

The new approach to ELT in Algeria: What teacher profile for what purpose?

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The recent reform in the Algerian educational system has enforced a new policy in English language teaching in the country. Definitely, it seems that the English language is not only seen as a means of communication enabling people to interact with cultural appropriateness, but also a means to develop cognitive and meta-cognitive skills and form knowledgeable citizens of the world. This new policy is given shape and substance through the new textbooks designed for intermediate and high school students, and which are grounded in the approach called the Competency-Based Approach (CBA).

The reform in the education sector is paralleled with another reform at the university which aims at establishing the BMD (Bachelor, Masters' and Doctorate) system. The innovation of the BMD lies in the introduction of vocational training with aims to create bridges between the university and its economic environment by preparing the students for professional life right from higher education.

The present paper attempts to bridge the gap between middle and secondary school education, on the one hand, and higher education and training, on the other, by investigating the profile of the teacher in Task-Based Teaching (TBT). TBT is a teaching method which accompanies the implementation of the Competency-Based Approach. It is part of Content-Based Instruction (CBI) which seeks to create "a student community of inquiry through authentic communication, cooperative learning, collaboration, and problem solving" (Stoller, 2002). Project work is the natural extension of CBI and is seen as no less than a task.

The appropriateness of task-based teaching to vocational teaching (in relation to BMD pedagogy) is put forward by Stoller (*ibid.*) who writes that project-based learning

“should be viewed as a versatile vehicle for fully integrated language and content learning, making it a viable option for language educators working on a variety of instructional settings, including general English, English for academic purposes (EAP), English for specific purposes (ESP), and English for occupational/vocational/professional purposes, in addition to pre-service and in-service teacher training”.

Our interest in the teacher and in teacher profile stems from the new role he is expected to play in implementing the new programmes and materialising the new orientation in English language teaching in Algeria; a role that is altogether different from that which he was called to play in the former teacher-centered approaches. This interest is also sustained by the fact that the reform launched through the new syllabuses and textbooks seems to overlook the role of the teacher as the first agent who will take in charge and materialise the reform through his pedagogical activities.

The crucial role of the teacher in the teaching/learning process was already stressed by Gatenby (1951) who mentioned four reasons behind failure in language learning. These reasons are: unsuitable classroom conditions, unsatisfactory textbooks, wrong methods, and untrained teachers. Gatenby added:

“...the last is the most important, for if we can train the teacher, make him efficient, and give him confidence, he can himself remove or get round most of the other drawbacks. He can improve his classroom environment, and though he may not be able to reduce the size of the class, he will know how to get the best results from fifty or sixty pupils he has to teach. As for the textbooks, the trained teacher becomes expert at making the best of the worst specimen, avoiding its defects and adding what is necessary (...) it seems therefore, that most of the obstacles to the requirement of a second language will be removed if we can provide the best teacher”.

In the light of the decisive role of the teacher in the learning process, one wonders if the profile of the Algerian teacher of English fits the orientation of the reform, and whether his traditional training has equipped him with enough skills to face change in the teaching methods and strategies. To address the issue of the Algerian teacher's profile in the context of the announced reform, we shall discuss the role expected from the teacher in

task-based teaching in relation to traditional methods of ELT in general and in the Algerian context in particular. The emphasis will be put on the appropriate profile of the teacher, because teaching is all about change, and without an appropriate teacher education and training, no reform would be feasible.

Before then, it is useful to review the theoretical framework which underlies the CBA and highlight the objectives set through it for the Algerian school. This review will serve to see to what extent the profile of the Algerian teacher is in line with the new syllabuses adopted by the textbooks.

The Competency-Based Approach is rooted in educational cognitive psychology which puts in action the constructivist view of learning. The latter appeals to the process of new knowledge construction on the part of the learner, who utilises his background knowledge and supporting environment. The constructivists see learning as an interactive process between the individual and the environment (Piaget, Vygotsky). Similarly, the CBA links learning to the mind in order to construct knowledge and skills in ways which are specific to each learner. This acquisition of metacognitive awareness leads to autonomy because as C.R. Rogers (1969:5) put it:

“The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge is a basis for security. Changingness, a reliance on process rather than upon static knowledge, is the only thing that makes any sense as a goal for education in the modern world.”

To promote autonomy in the CBA, students must engage actively in project-work which stands as the backbone of this “activity-based approach”. Thus, CBA breaks new ground with the process of “experiential learning”, “discovery learning”, “problem-based learning”, and “cooperative learning” (W. Littlewood).

