



## The Competency-Based teaching approach: A new expectation at Algerian universities

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### Suggested Citation:

Bekkar, M. (2024). The Competency-Based teaching approach: A new expectation at Algerian universities. *International Journal of Current Innovations in Interdisciplinary Scientific Studies*. 8(1), 31-40. <https://doi.org/10.18844/ijciss.v8i1.9415>

Received from July 12, 2023; revised from January 15, 2024; accepted from May 16, 2024;

Selection and peer review under the responsibility of Assist. Prof. Dr. Ezgi Pelin YILDIZ, Kars Kafkas University, Turkey.

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### Abstract

This study investigates the concern of teaching approaches at Algerian universities. It recalls teaching through competencies. The present research enumerates the extent this teaching movement is successful when encountering the university classroom setting. A semi-structured interview was conducted to provide the participants' measurement of the Competency-Based Teaching implication. Some urgent measures might be claimed to cope with TEFL with this teaching approach. It is noticed that a main finding emerges since the inexistence of a unique teaching model. Each teaching theory is set to be adapted according to particular educational needs, environments, and educational policies. This research focuses on reforms of the teaching of English Language at the level of Algerian universities. Regarding this teaching strategy, there are degrees of legitimate optimism, regardless of what is said and debated. This article tackled some of the reasons and criteria that boost a good learning process through competencies.

**Keywords:** Competency; competency-based teaching; Reforms; TEFL.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Implemented by the Algerian Ministry of Education during the academic year of 2003-2004, the Competency-Based Approach (CBA) is to be seen as an educational revolution within the teaching of English as a foreign language. This new approach paved the way for the implementation of the CBLT (Competency-Based Language Teaching) at the level of universities. This teaching movement is dictated by the changes occurring throughout the world, and globalization is one of the most important motives (Sisternans, 2020). A large debate among practitioners aims at discussing how the CBLT is applied inside classrooms and the roles of both teachers and learners.

Many studies were brought concerning educational approaches and methods. This field of research has always been of much discussion in many nations, particularly as it is the case in this current paper, in the Algerian educational sphere in general. In this respect, this study is guided by the following two research questions:

- What are the main issues undertaken in EFL learning in Algeria?
- How do university teachers achieve their teaching through Competency-Based Teaching?

Thus, the study examines first the teaching issues applied by university teachers resumed in presenting theoretical data followed by a set of written activities performed by students. A more apprehensive examines the teacher-student relationship that could provide teachers with insights into what learners do in class. The results of the present study also add to the growth of learner-centered teaching through teaching by competencies.

### 1.1. Purpose of study

Therefore, the purpose of this present study is to investigate and portray the metacognitive learning strategies since teaching is witnessing a strong movement towards learner-centered teaching. For this sake, this article provides a deep investigation at the level of the practical side of the CBLT. This present article also explores teachers' strategies and pupils' collaboration. To understand the teacher's attitudes and behaviors towards the CBLT, a semi-structured interview is conducted with teaching staff at the University of Mascara, in Algeria. A methodical issue that allows the researcher to discuss and then, analyze the data collected. This article will conclude with various implications and recommendations.

### 1.2. Literature review

To build a shared understanding of what the abbreviation CBLT means. It is necessary to define this concept and therefore, to explore what concerns teaching approaches in education in its theoretical view. It is worth comparing what is practiced and what is being performed inside Algerian universities. To this end, models of theories and frameworks of the topic are to be provided.

#### 1.2.1. Syllabus context

At the level of language teaching theory, some confusion still exists over the distinction between the word's *syllabus* and *curriculum*, since the two terms are used differently on either side of the Atlantic. In Britain, 'syllabus' refers to the content or subject matter of an individual subject, whereas 'curriculum' refers to the totality of content to be taught and aims to be realized within one school or educational system. In the USA, 'curriculum' tends to be synonymous with the syllabus in the British sense (White, 1998). Then, Stern (1983) argues that 'curriculum' is commonly used in two related senses. It refers, first, to the substance of a program of studies of an educational institution or system. We can say, for example, the school curriculum, the curriculum of French schools, or the curriculum of Algerian education. It is, therefore, used as a synonym of what in British universities and schools is referred to as syllabus. As a conclusion, a curriculum concerns the educational system as a whole, and a syllabus is concerned with a particular course at a particular level.

