

The Competency Based Language Teaching in the Algerian Middle School: From EFL Acquisition Planning to its Practical Teaching/Learning

Lamia BENADLA
Tlemcen University,
Algeria

Abstract

Algeria has adopted a new educational system called 'the Educational Reform' characterised by using the Competency Based Approach (CBA). Its goal is to modernise and develop education to face globalisation requirements. This reform, thus, introduces new dimensions related to globalisation like introducing ICT's use and focusing on foreign languages teaching without falling into the trap of losing one's identity and acculturation. This goal is not an easy task to accomplish, especially when it comes to language planning. The concern of the present paper is to give a panoramic view on EFL policy in the Algerian educational system, with focus on the middle school level, and its different objectives seen by policy makers. It attempts to have a bird's eye view on the general situation of EFL teaching/learning in the Algerian educational system after the adoption of the CBLT method; (the Competency Based Language Teaching). Eventually, it unveils some practical problems faced in the Algerian classroom, and analyses them showing to which extent they might hinder the development of EFL teaching/ learning classroom.

Keywords: EFL, The Algerian Educational Reform, CBLT, Acquisition, Planning- Practical Teaching/ Learning

1. Introduction

English is the language of globalisation. It is assigned a primordial role in science, technology, business and commerce. Due to globalisation, knowing English and being part of the world became synonymous. Algeria is giving importance to foreign languages, particularly, English, which is promoted through a special acquisition planning that begins from first year middle school, attempting to form competent users of English. However, when it comes to real classroom practices of EFL teaching, the situation still has some complications that have to be reconsidered in EFL acquisition planning in order to come to more effective results.

2. The Algerian Educational System

For any responsible authorities in the world, enhancing the educational system is a priority, since education is the tool by which the leaders can form the future generations. Ignored problems in any educational system may expand to more serious problems at a larger scale in the future society. The Algerian policy makers, being aware of the seriousness of this sensitive sector, have been concerned with supplying the future generations with the ‘appropriate’ training. They have been setting up special goals to achieve the intended model future citizen.

Therefore, since the independence (1962), the Algerian educational system has witnessed many changes according to the most ‘said efficient’ teaching methods in the world. The Grammar Translation Method was inherited from the already prepared French colonization syllabi. The Audio lingual Method was soon adopted, then, because of its behaviourist approach, relying on the principle of stimulus-response, the learner was treated as a ‘machine’ that responds to the teacher’s stimuli to learn. This proved to be unable to form learners who can communicate effectively as far as language teaching is concerned. For this reason, recourse was called from the communicative approach in the 1980s, with the ‘teaching with objectives method’. However, little was done to prepare the Algerian classrooms to adopt this teaching method, mainly in terms of classroom density and teaching tools. As a result, it proved to be a failure.

An urgent reform at all the educational levels was urgent in order to remedy the problems found in the previous system. There was a transition from the fundamental school of nine years of studies. It was split into two educational stages, which are the primary and the middle school. The primary school includes a five year studies period while the middle encompasses four years with a final national exam at the end of each stage. In order to solve the problem of those learners who have already been schooled in the previous system and finished their first part of six years of studies, they were integrated within the new system by being learners of first year middle school instead of being a seventh year learner, studying four years in the middle school, instead of three. After this stage of studies, the learners go to the secondary school to pass three years ending with the national exam of ‘baccalaureate’, before passing to university studies.

The change was not restricted to the academic years distribution but in the teaching approach as well. The previous teaching method; ‘the teaching with objectives’, relied on teaching units to be accomplished in a definite period of time, marginalising the learners’ achievements. It was substituted by a teaching method adopting the CBA principles, or *the Competency Based Approach*. In language teaching, the term CBLT can be found in writings about the topic to refer to *the Competency Based Language Teaching*. In other terms, the approach of teaching is termed

CBA, to refer to the theory of teaching/ learning believed in, and which appears in the teaching of any subject in the educational curriculum, be it Mathematics, Physics, or Arabic, while the term CBLT is restricted to the teaching method adopted for teaching a Foreign language, in our case, it is EFL.

