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Competency-based Language Curriculum in Focus

Morteza Montazeri

Department of English, Sari Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sari, Iran

Alireza Gerdabi

Department of English, Ministry of Education, Ilam, Iran

Mohsen Hashemnia Gatabi

M.A. Graduate of Geography and Urban Planning, Rey Branch, Islamic Azad University, Rey, Iran

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ABSTRACT

Competency-based instruction is an approach to language teaching that has its focus on teaching the skills and behaviors needed to perform competencies. Competency-based education has its basis on a set of outcomes derived from an analysis of tasks learners are required to conduct in real life situations. It is one of a number of approaches to instruction in which the curriculum is couched in terms of sets of learner performance. This paper aims at having a closer look at different aspects of competency-based instruction, its application in classroom teaching, teacher education and syllabus design. Pro and con views, advantages, and criticisms have been mentioned. English language classroom teachers, teacher trainers, and syllabus designers may benefit from the discussions of this study.

Key words: Competency, competency-based instruction, curriculum syllabus

1. Introduction

Competency is defined by Ernest (2001, cited in Sudsomboon & Anmanatarkul, 2007) as "a statement which describes the integrated demonstration of a cluster of related knowledge, skills and attitudes that are observable and measurable, necessary to perform a job independently at a prescribed proficiency level" (p. 38). This definition refers to a complete system consisting of several broad skills and sub-skills. This definition, as argued by Ernest (2001, cited in Sudsomboon & Anmanatarkul, 2007) means that:

1- The competency is a measurable performance in terms of quantity, time, cost, quality, and combination of any of these.
2- A cluster of broad skills comprising cognitive skills, practical skills, and social skills skillfully weaved together into an integrated whole.
3- The skill also involves higher order cognitive skills required to analyze, interpret, design, evaluate, create, etc.
4- A job is an activity, which has a definite beginning and end, which can be conducted over a short period of time resulting in a product, service, or decision.

Competency-based instruction is an approach to language teaching that has its focus on teaching the skills and behaviors needed to perform competencies (Richards & Schmidt, 1985). As explained by Richards and Schmidt (1985), competencies refer to the learner's ability to apply various kinds of basic skills in situations that "are commonly encountered in everyday life" (p. 94). Learning a foreign language is a complex task which its effectiveness may associate with different factors such as teachers' own language proficiency, self-efficacy, and experience (Fahim, Hamidi, & Sarem, 2013; Khatib, Sarem, & Hamidi, 2012). An experienced teacher knows when to mediate and when to ask peers to help their classmates. CBE can be considered as a resource capable of making meaningful tasks. As a matter of fact, competency-based education has its basis on a set of outcomes derived from an analysis of tasks learners are required to conduct in real life situations. Competency-based language instruction is, according to Richards and Schmidt (1985), is an application of the principles of competency-based education (CBE) to language instruction and has been used for the development and teaching of work-related and survival-oriented language teaching programs for adults.

Nunan (2004) defines competency-based instruction as "one of a number of approaches to instruction in which the curriculum is couched in terms of sets of learner performance" (p. 213). Besides, Funnel and Owen (1992, cited in Basturkman, 2006) introduce the term 'competency-based education and describe it as "an approach focused on developing the ability to perform activities of and occupation and function to the standards expected of those employed in that occupational setting" (p. 135). In language education, teaching which is oriented towards this objective presents language operationally in terms of what people do with language and the skills they need to do it (Basturkman, 2006). The organization of course, according to Basturkman (2006) is around core skills and competencies that are also subdivided into microskills and more specific competencies.

CBE by comparison is an educational movement that focuses on the outcome of learning in the development of language program (Richards & Rogers, 2001, p. 141). Based on what Richards and Rogers (2001) explain, competence-based education chiefly addresses what the learners are expected to do with language. The focus is

on outputs rather than on input, which is the central to the competencies perspective. They maintain that competency-based language teaching is "an educational movement that advocates defining educational goals in terms of precise measurable descriptions of knowledge, skills and behaviors students should possess at the end of the course of study" (p.141).