#### 1.2.1.1. *The syllabus designs*

Widdowson describes the syllabus as: “simply a framework within which activities can be carried out, a teaching device to facilitate learning...” (Widdowson, 1984). Then, Yalden (1984) defines the syllabus as an instrument by which the teacher, with the help of the syllabus designer, can achieve a degree of ‘fit’ between the needs and aims of the teacher. Since a syllabus could be summarized to be:

- A specification of the work done at the level of the school, often organized in sections and files as is the case in Spotlight I for the year middle school level.
- It specifies a starting point and ultimate goal.
- It is sequencing language learning according to language structure acquisition.
- It confines the administrative needs such as the materials.
- It is an administrative document that can be modified or adjusted.
- It specifies the teaching items.

#### 1.2.2. *Theoretical perspectives of teaching approaches*

It is important to dig deeper into EFL teaching throughout the last few decades to present a real image of what was practiced as approaches and methods in the Algerian educational sphere.

##### 1.2.2.1. *Task-Based Approach and Competency-Based education*

The following teaching and learning approaches are mainly focusing on communicating and then, structuring. That is to say, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) where oral drills prevail; followed later by the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) targeting the language structures. Then, a new teaching approach concerns the Competency-Based Approach. This approach goes along with another teaching objective, i.e., the Task Based Approach (TBA).

Skehan & Foster (2001) describes a task as an activity in which meaning is primary. There is a sort of relationship to the real world; task completion has some priority, and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome. Nunan (1989) describes a task as a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, and interacting with the target language to be taught. Carroll (1993) acknowledges a task as giving an appropriate setting to achieve a specifiable class of objectives.

In this sense, and through the task approach, learners depend mostly on their abilities. They are asked to perform different types of tasks in a classroom setting where they put into exercise their mental ability to solve problems through reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. Feez (as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001) summarizes Task-Based Instruction as the focus on process rather than product; learners learn language by interacting communicatively and purposefully while they are engaged in the activities and tasks that might be needed in real life. Prabhu (1987) defines, a task as an activity that requires learners to reach a result from given information through the process of thinking, and the role of the teacher is to control and regulate the process.

Along with the TBLT, another teaching model is introduced by Richards and Rodgers; it is Competency-Based Education (CBE) an educational movement that focuses on the outputs rather than the inputs (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). It is a movement that emerged in the United States in the 1970s. The CBE is described to have the basis of outcomes resulting from an analysis of tasks required from students. Such an approach had been adopted by the end of the 1970s and emerged in some parts of the world such as in Australia.

##### 1.2.2.2 *The Shift to CBLT Approach*

The Task Based Approach consists of a model in which learning a foreign language goes through doing and practicing different tasks. Activities performed during the learning session and, in which, learners are supposed to recognize and grasp the various features of the language. This meaning of TBA might make a shift towards another approach determined as being the Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT). Rodgers defines CBLT to be: “... based on a functional and interactional perspective on the nature of

language. It seeks to teach language about the social contexts in which it is used...learners have specific needs and are in particular roles..." (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Thus, the Competency-Based Language Teaching approach emerged in the United States in the 1970s. By its definition, it might be deduced that CBLT results in the approach implied in Algerian schools at the three levels of studies, primary, middle, and secondary where learners have their primary roles in the learning process.

### **1.2.3. The Competency-Based Approach Movement**

Henceforth, there could be proceeded to exist a rigid relationship between the CBLT and the CBA. This latter has been planned and put into practice for English language learning in Algerian schools. This new direction started first at the middle school level in the year 2003 and was continued at the secondary level by 2006. Then, many university teachers undertake this teaching approach. This CBA consists mainly of putting into exercise the learners' competencies. This Competency-Based Approach operates, as Hogan (1994) describes it, to proceed as follows: an initial assessment that places students within the framework based on their English proficiency level, their learning pace, their needs, and their goals of learning English.

