Lecture 7: The Competency-based Approach (1970s)

Introduction

The Competency-based Approach (CBA) or Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) emerged in the USA in the 1970s. CBA focuses on what the learners are expected to do with the language, however they learned to do it. It addresses the outcomes or outputs of learning in the development of language programmes (outcome-based). CBLT advocated defining educational goals in terms of precise measurable descriptions of the knowledge, skills, and behaviours students should possess at the end of a course of study. Auerbach (1986) argued that the CBA "reflects the shift from viewing language learning as an end in itself to viewing it as a means for learners to achieve their own individual goals" (p. 413).

1. Competence versus Competency

The term 'cometency' was first proposed in 1963 by Harvard psychological professor, David McClelland to refer to the key competencies, including knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal characteristics, required for success in the workplace. The Cambridge Online Dictionary defines competence as "the ability to do something well"; whereas, it defines competency as "an important skill that is needed to do a job" (n.d). Boyatzis defined competency as "an underlying characteristic of a person which rsults in effective and/or superior performance in a job" (1982). Participants at the American Council on International Intercultural Education (ACIIE) Conference defined a competency as "an ability, a skill, a knowledge, or an attitude that can be demonstrated, observed or measured" and includes cognitive as well as affective attributes (ACIIE, 1996, p. 3). Dubois (1998) defined competency as "those characteristics—knowledge, skills, mindsets, thought patterns, and the like—that when used whether singularly or in various combinations, result in successful performance" (p. v). According to Richards and Rodgers, "competencies consist of a description of the essential skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors required for effective performance of a real-world task or activity" (2014, p. 156). They further explained that "these activities may be related to any domain of life though have typically been

linked to the field of work and to social survival in a new environment" (2014, p. 156). For example, competencies for speaking are:

-Answer simple questions related to basic needs using previously learned phrases or simple sentences.

-Make statements in the present, past, or future tenses relating to basic needs and common activities, using previously learned phrases or simple sentences.

-Ask questions related to basic needs using previously learned utterances.

-Communicate simple personal information on the telephone.

-Give simple commands, warnings, and directions.

-Ask for and give clarification (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 157).

2. Theoretical Background

CBA is based on a functional and interactional perspective on the nature of language. It seeks to teach language in relation to the social contexts in which it is used. It adopts the following views about the nature of language:

1-Language is a means of achieving personal and social needs: language as a medium of interaction and communication between people for the achievement of specific goals and purposes.

2-Language links forms and functions: designers of CBA have to predict the vocabulary and structures likely to be encountered in those particular situations that are central to the life of the learner and can state these in ways that can be used to organise teaching units.

3-Language can be broken down into its component parts: language can be functionally analysed into appropriate parts and subparts: that can be taught (and tested) incrementally. CBA thus takes a "mosaic" approach to language learning in that the whole (communicative competence) is constructed from smaller components correctly assembled (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 154).

CBA has two main assumptions in terms of learning theory:

1-Language learning is skill-based (a skill-based view of learning): skills are integrated sets of behaviours that are learned through practice. They are made up of individual components that may be learned separately and that come together as a whole to constitute skilled performance.

2-Successful language performance depends upon practice. Practice refers to repeated opportunities to use language over time. Practice is normally accompanied by feedback, allowing the learner to gradually improve his or her performance (DeKeyser, 2007, as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 155).

3. Characteristics of the Competency-based Approach

1. A focus on successful functioning in society: the goal is to enable students to become autonomous individuals capable of coping with the demands of the world.

2. A focus on life skills: rather than teaching language in isolation, CBLT teaches language as a function of communication about concrete tasks. Students are taught just those language forms/skills required by the situations in which they will function.

3. Task or performance-centered orientation: what counts is what students can do as a result of instruction. The emphasis is on overt behaviors rather than on knowledge or the ability to talk about language and skills.

4. Modularized instruction: objectives are broken into narrowly focused sub-objectives so that both teachers and students can get a clear sense of progress.

5. Outcomes that are made explicit a priori: outcomes are public knowledge, known and agreed upon by both learner and teacher, they are specified in terms of behavioral objectives so that students know exactly what behaviors are expected of them.

6. Continuous and ongoing assessment: students are pretested to determine what skills they lack and post-tested after instruction in that skill. If they do not achieve the desired level of mastery, they continue to work on the objective and are retested. Program evaluation is based on test results and, as such, is considered objectively quantifiable.

