Competency-Based Evaluation of the Algerian English Language BAC Test

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Abstract

The current study investigates the competency-based extent of the Algerian English language Baccalaureate test. The BAC test was evaluated against a set of criteria derived from the review of the expert literature. Results indicate that only 30 % of the test questions can be considered competency-driven, but faulty in terms of competency-focused assessment principles such as complexity of the task, meaningfulness of the task, multiplicity of task instructions, and diversity of scoring standards. The other 70 % of the test questions are focused on the measurement of resources, with 10 % devoted to knowledge and 60 % to skills/abilities measurement. Nevertheless, of this large sum of percentage devoted to the assessment of resources, only 10 % percent is justified from a competency-based theory.

Keywords: Assessment of complex situations, Assessment of resources, BAC testing, competency-based approach, Competency-Assessment, pedagogy of integration, Skills-assessment.
ملخص

تقييم امتحان البكالوريا للغة الإنجليزية من وجهة نظر القارية بالكفاءات

يتناول البحث مدى استجابة امتحان البكالوريا للغة الإنجليزية المعتمدة لمعايير التقويم والتقييم والتحقيقات التي أثارها المنظرين للمقاربة بالكفاءات بالاعتماد على مجموعة من المبادئ الخاصة لهذا الأخير، وتطبيقها على محتوى أسئلة امتحان البكالوريا للغة الإنجليزية. وقد أكدت النتائج أن 30% فقط من محتوى أسئلة الامتحان تقييم الكفاءات لكن هذا العنصر الأساسي في الامتحان ناقص من حيث تطابقه مع معايير التقويم والتقييم المستعملة في قياس الكفاءات، مثل تعميق التمارين، توضيح مغزى المهمة، تعداد التقييم، وتوزيع معايير التصحيح، أما البقية من النسبة المئوية لحتوى الامتحان فهي تتناول قياس المصادر (10% مخصصة للمعرفات و 60% مخصصة للقدرات)، لكن هذه النسبة الكبيرة المخصصة لقياس المصادر فهي غير مبررة من وجهة نظر مبادئ هذا المنهاج البيداغوجي المعتمد، حيث 10% فقط من محتواها يمكن اعتبارها ملائمة ومقبولة وفي تطابق مع معايير التقييم والتقييم.

الكفاءات، تقييم المصادر، تقييم القدرات، تقييم الكفاءات بالكفاءات، تقييم امتحان البكالوريا

المشكلة الوضعية

I- Introduction

Following the 2002 School Reform, Algeria has adopted a competency-based approach (CBA) as a major breakthrough for the planning, implementing, and assessing learning targets in Algerian schools (primary, middle, and secondary schools). The newly selected model for defining curriculum components represents a radical alteration in the pedagogical paradigm (Seghouani, 2006, p. 74). In this new framework, assessment, one of the sub-sets of the curriculum, requires adherence to entirely new assessment practices. Instead of focusing on the assessment of specific discrete objectives, attention is shifted towards the measurement of successful attainment of competencies (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) in complex situations. The current study will attempt to evaluate the extent to which the Algerian English language Baccalaureate test reflects the principles of CBA by examining the most recent Baccalaureate National exam.
II- Background of the Study

As a teacher of secondary school for 12 years, I have noticed that the current supposedly competency-based national tests are not much different from those preceding the School Reform. The general impression those certification tests give is that of conventionality. It seems that accreditation assessment has not been affected by the implementation of a competency-based pedagogy. The only noticeable change in the design of the test is probably in the labeling (at least implicitly) of the written expression phase that has come to be referred to as integration situation. One wonders whether these exams reflect the principles of CBA, and whether espousing a pedagogy of integration (i.e., the competency-based version adopted by the Algerian education system) to assessment does not involve profound alteration in the format, procedures, and content of national exams.