#### **1.2.3.1. CBA principles**

This approach reflects learner-centered teaching based on his/her creative participation in the learning process. Learners' gradual autonomy is one of the main objectives of the CBA. It is Advanced that language is a feature that establishes relationships between people and is learned in its social context. As language is an individual process; the CBA curriculum seeks to provide opportunities through tasks.

### **1.2.4. Bloom's taxonomy**

It is worth saying that teaching by competencies might be described as a cognitive approach indebted to Bloom's taxonomy (1974). It refers to the classification of diverse objectives set by teachers for their students. Since the taxonomy refers to learning by objectives, Bloom divides the educational objectives into three domains: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor (Bloom, 1974).

The cognitive domain is identified through these six levels: knowledge-comprehension-application-analysis-synthesis-evaluation. The affective domain refers to the pupil's emotional reaction through the following five learning attitudes: receiving, responding, valuing, organizing, and characterizing. And then, the psychomotor domain describes the capacity for physical maneuvering of tools and instruments.

### **1.2.5. The Competency-Based learning syllabus**

Again, Competency-Based Language Teaching is based on the building up of competencies, the communicative nature of language, and its implications for both teaching and learning. Various CBLT syllabuses are designed to provide socialization through group work and to provide situational contexts in which the learner's imagination can find a variety of topics and settings in which he/she can play different roles.

Henceforth, this newly built syllabus contains a short introduction making explicit the finalities of English Language Teaching, as set by the educational authorities. We can derive from these finalities the linguistic, methodological, and cultural objectives. These finalities aim at supplying learners with the necessary pedagogical tools to promote their learning.

Competency is then, defined as know-how that integrates and mobilizes several abilities and knowledge to be efficiently used in problem-solving situations that have been met before. Khelifa (2003) links the competency-based syllabus to three main finalities:

- Interact orally in English.
- Interpret authentic oral and written documents.
- Produce simple oral or written messages.

### **1.2.6. Learning through competencies**

As identified earlier, the English language syllabus tends to focus on the following parameters: lexis, structures, notions and functions, and communicative activities helping activate students' mental abilities needed during the learning process. At this step, the teacher's role is expected to be a counselor, meaning to help learners in their linguistic acquisition of items to be autonomous.

Learners acquire the 'know-how' to develop and master the new vocabulary and structures, also, the ability to use language. Practically saying, learners are expected to produce (output) the language acquired (input). Teachers measure the amount of acquired knowledge through testing, assessing, and evaluating students' performances (Costa et al., 2024).

## **2. METHOD AND MATERIALS**

Based on qualitative data collection, an observation phase was conducted to the concern of teaching methods applied at the level of the Department of English Language and Literature at Mascara University, Algeria. To probe for specific answers, the researcher explores the realistic situation. Besides, an interview is administered to several English language teachers. This qualitative data adds abundant and copious data collected from the informants' answers. An analytic process is conducted for the generated data. It is then, important to underline that the personal researcher's teaching experience serves as an important research observation tool.

## **3. RESULTS**

### **3.1. Teachers' profiles**

The five questions administered to several five university English language teachers denote some of the practical aspects of the Competency-Based Teaching Approach. It is worth understanding what happens in real classroom situations. The five interviewees (three men and two women) have access to different teaching sources such as internet teaching sites, their English Department's library documents, and also, their participation in multiple conferences. Meanwhile, they have acquired a rich teaching experience varying from an amount of five to twenty years of teaching career at university.

### **3.2. The teachers' interview responses**

The three interviewed subjects offer useful information about CBA practice. The five questions answers are listed below:

#### **Answer one:**

Through exploring the teachers' interview answers, it is noted that the five participants have acquired a quite respectful teaching experience, varying from five to twenty years of teaching carers. They demonstrated at least five years' experience in teaching English through the CBLT. Additionally, their teaching practice period enabled them to attend and take part in many conferences helping them to consolidate their knowledge, skills, values, and teaching insights in both academic and professional (practical) studies. It is also worth mentioning the numerous in-service workshops undertaken by teachers to better; accomplish their teaching tasks, because in addition to learning about their students, teachers need to learn much more about their subject matter (Shulman, 1987).