Schenck (1978) states competency-based language instruction is in great association with such approaches to learning as performance-based instruction, mastery learning, and individualized instruction (cited in Richards & Rogers, 2001). As he maintains, this approach to instruction is outcome-based and adaptive to the changing needs of students, teachers, and community. CBE is based on a set of outcomes that are derived from an analysis of tasks typically required of students in real life situation (Schenck, 1978, cited in Richards & Rogers, 2001, p. 141).

According to Richards and Rogers (2001) competency-based language teaching shares the features of the graded objectives movement which was proposed as a framework for organizing language teaching in Britain in the 1980s. They define graded objective as a series of short term goals, each of which building upon the one before, in order to help learners advance in knowledge and skills.

Richards and Rogers (2001) give a better account of competency-based language teaching on its theory of language and learning, objectives, syllabus, learning activities, role of learners, teachers, and materials. Regarding its theory of language and learning, Competence-based language teaching is claimed by them to be based on a functional and interactional perspective on the nature of language, seeking to teach language regarding the social context in which it is used; language occurs as a medium of interaction among people. They also report that CBLT shares with the behaviorist theory of learning the notion that language form can be inferred from its function, tantamount to the fact that certain life encounters call for certain kinds of language. This, as noted by Richards and Rogers (2001), assumes that the vocabulary and structures that learners will encounter in those particular situations can easily be predicted and mulled over in the design of teaching/learning units. Central to the theory of language and learning is the belief that language can functionally analyzed into appropriate parts and subparts incrementally.

Regarding the syllabus in CBLT, Docking (1994) points out that "the traditional approach to developing a syllabus involves using ones understanding of subject matter on the basis for syllabus planning" (cited in Richards & Rogers, 2001, p. 143).The starting point is the field of knowledge to be taught and then the concepts, knowledge, and skills that constitute that field of knowledge are selected. Hence, the syllabus and course content are developed around the subject. As Richards and Rogers (2001) maintain, assessment of students in CBLT is usually based on norm referencing, i.e. students will be graded on a single scale. They further argue that competencies consist of a description of essential skills, knowledge, attitude, and behaviors which are necessary for effective performance of real-world task or activity.

Auerbach (1986, cited in Richards & Rogers, 2001) makes a useful account of factors which play the key role in the implementation of competency-based education programs in ESL: A focus on useful functioning in society, a focus on life skills, task- or performance centered orientation, modularized instruction, outcomes that are made

explicit a priori, continuous and ongoing assessment, demonstrated mastery of performance objectives, and individualized, student-centered instruction.

Regarding the assessment of the achievement, Brindley (1998) maintains that in competency-based systems, learners' achievement is often assessed against a set of performance criteria on a yes/no basis, that is they are judged to either have demonstrated the specified behavior or not. As Brindley (1998) further explains, "some competency-based schemes also include range statements specifying the conditions under which the performance occurs" (p. 49).

As an example of listening test or assessment in CBLT Brindley and Slatyer (2002) introduce competency based listening assessment tasks that require learners to demonstrate specific listening behavior.

2. Competency-based program outcomes

An alternative to the application of objectives in program planning is to describe learning outcomes in terms of competencies, an approach associated with Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) (Richards, 2001). CBLT, according to Richards (2001), aims to put a focus on the outcomes of learning as a central planning stage in the development of language program. Traditionally, in the instruction of language, planners have had focus on on the content ofd teaching or the process of teaching to a large extent (Richards, 2001). However, it is argued by critics of this approach that this is a concern with ends of learning rather than means of learning. CBLT turns the focus to the ends of learning rather than the end and seeks to improve accountability in teaching by means of linking instruction to measurable outcomes and performance standards (Richards, 2001).

According to Richards (2001), CBLT made its first appearance in the United States in the 1970s and was widely adopted in vocationally-oriented education and in adult ESL programs. Shenck (1978, cited in Richards, 2001) mentions that competency-based education has a considerable commonality with such approaches to learning as performance-based instruction, mastery learning and individualized instruction. It is outcome-based and adaptive to the shifting needs of learners, teachers, and community, and they also differ from other learner goals and objectives in that they describe the students' abilities to apply basic and other skills in situations than are commonly faced in social life.

