

A self-study of a former EFL teacher in Algerian secondary education

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Abstract

Several novices but also veteran teachers face several challenges as they try to implement the competency-based approach in their EFL classes. However, they can teach English better by deploying a number of innovative techniques and strategies instead of trying to implement a teaching method. This descriptive research paper aims to develop some reflections on TEFL at the secondary school level with special reference to Algeria. This research uses a self-study of teaching and teacher education practices (S-STTEP) by following the researcher's work as an EFL headteacher and coordinator in Algerian secondary education for six years in order to illustrate ways in which personal techniques and strategies can contribute to a deeper understanding of teaching English in Algeria. The paper argues that TEFL in Algeria can evolve for the better as teachers adapt to the contextual factors and promote continuing professional development (CPD) and 21st-century skills.

Keywords: Adaptation; Algerian secondary education; CBA; techniques; TEFL.

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1. Introduction

Academics and professors of linguistics wrote about the topic of methodology for TEFL extensively and investigated the best practices to teach and learn English. In fact, some linguists believe that effective teaching of English in schools can be achieved by implementing a valid set of procedures, and other scholars think otherwise. Richards (2002, p.6) contends that methods 'fail to address the broader contexts of teaching and learning and focus on only one small part of a more complex set of elements. Similarly, Brown (2002, p.17) asserts that 'we have emerged well beyond the dark ages of language teaching when a handful of pre-packaged elixirs filled up a small shelf of options.

Bell (2007, p.143), on the other hand, thinks that methods are still valid in the field of TEFL and suggests that methods are not dead since 'teachers seem to be aware of both the usefulness of methods and the need to go beyond them'. Put simply, any EFL teaching method has its limitations and disadvantages. That is why Bell (2007, p.141) notes that teachers 'are open to any method that offers practical solutions to problems in their particular teaching context'.

According to the Algerian English Framework of 2009, the CBA came to bridge the gap between school and extra-school settings. This approach aims at establishing competencies in the learners so that they can be ready for further personal development and active participation in social life. To achieve that goal, one of the basic premises of CBA is to develop learner autonomy by redefining the roles of both teachers and learners. Auerbach (1986, p.416) notes that under the CBA, 'the function of education is to transmit the knowledge and to socialize learners according to the values of the dominant socio-economic group. The teacher's job is to devise more and more effective ways to transmit skills.

The CBA was criticized by several educators and linguists. Tollefson (1986, p.652) argues that 'there is no scientific procedure available to validate competency lists for most programs', whereas Richards (2006, p.44) notes that language learning is reduced to a set of lists and 'such things as thinking skills are ignored'. Additionally, the CBA can only be used with a handful of students, generally the best ones who master the target language and can communicate easily using it. It means that under the CBA a great number of students find it difficult to communicate in English and solve real-life problems using a foreign language.

In 2014, the researcher began their teaching career in Guelma, Algeria. The researcher started as a pre-service teacher of EFL in secondary education. The main concern as a beginning teacher in secondary education was to teach English efficaciously by reaching learning objectives and by making students enjoy the lessons and the tasks they had in the classroom. From that moment on, the researcher spent six years in secondary education wondering about the best techniques and strategies to teach English effectively.

Algeria has chosen to engage in a deep reform of its educational programmes in its different levels from primary to secondary schools. Therefore, the Ministry of National Education has opted for implementing the competency-based approach. It is an interactive learner-centered approach that enhances communication by solving real-life problems and conducting projects.

The problem with the CBA is that a number of a novice but also veteran teachers of EFL face several challenges as they try to implement it in their EFL classes. They are not familiar with the CBA and because of those headmasters or inspectors blame them for not carrying out this teaching method in the classroom. It can be said, then, that implementing a teaching procedure whether it is the CBA, the communicative language teaching or the audio-lingual method can be problematic for EFL teachers.

1.2. Purpose of study

This descriptive research paper aims to develop some reflections on teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) at the secondary school level with special reference to Algeria. It is self-study research that focuses on the researcher's teaching practices to improve our future practice as EFL educators and teachers and come up with new knowledge that may enhance other teachers' instruction.

The paper suggests that we can teach English better by deploying a number of innovative techniques and strategies in our classes instead of blindly applying a teaching method. The following research questions are raised to address the aim of the study:

- What are the techniques and strategies that the researcher used as an EFL teacher of Algerian secondary education?
- What is the pedagogy of adaptation that the researcher implemented in the researcher's EFL classes?
- Can EFL teachers in Algerian secondary education make the difference to face the challenges of the twenty-first century?