#### **Answer Two:**

Referring to the second question, teachers realize some of the positive aspects of teaching through CBLT. They argue their responses by announcing that this educational movement focuses on outputs rather than inputs (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). It allows students to be more active. They can use their competencies in their learning process. Teachers also justify the use of CBLT which creates a mutual interaction between them and their students.

Perhaps the most significant idea about CBLT is to build the students' implications in the learning process. During the last few years, the implementation of the CBLT has implied the construction of bridges between teachers as intellectuals who think about the subject matter and students seeking to participate in the classroom process (Lin et al., 2024). The key concept of Bloom's learning approach (Hussain & Suleman,

2016), has a positive effect on students' academic achievement. As evidenced by the five teachers, it is strongly recommended to enhance students' English language performance at a higher level.

**Answer Three:**

The third question reveals what skills are to be learned through the practice of the CBLT. When advocating for a paradigm shift towards competency-based teaching, it should be taken for granted that teachers focus on the importance of giving value to the learning process and its reflection. Therefore, learners are supposed to develop their learning skills shown in achieving a task to develop a needed competency. In this respect, teachers are supposed to prepare a checklist to represent each of the required skills. Instead of memorizing, Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives projects more advanced thinking skills to be achieved (Bloom, 1956). As an example, the Mexican program (COSDAC, 2013) prospects to develop students' competencies as follows (Table 1):

**Table 1**  
*Generic competency example*

		Skills		
		Listen	Interpret	Issue
Students are required to	Understand what s/he listens to.	Talk about it to explain the message.	Produce an item (printed, audio-recorded, digitally presented or video recorded).	

Source: COSDAC, Mexico (2013)

**Answer Four:**

The fourth question scrutinizes teachers' feedback concerning their learners' assimilation and output. Frequent feedback enhances learning (Wang et al., 2021). A learner tends to absorb a language through a massive amount of input and exposure. Explicitly, teachers have also a tendency towards an explicit learning device involving grammatical rules that generate the language. So far, there has been a big emphasis on teaching students to learn the language not only as receivers but also as classroom participants.

Most educators' studies have mostly been concerned with teaching impacts on students' feedback. Accordingly, the five participants prefer rather speak about their students' learning strategies vis-à-vis acquiring English through their competencies. "They still learn through imitation, repetition, formulaic speech, and incorporation." Argue the interviewees. So, starting by imitating others, they come to a stage of learning to formulate English phrases, and at last, incorporating what they learned in their produced language.

**Answer Five**

Finally, the fifth and last question suggests real teachers' feedback concerning the CBLT practical side aspect. Amongst the five answers, one teacher involves the fact of being lost during the first time she implemented her teaching based on students' competencies. Others justified that educational systems are worth exploring and teachers need more explicit values rather than being crammed with unlimited theoretical texts.

One might argue that these teaching theories 'flood' are to be explained and put in plain words rather than being stuffed with only theoretical literature. The key issue is that research in cognitive science helps teachers understand the importance of how to use teaching knowledge in flexible, authentic, and, practical contexts. Bransford et al., (2000) give arguments about developing students' competencies through having a deep foundation of knowledge, understanding facts and ideas, and organizing knowledge to facilitate retrieval and application. Relatively, students should have opportunities to learn with understanding.

**3.3. Competency-Based teaching expectations**

The competency-based teaching is seen to be a model reform to previous approaches. Great efforts were made to imply the necessary changes in the teaching-learning reforms. After much research and numerous meetings attended by EFL teachers, new teaching finalities and objectives within exploiting students' competencies are established.

Furthermore, the challenge is great. More theoretical seminars and classroom practices lead to better results. At university, learners discover new concepts of learning English based on their competencies and performances. Their teachers manage to teach English according to new directives such as group work, the importance of the cultural side of language societies, task evaluation, pair work, integrating the four skills during teaching, learner-centered teaching, and the use of the language in its realistic situations.