3. EFL and the Algerian Middle School

Despite all the efforts spent in Algeria in order to pursue the mission of enhancing education, the educational level in general, not least that of EFL has witnessed a dilemma in the 1980s onwards. Because of the spoon-feeding nature of the adopted teaching method as well as being bent to time and not to the learners' achievements, EFL learning has reached an alarming situation in which it was divorced from its communicative nature. It became, thus, treated by the learners as a mere subject to be restricted to classroom use and never go beyond its boundaries. It became learnt solely on purely instrumental motives such as getting the average grades to pass to the next level. (Bouhadiba, 2006).

In the educational reform, EFL is given a special status, being the language of globalisation. It is learnt since the learners' first year middle school, after being acquainted with French in their primary school education; the country's second language. EFL is compulsory for the four years of middle school, but with a coefficient that is less important than other subjects like mathematics, Arabic, and physics. EFL remains compulsory in the next stage of studies; i.e. the secondary school, before taking their final national baccalaureate exam. In this three years stage, its coefficient depends on which studies stream is it; it is more important for literary streams than scientific or technological ones, in which technical and scientific subjects like mathematics and physics are more important.

As far as the middle school is concerned, since their first year middle school, the learners study EFL three times a week with a specialised teacher in EFL. They take two tests and one exam each trimester, that is to say three times a year. The change of teaching method has brought new requirements from the teacher. This is exposed in the next section.

4. The Educational Reform Requirements

One might come across a diversity of definitions of CBA. We will attempt to give a comprehensive one as presented by the Ministry of National Education in the national programme of English as a Second Foreign Language in the First Year Middle school teachers' guide (2003). It is defined in relation with the definition of the competency, which is:

... a know how to act process which interacts and mobilizes a set of capacities, skills and an amount of knowledge that will be used effectively in various problem- situations or in circumstances that have never occurred before. (p. 4)

CBA aim, thus, is to prepare more competent learners able to relate what they study at school to their everyday life. They should be able to solve their life problems relying on what they have learnt in school. The goal is to train future citizens who can rely on themselves and have a critical thinking. These goals are planned to be achieved through a special teaching method in which the teacher should not explain every detail or give ready made conclusions to the learners.

Through his learning, the learner 'learns how to learn'. In other terms, he learns how to master some cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies that enable him to learn by himself. The learners, also, are encouraged to seek information relying on their reasoning. Learning in this method, thus, should not stop at the low cognitive levels of the learner like merely knowing information, understanding them or applying rules, but should reach higher levels, mainly, analysis, synthesis and even evaluation.

EFL teaching is promoted in CBLT in the sense that the learners should be able to use it to communicate and not to keep their linguistic knowledge passive. Learners are trained, since their first year of the middle school education, to communicate orally as well as in the written form. They should master functions in which they need to use a set of linguistic forms. These are, thus, situationalised and never presented overtly (Comission Nationale des Programmes, 2004). The English syllabus for the middle school four years aims at achieving linguistic, methodological and cultural objectives.

The learner should achieve a certain communicative competence that enables him to communicate effectively. None of the four linguistic skills should be neglected. Since their first year, the learners are trained on listening and speaking, including pronouncing the different English sounds. They are, also, exposed to written texts in which they explore different functions and different linguistic forms which they should reproduce later. They become responsible for their own learning so that they should manage how to learn. They are exposed to other cultures than theirs. They can compare their own culture to others so that his tolerance in raised, which is an important component of globalisation.

One might dare to conclude that the EFL syllabus during the four years within the educational reform is said to enable the learners to learn English effectively if the teacher knows how to monitor his classroom and present his material attractively to raise his learners' motivation. Indeed, CBLT carries 'glittering' tenets that might solve the educational dilemma.

One cannot deny that in a vertical standpoint, considering particular individual learners, the approach has proved to be fruitful, giving tangible results in terms of the learners' level, i.e. a second year middle school learners' linguistic level is remarkably better than a former ninth year fundamental school learner' ability to use English. However, adopting a horizontal standpoint, the concrete situation appears quite different from the expected one. EFL teaching is still suffering from several problems that have to be solved.

5. EFL Classroom Problems

This section is not exhausting all the problems found in all the Algerian EFL classrooms, the situation might vary from one region, one school, and one teacher to another. The summarized below problems were observations of the author, relying on her own experience as an EFL middle school teacher, compared to observations shared by her colleagues, mainly in net forums and Facebook chats, in addition to data collected from interviews conducted to teachers and learners of EFL in Algeria.