2. Materials and Methods

This section explains the methodology followed in this research. The paper relies on the self-study of teaching and teacher education practices (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2009). It follows the researcher's work as an EFL headteacher and coordinator in Algerian secondary education for six years (2014-2020) to illustrate ways in which the researcher's techniques and strategies can contribute to a deeper understanding of teaching English.

A self-study of teaching and teacher education practices (S-STTEP) is sharing one's teaching experience from an epistemological stance to provide valid knowledge about pedagogical praxis in the classes. Hamilton and Pinnegar (1998, p. 236) define it as 'the study of oneself, one's actions, one's ideas... It is autobiographical, cultural, and political...it draws on one's life, but it is more than that. Self-study also involves a thoughtful look at texts read, experiences had, people known, and ideas considered'. S-STTEP is a qualitative research methodology that has its roots in reflective teaching and as a consequence, the teacher takes a dual role as the researcher and also the subject of the research being studied.

2.1. Data of the study

The research used the following data:

- The Algerian English Framework of 2009
- The official curricula of the three levels of secondary education issued by the Algerian Ministry of National Education (2005-2006)
- The official coursebooks of the three streams (*At the Crossroads*, *Getting Through*, and *New Prospects*)
- The teacher's book of Algerian secondary education (year one, two, and three)
- The researcher's lessons and lectures on in-service training
- The researcher's lesson plans (three levels)
- The researcher's teaching diary reflected on the researcher's strengths and weaknesses
- Classroom observations
- Informal discussions with colleagues
- Personal introspective techniques

3. Results

The paper suggests that to teach English efficaciously EFL teachers of Algerian secondary education have to use adaptation by considering several contextual factors. Also, teachers should use several strategies and techniques to foster learning English. Furthermore, they should take advantage of the CBA and its various benefits. Finally, the evolution of teaching English in Algerian secondary education depends on how we teachers evolve for the better as we give importance to continuing professional development (CPD) and promote 21st-century skills to enable our students to engage with the world of today and apply knowledge in evolving circumstances. The next sections include the findings of the research-based methodology of self-study.

3.1. Adaptation to the contextual factors

As an EFL teacher of Algerian secondary education, the researcher faced a number of difficulties that held them back from achieving the learning objectives. These were the insufficiency of time allowance, the unpractical schedule of the EFL sessions being always planned in the afternoon, the overcrowded classes which cause misbehaving and students' disinterest, the rigid administration, the uselessness of some sections of the coursebooks, the summative assessment that concentrates on marks, and the lack of teaching aids and ICTs, to name but a few.

In this case, the researcher tried to adapt well to the severe environment and adjusted to the difficult learning and teaching situations. The researcher was not the only one who adapted to the contexts they worked in to provide effective teaching. A large number of the researcher's colleagues, whether consciously or unconsciously, used adaptation in their EFL classes, and the researcher suspected this natural process resulted from a hostile environment that hindered the teaching and learning of English in Algerian secondary education. Therefore, the researcher decided to use adaptation by being fully aware of the benefits of this pedagogical principle.

The Online Etymology Dictionary indicates that the verb 'to adapt' is derived from Latin 'adaptare' and means 'to undergo modification to fit new circumstances. The process of adaptation is embodied in our ecosystem and the English naturalist Charles Darwin stressed the fact that species best adapted to their environments are more likely to survive and reproduce. It means that those who are best suited to their environment are the most successful and the others that are less well suited will not continue to exist.

We can draw an analogy between surviving in the ecosystem and adapting in Algerian secondary education. the researcher had to acclimatize to the researcher's environment by carrying out a dynamic pedagogy as the researcher modified the approach to teaching EFL to fit the real-life circumstances in which the researcher worked. The researcher used adaptation in Algerian secondary education when the researcher started to consider the contexts in which teaching and learning occur, including, 'the cultural context, the political context, the local institutional context, and the context constituted by the teachers and learners in their classrooms' (Richards & Rodgers, 2003, p. 248). Indeed, the researcher tried to be fully aware of these contextual factors before trying to apply any strategy or technique. And no matter what EFL methods the researcher used in classes; their efficiency depended on how the researcher adapted to the contexts the researcher was put in.