3. The nature of competencies

Competencies refer to observable behaviors that are required for a successful performance of real-world activities (Richards, 2001). These activities are explained by Richards (2001) to relate to any domain of life, "though they have typically been linked to the field of work and to social survival in new environment" (p. 129). As argued by Docking (1994, cited in Richards, 2001) a qualification or job can be described as a blend of units of competency, each composed of several elements of competency. A unit of competency might be a task, a role, a learning module, or a function which will undergo changes over time, from context to context. An element of competency can be defined as "any attribute of an individual that contributes to the successful performance of task, job, function, or activity in academic setting and/or work setting" (p. 129). This, as argued, includes specific knowledge, thinking processes, attitudes, and perceptual and physical skills. The meaning of an element of

competency is independent of context and time, and it is a building block for specifications of competency for training, education, assessment, tasks, qualification, and jobs.

Mrowicki (1986, cited in Richards, 2001) describes the following process of developing a competency-based curriculum for a refugee program designed to develop language skills for employment:

1- reviewing existing curricula, resource materials, and textbooks
2- needs assessment
3- identifying topic for a survival curriculum
4- identifying competency for each of the topics
5- grouping competencies into instructional unit

4. Examples of competency

Examples of competencies are (Mrowicki, 1986, cited in Richards, 2001):

Topic: housing

1- Identify common household furniture/rooms.
2- Answer simple questions pertaining to basic housing needs.
3- Ask for simple information about housing, including utilities, rent, and date available.
4- Report household emergencies and problems.
5- Request repairs.
6- Arrange time for repairs.

Topic: shopping

1- Read a limited number of basic signs.
2- Ask about the price of items.
3- Express basic food needs.
4- Request correct change when incorrect change is received.
5- Express intention to buy the item.
6- Read abbreviations for common measures and weights.
7- State clothing needs, including size and color.
8- Differentiate sizes by reading tags and tape measure.

5. Assessment in competency-based instruction

Competency-based education is a teaching/learning approach that has its primary focus on measuring and identifying specific learning outcomes that are needed for a real world practice. Ryan (2011) maintains that the Competency Outcome, Performance Assessment (COPA) model is a theoretical model for curriculum development in competency-based education. As he contends the first step in curriculum development when using the COPA

model is to identify the expectations for real practice that pertain to universal core competency areas. These core universals are as follows:

1- Assessment and intervention skills,
2- Communication skills,
3- Critical thinking skills,
4- Human caring and relationship skills,
5- Teaching skills,
6- Management skills,
7- Leadership skills, and
8- Knowledge integration.

According to Lunenburg et al. (2009, cited in Ryan, 2011), the omission of any competency area deprives the learner of the chance to learn valuable skills. Expectation for practice competencies is identifiable through the analysis of the current practice environment (Lunenburg, 1999, cited in Ryan, 2011).

6. Adults and competency-based instruction

Competency-based systems have been widely used in teacher education, elementary, high school, and adult education programs (Auerbach, 1986). According to Auerbach (1986) competency based education became accepted as the state-of-art approach ESL by national policy makers and learners in curriculum development. He maintains that the incorporation of insights from competency-based instruction into the ESL curriculum is, perhaps, the most significant breakthrough in adult ESL.

Tibbetts and Westby-Gibson (1983, cited in Auerbach, 1986) mention the following key features serving as a framework for the analysis of competency-based adult education:

1- A focus on successful functioning in society: the goal is to make learners autonomous individuals coping with demands of the world.
2- A focus on life skills: Instead of teaching language in isolation, CBAE teaches language as a function of communication about concrete tasks.
3- Task- or performance-centered orientation: what counts is what learners can do as a consequence of instruction. The emphasis is put on "overt behavior rather than on knowledge or the ability to talk about language and skills" (p. 414).
4- Modularized instruction: the learning of language is divided into manageable and immediately meaningful chunks, and objectives are broken into narrowly focused sub-objectives so that learners and teachers can get a sense of progress.
5- Outcomes which are made explicit a priori: outcomes are public knowledge which are known and agreed upon by both teacher and learner. They are specified in terms of behavioral objectives so that learners precisely know what behaviors are expected of them.

6- Continuous and ongoing assessment: the pretest is administered to learners in order to determine what skills they lack and, and then posttest is administered after instruction. If the desired outcome is not achieved, the learners continue to work and to be retested.