5.1. *The Learners' Effective Variables*

EFL is introduced to the learners in their first year middle school. In generalising terms, most of them are motivated to learn this new language. Some, however, might reject it in a set of negative attitudes either for being a foreign language or because of being associated with French, a language that they have already known in the primary school, and towards which they might had already carry negative attitudes too.

After some contact with EFL, many learners can communicate orally in this language, but they are surprised by having a low grade in the written test. This results from the fact that the oral skills are focused more than writing abilities (Semmouk, 2005). These low grades, according to (Dornyei, 2009), may lead to negative attitudes towards this language. These negative attitudes generate a lack or even a loss of motivation to learn this language. The learners might adopt a purely instrumental motivation in learning EFL aiming not at learning the language *per se*, but to get 'a good grade', especially that there are other subjects with a higher coefficient, and which are regarded as more important, like mathematics, or physics.

For this reason, it was attested in many interviews conducted to the middle school learners that they express a kind of avoidance of doing efforts in ameliorating their EFL, considering that as a waste of time and efforts, and they prefer to invest in other more important subjects in terms of coefficient. Therefore, they generally abandon autonomous work in spite of the fact that relying on themselves is one of the first tenets of CBLT. Group work presented in the form of projects is often a welcomed opportunity by some learners, not to learn English, but to practise some business by collecting money from their peers in order to go to a *cyber café*, an internet space, ask a person to copy-paste the research topic from the internet and print it, then give it to the teacher without even reading it. One might wonder about the reasons generating this behaviour, which are not learner related solely, but which might be a result of their environment.

5.2. *Socio-Political Variables*

If one attempts to analyse the learners' behaviour, s/he can relate it to many reasons. The first factor is the teacher who is in direct contact with the learners, so the way the lesson is handled or presented decides on the efficiency of teaching learning. Yet, the teacher is not an autonomous person that decides on every detail to be included in teaching. The content comes from a higher authority and the teacher often finds himself just an agent to apply the instructions of the system. Even if the system of education is a tight one, the role of parents and even the whole social character affects the way in which the learners perceive learning.

Teachers of English were either trained within the national training program called ITE, which is an ancient institute specialized in training teachers in Algeria, or have a license degree in the English language; the equivalent of a BA degree; a baccalaureate plus four years of university studies in the specialty of EFL.

Most of the teachers have witnessed the transition from previous teaching methods to CBLT. Many teachers complain about the complexity of the content of the reform in EFL. They often find themselves teaching linguistic points that they do not master themselves. Many of them were not trained to be teachers. So, teaching for them is just a job for 'bread earning'. Some do efforts to ameliorate their teaching, by keeping their level updated and by trying to modernise their teaching using ICTs but many do not care about their self development and do not have access to technologies like computers which might help them in accomplishing their job.

Many teachers still do not know how to apply CBLT in concrete situations in spite of seminars, study days and training sessions organised by inspectors to solve this problem. If you ask a teacher in which point in the syllabus he is, you might hear an answer like 'I dealt with the past simple' instead of saying 'I dealt with narration'. This type of answers reflects that the teacher is still focusing linguistic points more than language functions which are the core of CBLT.

The first concern of the teacher is still in many cases time bent, i.e. finishing the syllabus is still more important for many of them than the learners' assimilation of the content so that when the inspector comes in a visit 'he will not blame the teacher to be late in the syllabus'. This shows that the former teaching methods are deeply rooted in the teachers' subconscious and still affect their way of teaching. What clouds further the issue is that many teachers find themselves shifting to the previous way of teaching in which they feel 'safer' during their lesson.

The reform brought new administrative responsibilities to the teacher so that s/he, often, finds him/herself sunk in preparing lessons, at least two tests per trimester and an exam, giving grades including providing a grade for a continuous evaluation of the learners' work in class, a mark that is rarely based of objective criteria of evaluation and is often used as a means to threaten the learner to be 'a good learner' in class. The teacher should also fill the grades in his notebook, the administration's notebook and the learners' marks books, which are rarely consulted by the learners' parents. S/he has to fill them in a matrix of each learner's grades provide statistics of his subject and of a class of his responsibility.

These tasks may seem simple if the teacher teaches a limited number of non crowded classes, but the tasks become time consuming and efforts demanding with eight overcrowded classes. In this case, the teacher focuses all his efforts in being updated with administrative documents rather than in providing an effective teaching.