According to Fredricka L. Stoller (2002), students need to acquire research skills to gather library materials; they need to learn the steps for finding information, to practise note taking, to write formal letters, or to use World Wide Web. They also need to master the techniques of interviews and reporting. Therefore, language and information gathering tasks and exercises, and role play should be planned as supportive materials for project work activities.

To reach the objectives set for the teaching of English in Algeria, it seems obvious that the teacher is expected to be **the** agent of change and should not remain confined in his traditional role within a teacher-centred methodology based on the 'craft model'. The latter refers to teacher-training, defined by Penny Ur (1996) as "the learning of skills and techniques through observation and imitation of classroom model". The training courses are traditional teacher-dominated modes of learning to which teachers are exposed during their own schooling. Kennedy (1997) refers to them as "apprenticeship of observation pedagogies".

The craft model's training courses are based on imitation and reproduction of models during teacher training courses in the form of the "journées pédagogiques"(pedagogic days) which are organised by local inspectors in charge of teacher training; these inspectors are themselves in need of 'inspector education', i.e. preparation for better professional development.

According to Penny Ur (1996), "teacher-training can imply unthinking habit formation". This inadequacy of the current profile of the English language teacher necessitates the adoption of a more adequate teacher education rationale in line with the new approach. Thus, the teacher should move to the role of an agent of change within an approach centred on the learner for process gaining of personal and intellectual growth. For that he has to follow a 'teacher education' programme which is rooted in the "reflective model", whose process of learning develops moral, cultural, social, and intellectual aspects of the whole person as an individual and a member of society. The reflective model is based on experience from which personal theories about teaching and learning are developed before they are tried out in the field.

As we have already stated in the introduction to this article, the theory which informs the new textbooks of English in Algerian high schools is the Competency-Based Approach (CBA). It is a theory of teaching which resorts to knowledge from various sources for the purpose of building learners' intellectual competencies leading to active language construction and autonomy. CBA is supported by Task-Based Teaching (TBT). Buglar and Hunt (2002) classify this approach with the analytic syllabuses because the CBA is "a non-interventionist, experiential approach which aims to immerse learners in real-life communication" and which "stresses the growth and self-realization of the individual". Following White, Beglar and Hunt (ibid) describe the analytic syllabus as follows:

- 1- It is concerned with how the materials are learned
- 2- Some degree of negotiation between learners and teachers takes place
- 3- The content is defined mostly by the learner who determines his contribution to the course.
- 4- The learner decides partially about the criteria of assessment.
- 5- It involves cooperative learning.

TBT relies on a method that seeks to develop the learners' cognitive processes and activate their 'intuitive heuristics', through active involvement in classroom activities and purposeful interaction with real world problems. Its fundamental characteristic is that it relies on tasks to develop in the learners skills and competencies. A task is an activity which may culminate into a project. Littlewood mentions five characteristics inherent in a task:

- 1- tasks are activities in which students work purposefully towards an objective
- 2- the objective may be set by the teacher or the students themselves
- 3- tasks may be carried out individually or in groups
- 4- tasks may involve competition or, more often, collaboration between the students
- 5- the outcome may be something concrete or something intangible

To these five characteristics, Littlewood adds three others:

- 1- tasks involve communication, but the focus is more on meaning than linguistic structures
- 2- tasks should be authentic and close to the learner's daily life
- 3- the students are involved in various activities, in which they are required to negotiate meaning and make choices in what, when and how to learn.

The overall characteristics of tasks make it clear that in this kind of method, learning is a cooperative venture which allows the learners to assume responsibility over their instruction. This responsibility takes different forms. For example, the students are allowed to set objectives to their tasks and decide on the kind and quality of the outcome. They are also granted the autonomy to organise and manage their learning sessions by negotiating meaning and acting on the learning context. The learners may also decide on the criteria for assessment, since all along the learning process they have

been active agents, equal to the teacher, whose contribution has consisted in supervising the learning process and raising the students' awareness about the object of learning.

The implementation of the task-based syllabus diminishes the role of the teacher in the classroom. Definitely, with TBT the teacher finds his role far removed from what he used to be or do in functional and procedural syllabuses, especially when compared to the 'privileges and responsibilities' granted to the learners. Indeed, in TBT, the teacher does no longer stand in the centre of the pedagogical action. This change from teacher to learner is not without tremendous consequences on the power relations in the classroom. So, we wonder whether it would be easy to the Algerian teacher to give up his traditional role of master and source of knowledge and engage in cooperative teaching with his students as an equal partner. We wonder also whether the teacher-dependent Algerian student would easily give up his complacent attitude as an 'empty recipient', expecting to be filled with the master's knowledge.