As previously stated, this investigation uses observational data collection from real university teaching situations to explore and determine the efficiency of teaching and learning by competencies. Lobanova and Shunin (2008) report that the development of any person automatically comprises factors; that form a socially mature person. Relatively, this research paper determines the following three learning competencies:

- Developing learner's intelligence.
- Developing one's autonomy and responsibility.
- Developing motivation and a positive attitude.

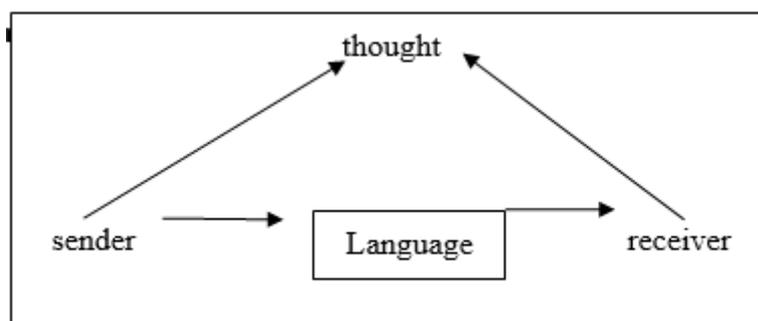
### 3.4. Moving towards an idealistic teaching approach

It is necessary to mention that teaching through competencies noticing the three criteria cited previously, the motivating fact is regarded as a positive point. Any educational reforms generate some constraints related to several factors. Prabhu (1987) deduces that the ideal class number is about sixteen learners. However, our university students' groups are often overloaded. This factor might inhibit teaching aims and practices. Pedagogic innovation can involve better classroom management for the high student number constraint by using blended learning activities in online platforms or using a shared social network account (Peng et al., 2019; Forde et al., 2024).

## 4. DISCUSSION

Language learning goes through some basic features, relying on its structure and semantic properties to convey meaning (Broughton et al., 2003). The following Figure 1 explains how a classroom language learning function does:

**Figure 1**  
*Language Learning Feature*



Source: Broughton et al., (2003)

Consequently, implementing competency-based teaching, concludes that this approach has been applied for a long period of nineteen years at primary and middle school levels (since 2003). Teachers received a theoretical and instructional background in teaching and learning English under the concept of the Competency-Based Approach (CBA). It is then conceived that learners' competencies are linked with

comprehending first, and then, producing. This is what Van Els et al., (1989) distinguish as the four variants of language behavior in the following Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Variants of language behavior*

	Language Production	Language comprehension
Oral language behavior	Speaking	listening
Written language behavior	Writing	reading

Source: Van Els et al., (1989)

The German philosopher Richard David Precht quotes: *“Learning and enjoyment are the secrets to a fulfilled life. Learning without enjoyment wears you down, enjoyment without learning dulls you.”* (Svoboda, 2007). In this sense, Mallett explains teaching through competencies as “the competency-based methods tend to ensure learning by measuring students’ understanding and their ability to apply required knowledge, skills, and abilities” (Mallett, 2016).

## 5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this exploratory study was to shed light on some recommendations resumed in the following guidelines:

- Coping with large classes is the teacher’s responsibility even if it is hard and continuous trouble.
- Teachers could be more eclectic. They must improve their level through a non-stop search for knowledge.
- The program might be impressive and tends to fulfill the students’ linguistic needs.
- Teachers are advised to cope with individuals, i.e., promoting learning opportunities for all students.

The purpose of this research was to understand and describe the Competency-Based Approach to teaching practices at Algerian universities. A context that leads to better language acquisition and motivating learning behavior. Also, the teaching process focuses on learner-centered teaching. Many criteria have to be considered to promote successful teaching. Thus, this study reveals that the Competency-Based Language Teaching Approach suggests familiarizing students with the new learning technologies named ICTs to boost their learning strategies and acquisitions.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval:** The study did not require any special permission.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

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## Appendix

### Teachers' Interview

*Question 1:* How long have you been teaching English with a Competency-Based Approach?

*Question 2:* What are your motives behind teaching through CBA?

*Question 3:* Which skills are supposed to be implemented?

*Question 4:* How do you judge your students' feedback?

*Question 5:* Are there problems you are facing in your teaching task?