3.2. The cultural context

As an Algerian teacher of EFL, the researcher adapted by adjusting the researcher's praxis to the cultural background of the learners. Unlike French Language, English does not have a colonial legacy in Algeria and consequently high school students have positive attitudes regarding this foreign language. Nevertheless, some cultural topics related to the Anglophone world are difficult to teach. This is particularly the case for classes composed of students who live in remote small towns where there is little or no access to the Internet and media tools.

Also, the researcher tried to avoid cultural hegemony by including too many Anglo-American topics in lessons. We live in a world of globalization and our aim as teachers is to create a global citizen aware of the various economic and climate challenges of the twenty-first century; however, this very citizen 'is not automatically an Anglo-American' (Guillaume, 2017).

When the researcher discussed with the different colleagues of secondary education, we all agreed that it would be preferable to contrast the Anglophone items to be taught with the local culture of the learners to avoid the dominance of the Anglophone culture. As we compare the different cultural components students get familiar with the Anglophone item by establishing identification based on their local culture. In short, our goal as educators is to improve the quality of TEFL in Algeria by helping our students succeed in their lives without forgetting who they are.

3.3. The political and institutional context

Similarly, the researcher tried to adapt the researcher's teaching practices to the political and institutional context. It must be said that Algerian teachers face institutional constraints that are imposed on their curriculum and therefore they work under rigid regulations. However, some teachers and particularly veteran ones choose to cover the syllabus by introducing some changes in it.

This helped me significantly as the researcher started to think about what the researcher should include in teaching, how the researcher teaches it, and how well it works despite the fact the researcher was required with the researcher's colleagues to follow the syllabi. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011, p. 213) describe this reflective process as 'teachers' awareness of the hidden curriculum of a language class'. Thus, the researcher followed the mandatory syllabus but at the same time, the researcher adapted it to the needs of the researcher's classes.

For instance, one of the aims of the third-year stream unit dealing with ethics in business is to make learners aware of the importance of fighting corruption. In this case, the researcher tried to show the researcher's students the negative effects of corruption and invite them, as the national curriculum puts it, to found an anticorruption organization to lessen this phenomenon. However, the researcher also taught the researcher's students that the best way to decrease corruption was to vote for strict laws to combat unethical practices in business.

3.4. The context of the classroom

Finally, stress must be given to the context constituted by the teacher and the learners in the classroom. Teachers need to adjust to difficult situations and particularly when they are to teach in overcrowded classrooms. No teaching method will explain to EFL teachers how to deal with misbehaving since classroom management is independent of methodology. Accordingly, teachers must develop some strategies to establish and maintain appropriate behaviour.

The researcher happened to teach technical mathematics classes composed of 10 to 15 students and this made learning the target language more enjoyable and effective because the researcher did not have to focus on class management. On the other hand, the researcher happened to teach first-year classes of the scientific or literary stream including 48 pupils and it was almost impossible to maintain discipline in the classroom and teach them the target language.

To decrease misbehaving inside the classroom, the researcher divided the students into small groups and assigned them a collaborative task that is challenging and helpful. Dividing the class into small groups enhanced cooperation amongst the learners who found it interesting and enjoyable to work in a team.

To maintain appropriate behaviour inside the classroom, the researcher also asked the help of the psychological advisor of the high school who could deal with specific students needing psychological assistance. Besides, confronting the students with their parents could be beneficial and informative as parents became aware of their children's misbehaviour that occurred at school.

Finally, it must be argued that effective teaching and learning of EFL can only happen when an Optimal Learning Environment (OLE) is in place. *The New Teacher Center (2021)*, a US organization dedicated to strengthening the practice of beginning teachers, indicates that Optimal Learning Environments begin with a positive, productive school climate and provide intellectually and emotionally safe, simulating classroom communities that are personalized and co-constructed by adults and students. It means that teachers have to create an atmosphere of confidence inside their classrooms so that a significant number of their students achieve high standards.

The researcher happened to tell all the researcher's classes on the first day of our meeting that the researcher aimed to create an OLE that is characterized by kindness and mutual respect in the classroom. And the result was that students trusted me and knew that the researcher cared about them and wanted the best for them. As a consequence, even the most introverted students went out of their comfort zone and expressed their opinions using the target language.

3.5. Techniques and strategies

Bell (2007, p.141) considers that teaching methods are taught 'in terms of techniques which realize a set of principles or goals. This means that the EFL teachers are invited to use practical techniques whichever methods they carry out in their classes. They may choose whatever works best at a particular time in a particular situation to achieve the learning goals.