The review of the available related work shows that the current BAC practices do not fully adhere to competency-based perspectives. For instance, Aouine’s (2011) study pointed out that the BAC test does not tap at the higher order skills (e.g., analysis, synthesis, and problem solving) in Bloom’s taxonomy of cognitive educational objectives (p. 172), one of the major underpinnings of the Algerian competency-based model of teaching. Also, Miliani’s (nd) review of the teaching methods used in the new syllabuses indicated a mismatch between the teaching practices promoted in the English language textbooks in use and the BAC test (p.4). These studies looked at the Baccalaureate test from specific competency-based perspectives; hence, they only partially evaluate the BAC test from a competency-based standpoint. It follows, then, that a comprehensive examination of this test is recommended to see whether a test of competency would look any different from traditional and conventional tests, which were widely in use in our secondary school.
III- Research Question

Based on the above background, the current study will attempt to determine and discuss the compatibility of the final secondary school exam with a genuine pedagogy of integration as presented in the review of the expert literature. The following research question will be used to investigate the research concerns reported above:
To what extent does the Algerian English language Baccalaureate test comply with the principles of the pedagogy of integration?

IV- Research Method

In order to evaluate the competency-based extent of the English language BAC test, a sample test will be used because the various tests corresponding to different streams obey to a single format, with slight variations in the type of content. However, the most recent BAC exam will be sampled, because it is assumed that the more a test is distanced from the onset of curriculum renewal, the more feasible it is for the educational authorities to apply the principles of the School Reform. Indeed, the implementation of the new teaching model requires years, if not generations. A competency-based component needs to be gradually implemented to do away with the old objective-based pedagogy (Miled, 2006, p. 135). The 2015 BAC test, which is the seventh competency-driven exam since the introduction of the pedagogy of integration into Algerian secondary schools in 2005, should at least assess the accomplishment of minimum communicative competencies.

As the present study is concerned with competency conceptualization of the BAC test, it includes only theory that is realized in discourse data. According to Denzin and Lincoln’s (1994) definition of qualitative research, this interpretivist philosophical approach includes, among other methods, the analysis of reports and documents (p.4). Accordingly, a qualitative philosophy will be applied to the analysis of BAC test and syllabus documents. Nevertheless, some discourse data will be rendered in numerical terms.

The sample exam will be evaluated against the following set of competency-based evaluation criteria derived from the review of the literature.
• Measurement of both resources and competencies
• Application of the rule of two thirds for the testing tasks
• Use of the role of three out of four
• Multifaceted format of the assessment tasks
• Meaningfulness of assessment tasks
• Integration (complexity)

V- Analyses and Discussions

As already mentioned, the current enquiry evaluates the competency-based extent of English language BAC test against a set of assessment principles derived from the works of well-established writers of the pedagogy of integration. The discussion and analysis of the BAC test are framed around this set of competency-oriented assessment precepts.

V.1. Measurement of Resources and Competencies

A quick glance at the representative BAC test (see Appendix A) will show that it is mostly focused on the assessment of resources (i.e., knowledge and skills proper to English language). As illustrated in the figure 1 below, 70% of the test items are text-based or linguistically-motivated (refer to Part One in the Appendix A). The other 30% is devoted to a written production in a form of a complex task (see Part Two in the Appendix A). These findings indicate a discrepancy between the BAC testing practices and the competency-focused procedures outlined in the pedagogy of integration. According to Roegiers (2005a), one of the precepts of the pedagogy of integration is the accreditation of the learner through solving everyday tasks, rather than the measurement of knowledge (p.121). The measurement of these fragments of knowledge and skills should not exceed 25% (Gerard, 2006, p. 103) or 50% (Roegiers, 2005b, p.149) of the total content of the certification assignment.

