do. However, one difference between competencies and performance objectives is the level of generality. That is, objectives are more specific than competencies. The following are some required competencies for the area of retaining a job provided by Mrowicki (1986 as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

- Follow instructions to carry out a task.
- Respond appropriately to supervisor's comments.
- Request supervisor to check work.
- Report completion of task to supervisor.
- Request supplies.
- State problem and ask for help if necessary.

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), the most recent manifestation of competency perspectives is the standards movement. It is the current trend in performance-based curriculum development which has dominated educational discussions since the 1990s. The term standard refers to “what students should know and be able to do” (Nunan, 2007, p. 428). Other terms may be used for standards such as benchmarks, bandscales or profiles (McKay, 2007). Nunan (2007) asserts that again the major difference between competencies and standards is the level of generality. McKay (2007) states that standards are divided into substandards such as content standards and performance standards. Content standards specify curriculum goals, whereas performance

standards specify what ought to be learned at one level or another. In addition, a standard is divided into different components. The following example is from the ESL standards for grade pre-K-3.

Goal:

- To use English to communicate in social settings

Standard:

- Students will use English to participate in social interactions

Descriptors:

- Sharing and requesting information
- Expressing needs, feelings, and ideas
- Using nonverbal communication in social interactions
- Getting personal needs met
- Engaging in conversations
- Conducting transactions

Sample Progress Indicators:

- Engage listener's attention verbally non-verbally

- Volunteer information and respond to requests about self and family
- Elicit information and ask clarification questions
- Clarify and restate information as needed
- Describe feelings and emotions after watching a movie
- Indicate interests, opinions, or preferences related to class projects
- Give and ask for permission
- Offer and respond to greetings, compliments, invitations, introductions, and farewells
- Negotiate solutions to problems, interpersonal misunderstandings, and disputes
- Read and write invitations and thank you letters
- Use the telephone (Short et al. 1997 as cited in Nunan, 2001)

The above example is taken from the ESL Standards for pre-K-12 Standards which are specified by the Association of TESOL in the United States. These standards are organized around three goals and nine standards. Furthermore, each standard is explained by descriptors, sample progress indicators, and classroom vignettes with discussions.

Aurebach (1986) refers to eight key features as a framework for CBE programs in ESL.

The factors are as follows:

1. A focus on successful functioning in society: The goal is to enable students to become autonomous individuals capable of coping with the demands of the world.
2. A focus on life skills: Rather than teaching language in isolation, CBAE/ESL teaches language as a function of communication about concrete tasks. Students are taught just those language forms/skills required by the situations in which they will function. These forms are determined by “empirical assessment of language required” (Findley & Nathan, 1980, p. 224).
3. Task- or performance-centered orientation: What counts is what students can do as a result of instruction. The emphasis is on overt behaviors rather than on knowledge or the ability to talk about language and skills.
4. Modularized instruction: “Language learning is broken down into manageable and immediately meaningful chunks” (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1983, p. 2). Objectives are broken into narrowly focused subobjectives so that both teachers and students can get a clear sense of progress.
5. Outcomes which are made explicit a priori: Outcomes are public knowledge, known and agreed upon by both learner and teacher. They are specified in terms of behavioral objectives so that students know exactly what behaviors are expected of them.
6. Continuous and ongoing assessment: Students are pretested to determine what skills they lack and posttested after instruction in that skill. If they do not achieve the desired level of mastery, they continue to work on the objective

and are retested. Program evaluation is based on test results and, as such, is considered objectively quantifiable.

7. Demonstrated mastery of performance objectives: Rather than the traditional paper-and-pencil tests, assessment is based on the ability to demonstrate prespecified behaviors.
8. Individualized, student-centered instruction: In content, level, and pace, objectives are defined in terms of individual needs; prior learning and achievement are taken into account in developing curricula. Instruction is not time based; students progress at their own rates and concentrate on just those areas in which they lack competence. (Auerbach, 1986, pp. 414-415)

Evaluation:

As mentioned earlier CBLT focuses on outcomes or competencies. Stoffle and Pryor (1980) assert that assessment of the students' performance is best accomplished under actual conditions. However, this approach is very expensive and usually not feasible. Most learners are assessed using multiple-choice tests, simulations, games, etc. Council on Education for Public Health (2006) adds that CBE often requires more complex assessment including portfolios and role-playing. In CBLT programs, assessment is criterion-referenced rather than norm-referenced. In criterion-referenced assessment, scores are interpreted with respect to a specific level or domain of ability, while in norm-referenced assessment, scores are interpreted in relation to the performance of a particular group of individuals (Backman, 1990). Criterion-referenced testing is diagnostic. "Learners are able to obtain useful diagnostic feedback on their progress and achievement since explicit criteria are provided against which they can

compare their performances” (Nunan, 2007, p. 425). Criterion-based assessment procedures measure how well learners can perform on specific learning tasks (Docking, 1994 as cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

Pros and Cons:

There are several advantages of a CBLT. First of all, CBLT focuses “on language as a tool for communication rather than on language knowledge as an end in itself” (Nunan, 2007, p. 425). It promotes responsible and accountable teaching (Findley & Nathan, 1980). Referring to benefits of CBE, Norton (1987, as cited in Sullivan, 1995) states that in CBE learners’ confidence is enhanced because they can achieve competencies required in the performance in real life. Another benefit is that, the instructor in CBE is a facilitator and more training time is devoted to working with learners individually or in small groups rather than presenting lectures. Richards and Rodgers (2001) mentions four advantages of a competencies approach:

1. The competencies are specific and practical and can be seen to relate to the learner’s needs and interests.
2. The learner can judge whether the competencies seem relevant and useful.
3. The competencies that will be taught and tested are specific and public — hence the learner knows exactly what need to be learned.
4. Competencies can be mastered one at a time so the learner can see what has been learned and what still remains to be learned. (pp. 146-147)

CBE establishes standards which must be defined and tested against reality. It also increases productivity of educational instructions (Corcoran, 1976 as cited in Stoffle & Pryor, 1980).

Those who support standards believe that they can provide guidelines for practice. Furthermore, they can assist governments to monitor educational systems by assessment. Supporters believe that standards can provide information about relative progress by comparing individuals, schools and systems (McKay, 2007). Providing diagnostic feedback on learners' progress is another advantage of CBLT (Nunan, 2007).

Taking disadvantages of CBLT into account, Auerbach (1986) points that critics of CBLT argue this approach carries hidden assumptions about reality and social order. It is value governed in that it imposes its own norms. Therefore, it is determinist prescribing social roles for students and reinforcing the power structure. In addition, teaching overt behaviors seems mechanical, inhibiting critical thinking. CBLT is also considered within reductinist approach by its critics. That is, the sum of the discrete objectives does not equal the essence of the complexity of the whole language. CBLT advocates bottom-up processing which make students not to see the forest for the trees. CBLT emphasizes observable outcomes. However, much learning can not be observed. Only focusing on results obscures the complexity and dynamism of language and teaching process, therefore, creativity and innovation may be suppressed. The nature of language is creative and unpredictable. It does not include successive acquisition of discrete forms. Another critique is that although CBLT claims to be student-centered, it takes control of learning out of students hands by extensive information gathering process prior to instruction as well as prespecifying standardized competency lists. For CBLT to be learner centered, needs have to be identified collaboratively as a result of trust and experience rather than as a precondition for instruction. Corder (1967, as cited in Aurebach, 1986) believes that only through classroom interaction a learner-based

syllabus can be determined. Taking cultural differences into account, CBLT begins with only one presupposed culture. Sullivan (1995) adds that unless training and follow up assistance is provided for the teachers, there is a tendency to slip back into the role of the traditional teacher. Tollefson (1986) argues that there are no valid procedures to develop competencies for most programs. On the other hand, many of the areas are impossible to operationalized. Richards and Rodgers (2001) add that CBLT is seen as prescriptivist in that it “focuses on behavior and performance rather than on the development of thinking skills” (p. 148). They mention that CBLT reflects a banking model of education in which the function of education is to transmit knowledge or skill according to the values of the dominant socioeconomic group.

McKay (2007) state that critics of standards believe that they are both administrative and political. Moreover, since standards underpin individualism and competition, they are considered as intrusive by many teachers. Brindley (1998) suggests that tensions between purposes of policy-makers, administrators, and practitioners impact on the validity of standards.

To sum up, CBE in general is a movement that focuses on the competencies or outputs. CBLT is an application of the principles of CBE to language teaching. It concerns accountability, management and quantification. In this approach, if teaching competencies “becomes an end in itself, students and teachers become the objects rather than the subjects of the educational process” (Auerbach, 1986, p. 425). On the other hand, if competencies are seen as tools to enable learners to act for change in their lives, critical thinking will be promoted.

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