3.6. Taking advantage of the CBA

One of the most important strategies the researcher developed in the researcher's classes was to take full advantage of the CBA instead of criticizing the impossibility of implementing it. The CBA indeed has several limitations and inadequacies; however, it is beneficial and helpful too. The researcher assumed a less directive role since the CBA places learners at the centre of the learning process. The researcher was liberated from the traditional heavy burden of transmitting knowledge and the researcher had more time to observe the progress of the researcher's students and what they can do. When the researcher created a learner-centered teaching classroom as prescribed by the CBA, the researcher's students became more independent and helped somehow to carry out the lesson. As a result, the researcher did not need to be the centre of attention all the time.

The CBA encourages students' production of the target language. So, the researcher made sure the teacher talking time (TTT) was less than the students talking time (STT). The British Council (2021) asserts that 'one key element of many modern approaches is to reduce the amount of TTT as much as possible, to allow learners opportunities to speak, and learn from speaking'. In short, teachers should talk less and listen more to their students to identify their weaknesses and develop some strategies to achieve the learning outcomes.

Richards (2006, p.43) suggests that the CBA shifts attention away from methodology or classroom processes, to learning outcomes. In a sense, one can say that with this approach, it doesn't matter what methodology is employed as long as it delivers the learning outcomes. In fact, under the CBA, EFL teachers of Algerian secondary education usually start the unit of the curriculum by giving their students a holistic view of the learning outcomes. In addition, when teachers start presenting each sequence of the unit, the learning outcomes are made explicit a priori. This can be helpful to the students in several respects. They get a bird's eye view of the unit's grammar, lexicon, functions, and phonology they will deal with. Also, they become aware of the very act of learning EFL and can develop some strategies to learn the target language. In short, they become autonomous as their teachers provide them with the necessary feedback and tips on how to learn EFL effectively.

Finally, the CBA is a project-oriented approach. Conducting a project can be pedagogical as it gives room to establishing the three basic competencies in learners, namely interaction, interpretation, and production. Setting up projects can be interesting and particularly if students are motivated. The researcher made sure that the researcher's students were familiarized with some tips on how to carry out this challenging task.

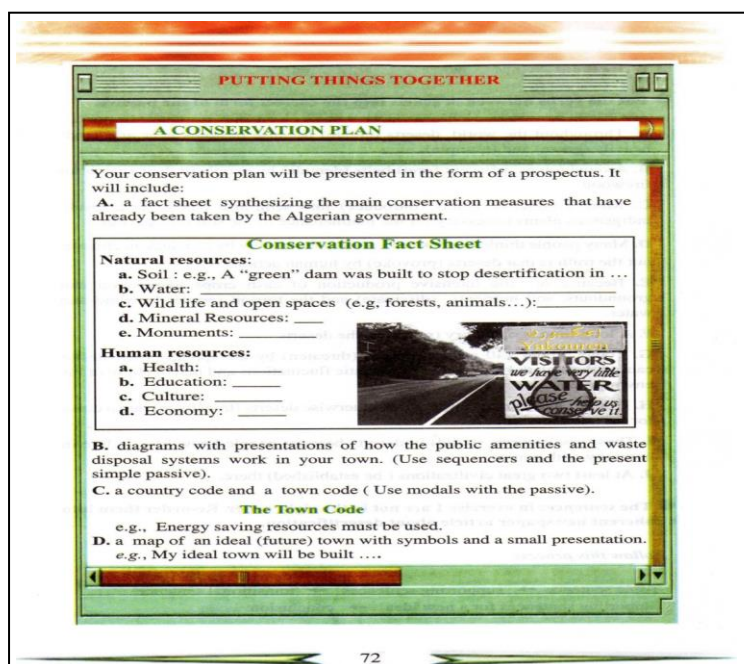
3.7. SARSing activities and fostering communication

Another technique that the researcher used in the researcher's classes was to rearrange the researcher's teaching by SARSing (select, adapt, reject and supplement) the activities of the coursebook. Richards and Schmidt (2010, p.10) point out that adaptation in the TEFL field refers to 'changes made in the use of published teaching materials to make them more suitable for particular groups of learners by supplementing, modifying, or deleting parts of a textbook'. Undoubtedly, some tasks of the EFL coursebooks of Algerian secondary education are somehow purposeless and therefore the researcher rejected them. Other tasks, on the other hand, needed to be adapted in a way that facilitated reaching the learning objective. Personally, the researcher happened to modify some tasks altogether to meet the needs of the learners. This was done by simplifying the activities which are too long or too complex. The researcher also supplemented some listening excerpts and reading passages that needed to be short and authentic to achieve the learning objectives.