7. Demonstrated mastery of performance objectives: rather than the traditional paper-and pencil tests, assessment is based on the ability to demonstrate pre-specified behaviors.

8. Individualized, student-centered instruction: in content, level, and pace, objectives are defined in terms of individual needs; prior learning and achievement are taken into account in developing

curricula. Instruction is not time-based; students progress at their own rates and concentrate on just those areas in which they lack competence. (Auerbach, 1986, pp. 414-415)

Within their new definition of the Comepetency-Based Approach, Levine and Patrick (2019) summarised the characteristics of CBA as follows:

1. Students are empowered daily to make important decisions about their learning experiences, how they will create and apply knowledge, and how they will demonstrate their learning.

2. Assessment is a meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experience for students that yields timely, relevant, and actionable evidence.

3. Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.

4. Students progress based on evidence of mastery, not seat time.

5. Students learn actively using different pathways and varied pacing (each student's pace of progress matters…the primary goal is deeper learning, not faster learning).

6. Strategies to ensure equity for all students are embedded in the culture, structure, and pedagogy of schools and education systems.

7. Rigorous, common expectations for learning (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) are explicit, transparent, measurable, and transferable (p. 3). In this respect, transferable skills (higher-order skills/soft skills) such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and collaboration enable people to perform effectively in different settings and apply knowledge and skills to different tasks (p. 5).

Consequently, defining competencies that meet the needs of students in ways that are progressive (in that one competency builds on earlier competencies and leads to more advanced competencies), and coherent (in that the sum of all the competencies produces a graduate with all the knowledge and skills required within a degree) is perhaps the most important and most difficult part of CBA.

4. Procedures of the Competency-based Approach

Different stages of CBA pedagogy are indicated:

1-an assessment of the learners' needs.

2-a selection of the competencies that should be specific and stated in measurable behaviours.

3-determination of the target instruction; the content is based on learners' goals i.e. competencies.

4-evaluation of the competency, learners continue to learn until mastery of the competency. Assessment should be criterion-referenced: each competency must have clear performance criteria, and learners need to be assessed on how successful they are in performing tasks, not how well they know about language. (Weddel, 2006)

5. Learners' Roles in the Competency-based Approach

Learners are active participants in the learning process. Primary roles assumed for learners are as follows:

1-To monitor their learning in reference to the target competencies. Learners need to develop skills in self-assessment to monitor their learning in relation to the learning targets.

2-To develop a range of learning strategies. Successful mastery of target competencies depends upon the ability to use strategies to achieve communication.

3-To be able to transfer knowledge and skills to new situations. Learners must be prepared to apply skills learned in the classroom to situations outside of the classroom. (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 159).

6. Teachers' Roles in the Competency-based Approach

Teachers too have an active role in CBA, although the role of the teacher will depend on on whether the teacher is implementing a CBA course design that has been developed by others, or developing an ESP course:

1-Needs' analyst: the teacher may be required to conduct a needs analysis of his or her students and is able to select suitable competencies based on the learners' needs.

2-Materials' developer and materials resource assembler: the teacher may he required to assemble suitable materials - including technology-supported materials - as well as to develop materials to address specific target competencies.

3-Assessor: the teacher is engaged in ongoing assessment of students' learning and may need to re-teach skills that have not been adequately mastered.

4-Coach: the teacher is also expected to guide students toward use of appropriate learning strategies and to provide the necessary guidance and support for this purpose (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 159).

7. Syllabus and Instructional Materials in the Competency-based Approach

The syllabus for a CBA language course consists of a description of learning outcomes in terms of "competencies". One starts with the field of knowledge that one is going to teach (e.g., contemporary European history, marketing, listening comprehension, or French literature) and then selects concepts, knowledge, and skills that constitute that field of knowledge. A syllabus and the course content are then developed around the subject. Since CBA is built around specific learning targets, these can form the basis for the design of published courses as well as teacher-developed materials and technology supported materials. A wide range of published courses are available based on CBLT (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 160).

8. Traditional vs. Competency-based Assessment

Harris et al. (1995) described assessment in CBA as both an ongoing process and a final step. It aims at measuring students' outcomes and achievement in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. It assesses students' transfer of skills in new situations. Traditional assessment is more focused on mistakes than on achievements. Grades are given to assess any assignement (test, exam, project). However, in CBA, each competency should have a grade that reflects its mastery; and formative assessments are not counted in the final evaluation, they just guide daily instruction.