The second problem which may result from the implementation of a task-based syllabus in Algerian schools and universities is related to course management and accountability i.e. the items and functions which traditionally allow the teacher to measure the progress in the syllabus and decide on the form of evaluation. In approaches based on synthetic syllabuses, these two problems rarely occur, since learning is seen as no more than quantifiable language structures and forms, such as grammar rules, lexical forms and functions to be taught almost in isolation. Such a procedure is convenient to the teacher, who often relies on formulaic rules to be taught deductively in order to decide on clear-cut pedagogical objectives, teaching proceedings, and forms of assessment. However, in the absence of these security devices, would it be possible for the teacher of English in Algeria to plan his syllabus, organise his sessions, and assess his students?

Even though task-based teaching does not imply a central role on the part of the teacher, it still demands his active involvement in the classroom. Thus, the teacher should develop in the learner abilities linked to classroom skills, such as the way to ask questions and negotiate meaning, to conduct library and internet searches, to select, collect and organise data, together with more technical devices, such as designing and administering questionnaires, planning and conducting interviews, and writing and reading statistics. These demands meet mostly the requirements for pre-tasks activities which should

accompany the carrying out of tasks and projects, and pave the way for the autonomy of the learner, both in the collection of data and decision making. For Fredrika Stoller (2002) this educational environment should go hand in hand with the integration of project work in the classroom, in which “educators create vibrant learning environments that require active student involvement, stimulate higher-level thinking skills, and give students responsibility for their own learning”.

Apart from positive action on the educational environment and implementing pre-tasks activities, the teachers should develop learners’ metacognitive awareness to make them aware of the general strategy of the learning process in order to reflect on the process involved and learn how to learn. To quote Gail Ellis

“Teachers will need to expand their role by taking on a guiding, questioning role which will involve informing children about language learning and what they are doing and how they are going to do it. They can do this by prompting, modelling questions and strategies, demonstrating, discussing learning and helping children reflect on what they have done, how they did it and how well they did.”

Active reflection can take the form of language awareness to know how grammar(s) work(s); it can be cognitive awareness to understand how things and events are related to one another; it can also stand for cultural awareness in order to understand, compare and contrast between cultures.

But this modification in teachers’ behaviour cannot be attained without an active training involvement coupled with their background learning experience so as to put reflection in action and construct intellectual competencies leading to autonomy. Eraut (1994) defines three types of teacher professional knowledge:

- **propositional knowledge**, which enables teachers to take pedagogical actions consistent with theory
- **process knowledge** based on impressions which lead to personal interpretation to integrate new knowledge into personal schemes of experience
- **tacit knowledge** which involves planning, problem-solving, and analysing and decision making .

In the light of these three types of knowledge, it becomes obvious that the teacher education programme that accompanies the implementation of the reform in ELT should develop in teachers appropriate skills that would

enable them to cope with their learners linguistic and cognitive demands with relevance to task difficulties and learners' linguistic capacities and background knowledge on the one hand, and their educational needs and subject-content demands on the other. This programme should also help teachers to manage teaching sessions with regard to cooperative work and peer-work in order to facilitate learners' autonomy. The latter seems to be no less than the most important challenge in task-based teaching, without which content-based instruction in general and the recent reform in Algeria will be defeated.

Conclusion

To synthesise all that has been developed so far, let us quote Shulman (1996) who wrote: "we do not learn from experience; we learn from thinking about our experience (...) the process of remembering, retelling, reliving and reflecting is the process of learning from experience." It follows from here that the new role of the teachers is, still in Shulman's words, "to encourage trainees to articulate what they know and put forward new ideas of their own; to get them to acquire the habit of processing input from either source through using their own experience and critical faculty, so that they eventually feel personal 'ownership' of the resulting knowledge."

To do that teachers should acquire skills and develop behaviour with a focus on values such as adaptability, flexibility, creativity, and refinement in process thinking to play the new roles devoted to them; roles of facilitators, guides, coaches, material designers, researchers, counsellors...etc.

Let us also recall Carl Rogers' words, but this time in a way meant both to learner and teacher: "the only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn; the man who has learned how to adapt and change; the man who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge is a basis for security. Changingness, a reliance on process rather than upon static knowledge that makes any sense as a goal for education in the modern world".

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