Also, the researcher happened to adapt the unit's project to the capacities of students by simplifying it and making it appealing and motivating. For instance, the project of unit 3 (*Waste not, Want not*) of the English coursebook *Getting Through* (secondary education, year two) asks the students to design a conservation plan; however, the task is difficult and ambiguous (See figure1).

Figure 1

The 'Putting Things Together Rubric (Unit's project)



Therefore, the researcher asked the researcher's students to design a conservation plan for their neighbourhood. This was a challenging task as they worked in groups that included members living in the same neighbourhood. They conducted a real investigation and took pictures of the actual pollution that affected their neighbourhood. The project sessions also gave the researcher's students the opportunity to develop communicative skills in terms of giving presentations and facing the audience.

Also, EFL students of Algerian secondary education are encouraged to speak English fluently to communicate effectively and to convey meaningful messages that can be deciphered by the addressee. After all, the various methods and approaches of TEFL promote communication and the production of meaningful language.

It must be said that the coursebooks of English of the three streams of Algerian secondary education tend to give importance to communication through the various tasks and activities they include. For instance, the rubric 'Think, Pair, and Share' of the coursebook *New Prospects* (secondary education, year three) aims at getting the students to work together in small groups to foster communication and foreground a particular function (advise, compare, inform). Richards (2006, p.20) argues that students 'can learn from hearing the language used by other members of the group; they will produce a greater amount of language than they would use in teacher-fronted activities; their motivational level is likely to increase; they will have the chance to develop fluency'.

3.8. Teachers' willingness to evolve

The last point the researcher would like to discuss is teachers' willingness to evolve by promoting CPD and stressing twenty-first-century skills. It must be recognized that some teachers tend to teach English by using the traditional approach that focuses on face-to-face teacher-centered instruction, and consequently, they rapidly sleep back into the role of a traditional instructor. Generally speaking, the best EFL teachers are those who are willing to evolve and change the way they teach English.

We can evolve into better EFL teachers by taking responsibility for our professional development. We ought to search and reflect on our practice as educators to improve our teaching of the target language and to inspire our students. This involves the following elements:

- ✓ Writing a teaching diary to evaluate the success of our lessons and reflect on our strengths and weaknesses and identify areas of development
- ✓ Using ICTs to teach
- ✓ Reading the latest books and articles in the TEFL field
- ✓ Collaborating with colleagues (weekly sessions of coordination)
- ✓ Attending and presenting at conferences and study days
- ✓ Observing other teachers and being observed

Similarly, EFL teachers of Algerian secondary education ought to promote twenty-first-century skills which comprise abilities and learning dispositions that students need to succeed in twenty-first-century society. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) indicates that promoting twenty-first-century skills 'will raise levels of creativity and innovation, and provide better skills, better jobs, better societies, and ultimately better lives (Fadel, 2012). This can be done as students develop an awareness of and proficiency in:

- communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity (4Cs)
- digital literacy
- citizenship
- leadership and personal development

4. Conclusion

The paper previously emphasized that EFL teachers of Algerian secondary education should create an optimal learning environment and promote learner-centeredness; however, it is the responsibility of the decision-makers and the education planners to create a suitable climate for teaching, provide materials and ICTs, insert the oral exam of EFL in the baccalaureate to enhance communication, provide more teaching trainings, and more importantly reduce the number of students in each class.

We live in a contemporary era of adaptation and the Algerian EFL teachers should adapt to contemporary times. All in all, teachers should improve the quality of their teaching and prepare

their learners for the challenges of the twenty-first century by being flexible to the different contextual factors and by revisiting the way they deliver their lessons in the classroom. The researcher shall conclude by stressing the fact that the best EFL teachers should be risk-takers and should always be searching for innovative teaching strategies and techniques.

The main weakness of this self-study is its lack of rigor as it relied on the researcher's own experience of teaching. The researcher could have used interviews or questionnaires, but the researcher relied on the researcher's reflections and interpretations. After all, 'research in second language acquisition and pedagogy almost always yields findings that are subject to interpretation rather than giving conclusive evidence'. In short, the researcher's personal opinion about teaching English is not enough and the researcher thinks that further studies should be conducted to develop the best ways and techniques to teach English in Algerian secondary schools.

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