Unlike traditional assessment, if students do not earn course credit, teachers specify competencies that need to be re-learned not the whole course. CBA focuses on self-improvement, allowing students to make mistakes and learn from them, understanding that it is not a problem to make mistakes. Students collaborate with their teachers to decide when and how to show what they have learned. They have multiple chances to demonstrate mastery. Assessment of students' competencies can be effectively achieved through questioning, direct and indirect observation, portfolios (e.g. collection of tests/exams papers), self-assessment, and rubrics. The following is an example of a rubric to assess students' speaking:

	Excellent 20	Good 10	Fair 5	Needs improvement 1
Content Has the content of the presentation been appropriate to the theme and the audience?	Complete. The speaker clearly conveys the main idea and provides details that are relevant and interesting.	Generally complete. The speaker conveys the main idea, but does not provide adequate relevant details to support it.	Somewhat incomplete. The main idea is unclear. Much of the detail is irrelevant.	Incomplete. The main idea is unclear. Details are non-existent or random and irrelevant.
Comprehensibility Was the presentation structured in a way that is easy to understand?	Comprehensible. The speaker uses appropriate language to convey the main idea of this item clearly.	Generally comprehensible. The message is unclear in places. The language used is inadequate to make the message totally clear.	Somewhat incomprehensible. The message could only be understood by a sympathetic native	Incomprehensible.
Fluency Has the team organized the day well and how to present the content?	The student speaks very clearly without hesitation. Pronunciation and intonation sound natural.	The student speaks with some hesitation. Problems with pronunciation and intonation do not prevent communication.	The student hesitates frequently. Problems with pronunciation and intonation distort meaning and inhibit communication	Frequent hesitations and extreme problems with pronunciation cause communication to break down.
Accuracy Were the materials used helpful and conducive to the presentation?	Functions, grammar, and vocabulary are used correctly.	Minor problems in usage do not distort meaning or inhibit communication.	Problems in usage significantly distort meaning and inhibit communication in some instances.	Problems in usage completely distort meaning and inhibit communications.
Effort How has the team worked? Are they cohesive and well coordinated?	Exceeds the minimum requirements of the assignment and provides evidence of thoughtful input.	Fulfils the minimum requirements of the assignment and provides evidence of thoughtful input.	Fulfils the minimum requirements of the assignment but does not show evidence of thoughtful input.	Does not fulfil minimum requirements of the assignment or provide evidence of thoughtful input.

9. The Competency-based Approach in Algeria

CBA has been implemented in Algeria since 2002 as a result of the educational reform. CBA, according to the Algerian Ministry of Education, aims at establishing three main competencies in EFL learners:

-To interact orally in English.

-To interpret authentic, oral, or written documents.

-To produce simple, oral, or written messages.

Algerian textbooks follows a functional format that includes various topical units in the form of sequences, followed by a project and a self-evaluation grid to complete. The transfer of the acquired knowledge to solve a real-life problem manifests itself in the project work. However, teaching homogeneous groups of pupils, as advised by CBA, is difficult to implement in the Algerian schools due to the ignorance of individual differences and large class size. Also, students

do not have the freedom to choose the competencies they want to develop since they are already identified in the textbook.

10. Criticism of the Competency-based Approach

Despite its importance, the validity of CBA has been repeatedly questioned mainly because:

1-It assumed that competencies and effective performance is necessarily direct, observable and testable relationships (Jamil, 2015). So, only 'observable' outcomes are regarded as valid. (Macfarlane & Lomas, 1994, p. 30).

2-It was perceived as a political move to vocationalize education: Education is more than developing competencies for vocational purposes. (Macfarlane & Lomas, 1994).

3-It fails to acknowledge that learning is an incremental process, not something which can be defined in absolute terms (Macfarlane & Lomas, 1994, p. 29).

4-Once a competence level is met, there is no incentive for the learner to delve more deeply into the complexities of any particular area of learning…A minimalist approach to education will produce minimal learning. The learner will soon realise that there is no need to do more than the minimum to achieve the "competence" level (Macfarlane & Lomas, 1994, p. 29).

Conclusion

Preparing all students for success in the modern world requires moving away from the traditional model of education to one that ensures equity and promotes deep student engagement and learning. Competency-based education is designed to meet this challenge, and its implementation is growing rapidly.

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