Activities 1-5 in the Part One/1.Reading of the test (see Appendix A) measure reading skills. According to De Ketele (2010),
these types of activities are procedures for measurement of school applications. Tasks 1 and 2 in *Part 1/2. Text Exploration*, on the other hand, test target knowledge restitution. Activities 3-5 in the same section again and to continue using De Ketele’s distinction, are means for measurement of school application. In simpler terms, all these activities either measure knowledge restitution or skills/abilities. Scallon (2004) defined knowledge restitution tasks as questions requiring students to repeat answers already acquired at class, while skills activities stimulate the learner to use his/her knowledge (p.36). The levels of complexity of these two types of activities in Bloom’s taxonomy of the cognitive domain lie in a continuum between remembering and application. Thus, it seems that this test is still virtually functioning within the logic of specific objective testing, in which assessment activities are decontextualized and do not require skills integration.

The figure below, borrowed from Roegiers (2005b, 149), illustrates clearly the discrepancies in the distribution of assessment categories that exist between the BAC test and the norms established in the pedagogy of integration.

![Distribution of assessment categories in the BAC test](image1)

![Norms of assessment in accreditation tests](image2)

**Figure 1:** Comparison of distribution of test items in the BAC test and in the expert literature

Moreover, as shown in the figure below, less than half of the percentage of the test items is justified from a competency-based
viewpoint, and the 30% of the test framework devoted to competency testing shows serious defects in the design of testing tasks.

![Figure 2: Competency-based appropriateness of the BAC test items](image)

As illustrated in the above figure, of the 70% of testing items employed in the BAC test, only 17% is justified. Likewise, competency-testing that occupies a small percentage of the test framework is not fully accommodating for the requirement of problem-solving tasks that constitute the key lever in determining attainment of competencies.

As the only seemingly competency-driven task in the BAC test is the Written Expression section (see part II in Appendix A) and the other assignments in the test construction are not tasks in the strict sense, the analysis and evaluation of the BAC test will henceforward be entirely concerned with the Written Expression section of the test.

V.2. Rule of Two Thirds

The Written Expression section of the test does not apply the rule of two thirds suggested by De Ketele in 1996. The rule of 2/3 states that the testee should be given three independent questions to ensure achievement of assessment criteria; then, if he completes successfully at least two questions out of three, he/she declared competent (De Ketele, 2010, p 34; Roegiers, 2005, pp. 112-113). Discordantly, the Written Expression segment of the test employs two
separate questions for choice. In so doing, the learner answers a single question; consequently, we cannot draw a valid judgment on the degree of mastery of a competence (Roegiers, 2005a, p. 110). It can be said then that the test breaches a fundamental rule of the pedagogy of integration, namely, checking assessment criteria three times.

V.3. Multifaceted Format of the Test

The two questions for choice in the Written Expression phase of the test under investigation are two simple questions, with the first questions incorporating some notes (clues) to assist the learner to answer the question. From a competency perspective the first question has some characteristics of the pedagogy of integration while the second one does not adhere to the format of instruction peculiar to competency testing. The first question that is about corruption and bribery prompts the learner to react to the text by writing an article showing that corruption is not limited to bribery. After reading and comprehending the text (a communication situation), the learner is requested to react to the text by producing an essay on bribery and corruption.

However, this first question lacks provision for an appropriate and explicit context. The examinee is just asked to write an article, with no further indications on the incentive. In the pedagogy of integration the task should not only be functional, but also triggered by realistic conditions. Moreover, this question lacks authentic or semi authentic materials that can be invested and manipulated to solve the problem at hand. Still, the task is void of any instructions apart from the assignment. In short, although the format of this task has some characteristics of competency testing situations, it is much more like traditional problem solving activities.

The second question of the assignment, on the other hand, is a clear conventional “problem-task” as outlined by Roegiers (2006, pp. 70-71). It is a straight invitation to write in an open way on a pre-specified topic (i.e., aspects in which civilizations enrich one another).
The question involves restitution of knowledge (i.e., ways in which civilizations build on one another) and skills (e.g., combining sentences) dealt with in the classroom. Besides the direct regurgitation of knowledge and skills, this assignment is deficient in terms of context, the use of authentic support materials, multiplicity of instructions and authenticity or functionality of the task. Still more, the evaluative question is deemed inappropriate because it deals with a topic that has nothing to do with the communication situation. The reading passage is on the different significations of corruption and this assignment is about interdependence of civilization. This question is, then, invalid because it does not test what is contended to be tested in the syllabus.