7- Demonstrated mastery of performance objectives: rather than the traditional paper-and-pencil tests, assessments are based on the ability to demonstrate predetermined behaviors.

8- Individualized, student-centered instruction: in content, level, and pace, objectives are defined in terms of individual needs, and the prior learning and achievement are taken into consideration in developing curricula. Instruction is not time-based, and learners progress at their own rates and concentrate on just those areas where they lack competence.

7. Criticisms against the use of competencies

Tollefson (1986, cited in Richards, 2001) contends that there are no valid procedures available to develop competency specification; although there are lists of competencies which can be generated intuitively for many activities and areas, there is no way of knowing which one is essential. Typically, competencies are described on the basis of intuition and experience, a process similar to the one applied to develop statements of the objectives (Richards, 2001). Moreover, Tollefson (1986, cited in Lesikin, 2001) in examining competency-based curricula found that learners are socialized to be passive, complaisant citizens and workers.

According to Jones and Stubbe (2004), critiques of competency-based methods in human resources include the argument that these methods "restrict creativity, are too generic, and cannot be meaningfully measured' (p. 196). For example, practitioners are frequently required to show communication competencies with little understanding on the part of evaluator or communicator of what that means (Jones & Stubbe, 2004).

As argued by Richards (2001), hidden values which underlie competency specification in competency-based language teaching is based on a social and economic efficiency model of curriculum design seeking to enable learners to have an effective participation in society, and, consequently, the competencies selected as a basis for instruction typically represent value judgments about what such participation involves.

7. Critiques of competency-based adult education

Auerbach (1986) mentions the following criticisms cast upon CBAE:

1- Focus on successful functioning in society: the claim in CBAE is that it is a process and toll which can be applied for any purpose determined by practitioners and thereby it has no inherent sociopolitical bias. However, it is argued by Schaul (1970, cited in Auerbach, 1986) contends that no curriculum or educational process. Critics of CBAE argue that the mode of curriculum itself carries hidden assumption that about the reality and social order which serve to support current socioeconomic order.

2- Focus on life skills: critics argue that CBAE is determinist in that it prescribes social roles for learners. Both the form and content of instruction prepare learners to fit into the status quo in particular ways.

3- Performance-based: Not only the content, but also the process of instruction in CBAE may contribute to socializing learners for subordinate roles. The focus on behavior and performance rather than on development of cognitive skills.

4- Modularized instruction: CBAE may inhibit critical thinking by chunking or modularizing instructional objectives into discrete units or subunits.

5- Pre-specified outcomes: The emphasis on observable outcomes in CBE limits the possibility for critical thinking. According to Price and Mongomery (1985, cited in Auerbach, 1986) it has a reductionist insistence that outcomes be translated into observable behavior.

6- Student-centered instruction: in CBAE model, learners are screened for their interests and needs, and a curriculum is designed on the basis of this a priori needs assessment. One criticism is that the process of needs assessment itself takes control of learning out of the students' hands.

8. Final remarks

Nunan (2007) states that during the 1980s, competency-based instruction developed as an alternative to the use of objectives in program planning. As with the objectives movement, competency-based language teaching has its focus on what learners should be able to do at the end of a course (Nunan, 2007). Nunan (2007), besides, contends that competencies are also generally introduced at a higher level of generality than performance objectives, and, hence, they enable the development of more coherent programs.

Competency-based methods of training in industry were successful in the US after the Second World War (Jordan et al., 2008). Workers developed competencies in the performance of specific measurable tasks, and this competency-based approach was applied to education. Jordan et al. (2008) state that it has influenced a number of educational developments:

1- the learning outcomes movement,
2- the standardization of education,
3- initiatives in the vocational and business sectors, and
4- the emergence of the concept of 'transferable skills'.

The competency-based approach has its focus on acquiring life coping skills while developing the language to perform these skills (Bowman et al., 1989). This approach is, according to Bowman et al. (1989), is based on theories of adult learning which state that in order for an effective learning top take place, there is the need for adults to know that what they are studying will improve their lives. Bowman et al. (1989) contend that the learners' needs dominate the competency-based approach, and language skills and grammar and vocabulary are sequenced according to the learners' needs. Context is used to help learner deduce meaning, and authentic materials are used and the learners are encouraged to practice language by performing real tasks outside the classroom.

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