Many complains were sent to the ministry of national education from teachers of all subjects concerning the density and the length of the syllabus in the Algerian middle school. Their claims were answered in 2008-2009 by slimming down the syllabus. This work has been accomplished first by inspectors, then by some teachers who finalised the work before being implemented. Therefore, the teachers of all subjects, including EFL, received the slimmed down syllabus, and received instructions from the inspectors on what to skip as lessons. They used to gather us in seminars and study days, being an EFL middle school teacher at that period, explaining the content of the slimmed down syllabus. Many files; teaching units, were removed, but the

learners' books and the teachers guides did not change because this occurred in a hurry without an effective planning of experts.

Many others complains may be found in some areas in Algeria like the density of classes, mixing the former system learners with the new ones which makes classes mixed not only in terms of ability, but in the age range as well. So, the teacher finds himself confronted to 10 years old children, resulting from the primary school of the educational reform, schooled in the same class with 16 years old teenagers, who were educated within the former fundamental school, and were integrated within the new educational system. This situation makes the teacher confuse which teaching techniques appropriate for both age ranges, and compatible with both educational backgrounds of the learners.

6. Perspectives on EFL Teaching in Algeria

After exposing these problems, one might wonder about the future of teaching in Algeria, particularly that of EFL. How can the responsible authorities solve these problems? How can policy makers design solutions by which the learners become motivated about learning EFL in an integrative way? What can make learners rely on themselves, be responsible of their learning, and avoid ready made projects? How can policy make parents interested in their children's learning without leaving the whole task to the school? Which solution can we provide to make teachers convinced in the change in the teaching approach? What can motivate them to develop themselves keeping up with the world development using technologies and teaching methods? These questions do not have watertight answers because their solving means changing the Algerian character at once, which is not an easy task to do overnight.

Semmouk, A. (2005), an Algerian sociologist noticed that accepting what is cited from above without a critical thinking or discussion is deeply rooted in the Algerian psyche. Indeed, if one has a sociologist eye, s/he may attest this behaviour in the Algerian society. This begins from the level of the family, accepting the parents' orders with no discussion, to higher layers of the Algerian society. This explains the learners' behaviour of avoiding autonomous work and always wondering what to do for pleasing the teacher to get a good grade. It may explain also the teachers' behaviour, being part of the Algerian society, who do not adopt the change in method and do their jobs to apply the authorities' words. This character is deeply rooted in our society and it might take many years, if not decades, to be changed.

7. Conclusion

There have been considerable efforts in the educational system from top to bottom, from policy makers to learners in order to enhance education in Algeria, however, being in a transition time point; many difficulties still hinder the development of this sensitive sector. Considering the seriousness of the reform, one can have an optimistic vision and expect positive results on the long term, but this can not be achieved if not all levels, from authorities to family, strive to adapt the Algerian social character, making the Algerian citizen more open on the world and more convinced in his beliefs, in order to be able to survive in a world of globalisation. Changing the social norms, which is not an easy task to accomplish, and cannot be done without the coordination of not only educationists, but also of sociologists and anthropologists, may solve most of the problems found in the Algerian education. In parallel, education is the main sector by

which a society can develop. Here, we find ourselves wondering which one effects the other education or society.

About the author:

Miss **Lamia BENADLA** has a master degree and is preparing a doctorate in sociolinguistics. She has been concerned with educational linguistics, language policy, and interaction in classroom settings. She had a three years experience as a teacher of English in the Algerian middle school, which permitted her to make reflections on EFL acquisition planning in Algeria.

References

Bouhadiba, F. (2006), The CBLT in Algeria: facts and findings. *Revue Magrebine des Langues* 2006, 4. Algeria: Editions Dar Algharb, 165-182.

Comission Nationale des Programmes (Juillet 2004): *Programme de la 3ème Année Moyenne*. Algérie: ONPS.

Dornyei, Z. (2009). *The Psychology of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: OUP.

Ministry of National Education (May 2003), *Programme of English as a Second Foreign Language*, The First Year Middle school teachers' guide, Algeria: Algiers, 1-17.

Semmouk, A. (2005), almashroue attarbawi aljazairi bayna muàwwiqat alazma wa waqie al-àwlama. *Revue des Sciences Humaines n 07*, Algeria, Ain Mlila: Alhoudda, 113-126.