V.4. Meaningfulness of the Task

Unlike traditional problem-tasks, which invite learners to write freely in a way to display their knowledge to the examiner, problem-situation tasks typically used in integration pedagogy are socially useful (Gerard, 2005, p. 89). With reference to the Written Expression phase of the BAC test, both assignments lack functionality in that they lack an external audience; consequently, they are far removed from the realities of everyday tasks because the expected audience is the teacher. In reality, this BAC task tests the examinees knowledge and savoir-faire, without going as far as to involve them in actions that mirror every day activities that they will be called upon to perform when they leave school. Consequently, students do not see a pragmatic sense in solving such knowledge display activities.

V.5. Complexity of the Task (integration)

In contrast to objective-based tasks, integration situations require from the learner the mobilization of different types of resources to solve a problem-situation (Roegiers, 2006, p.71; Gerard, 2006, 89). The variety of resources in competency testing stems from the multiplicity of objectives we seek to evaluate. Disciplinary
objectives, interdisciplinary objectives, cognitive objectives, and life skills are usually represented in competency testing tasks. The appliance of this criterion to the competency phase of the BAC test indicates that the two assignments are defective in terms of integration. The examinee is virtually invited to exhibit his knowledge of the language in a sequenced way. For instance, jotting down instances of corruption types, then writing them in a form of a composition is another form of knowledge restitution. Roegiers (2006) warned against this practice and termed it “disguised restitution of knowledge” (p.72).

It is noteworthy to point out here that providing testees with the kind of elements to be invested in the task, as it is the case in the first activity of the Written Expression phase, strips the testing activity from its substance. One of the objectives of complex situations is to measure the student’s ability to mobilize appropriate resources, either in terms of skills or content. This result concurs with Aouine's (2011) findings in which he pointed out that providing students with clues in the first question of Written Expression makes the test less demanding and valid (p.169). On this issue, Roegiers (2006) pointed out that in a competency assessment test, students should not be supplied with the elements of the solution and then simply invite them to apply the rules they acquired in class; rather, they ought to start first by identifying resources necessary for the completion of the task (p. 71).

V.6. Use of the Rule of Three out of Four

The rule of ¾ states that ¾ of the global mark should be focused on basic learning targets (De Ketele, 2010, p.34). That is, if the mark is on 20 points, 15 points should aim at assessing fundamental (minimal) learning targets, while 5 points should be assigned for advanced criteria. With regards the marking of competency in the BAC test (See Appendix B), the Written Expression phase identifies only two criteria (i.e., form and content). Form refers to the overall presentation of the composition, including paragraphing, indentation, and discourse competence in general;
content, on the other hand, refers to the quality of information (pertinence) and the linguistic competence in a broad sense. These two exclusive criteria employed for assessing the complex task are almost marked equally.

Employing only two standards for assessing complex tasks might lead to a subjective view of the written production. Form and content are two independent factors to consider in any complex production, but teachers find it extremely difficult to adhere to these criteria; most of the time they are influenced by the “Halo effect” (De Ketele (2010, p.33), that is, they are influenced, for instance, by the content and they ignore the form. In De Ketele’s view, the fact that the scoring of the criteria converges to a single mark makes compliance to the independent standards even more difficult. For this reason, De Ketele suggested using a grid to signal the complexity of the task. This assessment grid typically includes a number of assessment criteria along with their possible performance values.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of mastery</th>
<th>Minimal criteria</th>
<th>Advanced criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Criterion 1 (Pertinence)</td>
<td>Criterion 2 (Reasoning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total absence</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial mastery</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal mastery</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximal mastery</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>15/20</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3:** Assessment of a language complex task (competency)
This framework adapted from De Ketele (2010, p.34) highlights the complexity of the task and assist the scorer to respect measurement standards, and consequently, get rid of subjective assessment of complex tasks. Furthermore, as De Ketele (2010, p.34) and Roegiers (2010, p.199) assert, it can contribute to overcoming abusive failures that occur because of subjectivity or simply the use of one single criterion for correcting a complex and multifaceted task. Indeed, how many teachers naively penalize students and assign very low marks because of a poor linguistic performance despite a rich content or even originality of the work? This tendency towards a global view of a complex task usually unfairly throws away invaluable efforts of learners!

VI. Conclusion

We have seen in the current enquiry that the English language BAC test, as it stands, seems narrow and conventional; it is primarily directed towards the measurement of resources, while the assessment of competency is relegated to a secondary position. The first section of the test is restricted to the assessment of the student’s capacity to restitute the sums of knowledge ingurgitated during class time and to apply pre-specified rules to solve the assigned tasks.

Also, we have shown that the Written Expression section of the test that is purposefully designed for assessing students’ performance is defective in many ways. First, it does not apply the rule of two thirds that allows checking the assessment criteria three times. Second, the format of the supposedly competency assessment task is lacking multiplicity of instruction, context, and support documents. The instructions are presented in a straightforward way, requiring only the mere exhibition of knowledge and know-how (savoir faire). Third, these complex tasks lack meaningfulness and authenticity. Fourthly, these competency evaluative tasks lack the complexity of a terminal or real world tasks, which involve the integration of a variety of resources such as problem-solving, synthesizing, comprehending communication situations, and reacting appropriately. Finally, the rule of ¾ is not respected, hence leading to a subjective overall appraisal of a complex situation through usually one single criterion.
VII. Pedagogical Recommendations

Basing on the findings that stemmed from this study, it seems that the BAC test needs significant enhancements to attain the competency standards that the syllabus contends to measure. Firstly, the assessment of resources should be reduced to a maximum of 25% of the total sum of test assignments. Secondly, the competency measurement task, which should constitute the remaining percentage, needs to exhibit the following features.

- Providing the learner with three independent opportunities to demonstrate his/her mastery of each assessment criterion
- Supplying the competency-based task with various instructions, context, communication situation, and authentic/semi-authentic support materials
- Making the competency assessment task meaningful and authentic
- Making the competency task complex to allow the student to use different materials and resources to arrive to a successful solution.
- Utilizing a diversity of criteria for the assessment of a competency, including both minimal and advanced criteria.

References


Appendices

Appendix A

Part One: Reading.
A/ Comprehension and Interpretation.
Read the text carefully and do the activities.

Corruption has been defined in many different ways, each lacking in some aspect. A few years ago, the question of definition absorbed a large proportion of the time spent on discussions of corruption at conferences and meetings. However, like an elephant, even though it might be difficult to describe, it is generally not difficult to recognize when observed. In most cases, though not all, different observers would agree on whether a particular behaviour constitutes corruption. Unfortunately, the behaviour is often difficult to observe directly because, typically, acts of corruption do not take place in broad daylight.

The most popular and simplest definition of corruption is that it is the abuse of public power for private benefit. From this definition, it should not be concluded that corruption cannot exist within private sector activities. Especially in large private enterprises, this phenomenon clearly exists, as for example in procurement or even in recruitment. In several cases of corruption, the abuse of public power is not necessarily for one’s private benefit or one’s party, class, tribe, friends, family, and so on. In fact, in many countries some of the proceeds of corruption go to finance the political parties.

Not all acts of corruption result in the payment of bribes. For example, a public employee who claims to be sick but goes on vacation is abusing his public position for personal use. Thus, he is engaging in an act of corruption, even though no bribe is paid.

It is important to distinguish bribes from gifts. In many instances, bribes can be disguised as gifts. A bribe implies reciprocity while a gift should not. However, even though the distinction is fundamental, the identification of a bribe may not always be simple.

Adapted from “Corruption Around the World” by Vito Tanzi, May 1998

1. Choose the general idea of the text.
   a. The effects of corruption.
   b. The different significations of corruption.
   c. The causes of corruption.

2. Are these statements true or false? Write T or F next to the letter corresponding to the statement.
   a. The notion of corruption is still unclear.
   b. Observers would agree on whether a particular behaviour constitutes corruption.
   c. Corruption benefits private interests only.
   d. Acts of corruption always lead to bribe payment.

3. In which paragraph is it mentioned that corruption is not limited to tribe taking?
4. Answer the following questions according to the text.
   a. What is corruption compared to? Why?
   b. Can a person be corrupted without getting something in return? Justify.
   c. What does reciprocity in corruption imply?

5. Who or what do the underlined words refer to in the text?
   a. all (§1)
   b. this phenomenon (§2)
   c. his (§3)

II. Text Exploration.
1. Find in the text words that are closest in meaning to the following:
   a. attitude (§1) = ...
   b. periods (§3) = ...
   c. differentiate (§4) = ...
2. Complete the chart below as shown in the example.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>noun</th>
<th>verb</th>
<th>adjective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>corruption</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>corrupt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>engine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>different</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Connect each pair of sentences with only three link words from the list below. Make changes where necessary.
   a. Corruption is widespread. Many associations launched an international campaign to eradicate the phenomenon.
   b. Businesses will pay their taxes honestly. The economy will prosper.
   c. A bribe is an act of corruption. A gift is not an act of corruption.

4. Classify the following words according to the pronunciation of their final "s":
   instances — parties — proceeds — exists
   1st | 2nd | 3rd |
   --- | --- | --- |
   
5. Fill in the gaps with only four words from the list below:
   unfair — teaching — determines — corrupt — relationships — ethical
   Ethics is a set of moral values. It (1) what is right and what is wrong. It teaches all professions; (2) journalism, business, medicine etc. It establishes (3) codes of behaviour for each one of them. These values are essential for better (4) within society.

Part two: Written Expression.
Choose One of the following topics:

Topic One:
Some people generally relate corruption only to bribery, but this is a mistaken belief.
Write a composition of about 120 to 150 words showing other forms of corruption in which ordinary citizens may be involved.
The following notes may help you:
• being late for work
• bureaucratic abuse
• copyright thefts
• buying goods of suspected origins
• nepotism
• embezzlement

Topic two:
Civilizations are inter-related. They enrich one another in different aspects of life.
Write a composition of about 120 to 150 words developing this idea and illustrating it with examples.
Appendix B

Subject 1: Corruption has been defined...

Part One: Reading.

A. Comprehension:

1. a.

2. a-T b-T c-F d-F

3. § 3

4. a- It is compared to an elephant because it is difficult to describe but easy to recognize when observed.
   b- Yes he/she can: “A public employee who claims to be sick but goes on vacation is abusing his public position for personal use.”
   c- It implies a bribe. It results in the payment of bribes / exchange of interests.

5. a- cases b- corruption c- a public employee

B. Test Exploration:

1. a. behaviour b. claims c. distinguish

2. 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>noun</th>
<th>verb</th>
<th>adjective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>engagement</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>engaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>difference</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>differ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>differentiate</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>differentiate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. a. Corruption is so widespread that it should be everybody’s concern.
   b. The economy will prosper provided that businessmen pay their taxes.
   c. Unlike a bribe which / that is an act of corruption, a gift is not.
   d. Unlike a bribe, a gift is not an act of corruption.
   e. Unlike a gift, which / that is an act of corruption, a bribe is.

4. /a/  /b/  /c/

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>/exists/</th>
<th>/parties /proceeds</th>
<th>/instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

5. 1. determines 2. teaching 3. ethical 4. relationships

Part Two: Written Expression.

Topic 1:
Form: 3.5 pts
Content: 2.5 pts

Topic 2:
Form: 3.0 pts
Content: 0.5 pts

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صفحة 1 من 2