

## **Teaching Language Skills in Competency-Based Approach: Practical Guidelines**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Since the introduction of competency-based teaching into the Algerian English language syllabuses in 2005, teachers have been supplied with a big deal of theory about this instructional model, without practical applications for day-to-day classroom instruction. This study focuses on practical issues of the competency system through a concrete illustration of the teaching of the four language skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing). Essentially, the teaching of these basics is embedded in life skills, and their practice is carried out through the prior teaching of the competency pre-requisites of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Next, an authentic global task is presented to learners to harmoniously reinvest their newly acquired knowledge, skills and attitudes to solve a problem.*

**KEYWORDS:** Competency-based approach, integration situations, language skills, resources

**RÉSUMÉ** *Depuis l'introduction de l'enseignement par les compétences dans les programmes de langue anglaise algérienne en 2005, les enseignants ont bénéficié que des aides théoriques sur ce modèle d'enseignement, sans leur donner une assistance pratique concernant son application au quotidien de classe. Cette étude se concentre sur les questions pratiques du système de compétences à travers une illustration concrète de l'enseignement des quatre compétences linguistiques (l'écoute, la lecture, le parler et l'écrit). Pour l'essentiel, l'enseignement de ces notions de base est ancré dans les compétences de vie et leur mise en pratique se fait par l'enseignement préalable de connaissances, aptitudes et attitudes. Ensuite, une tâche globale authentique est présentée aux apprenants pour réinvestir harmonieusement leurs connaissances, habilités et attitudes nouvellement acquises pour résoudre un problème.*

**MOTS-CLES :** Approche par compétences, compétences linguistiques, situations d'intégration, ressources

## **1. Introduction**

Algerian teachers have been called upon to teach through competency-based approach (CBA) since the school reform of 2002; they have mostly relied on the guidelines outlined in the textbooks and syllabuses to apply the principles of this new pedagogy, but they seem mostly unfamiliar with the practical side of this instructional model, that is, how the teaching framework of CBA is applied. For example, the teachers seem unfamiliar with the practical application of this approach to the teaching of the language skills. Even the literature of competency-teaching does not specify how to proceed with the teaching of the language skills or the vocabulary.

Usually, the advocates of this approach (such as Savage, 1993; Auerbach, 1986; and Roegiers, 2000) do not explicitly provide practical guidelines to explain how the language skills are practically taught. This is due to the fact that, firstly CBA focuses on life skills, and thereby considers the language skills as means to achieve survival competencies; and, secondly, CBA is an approach rather than a teaching method (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), that is, it sets a series of broad teaching guidelines to guide teaching, without detailing the moment-to-moment teaching steps that should be taken to teach a given language skill or language component.

The review of the previous literature on the topic of the teaching of the language basics in CBA shows that most of the scholars (e.g., Chelli & Khouni, 2014; Mostefaoui, 2019; Adjeroud & Belouahem, 2020) have focused mainly on the problems that the Algerian students meet in learning language skills under competency-based teaching. To the researcher's current knowledge, no previous study has illustrated the teaching of the language skills in the competency system.

In the light of the above background and given the fact that the Algerian middle and secondary school English language textbooks focus on the teaching of the basic language competencies of interpretation (listening/reading), interaction (speaking), and production (writing and speaking), this study attempts to explain to competency-based English foreign language (EFL) teachers how to apply the principles of CBA for teaching the language skills.

## **2. Origins of Competency-Based Teaching**

CBA is an instructional approach that teaches competencies, rather than language components such as grammar and lexis. Clearly speaking, the word competency refers to the teaching of the tasks or skills (such as filling out a cheque, reading an electricity invoice, shopping, and making a phone call) that people or learners are required to do in real life. Consequently, only the language skills and components needed to carry out these tasks are included in the teaching framework.

This competency-based instructional approach evolved in the American tradition of the systems/objective approach. During the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, writers like Taylor (1911) and Bobbitt (1918) started taking interest in teaching the tasks that people need to do in real life. For example, they tried to look at what operating a given machine involves, that is, what skills and knowledge needed to perform such a task. These activities are considered the starting point of teaching programs. In other words, the syllabus designer analyses the different steps involved, for instance, in driving a car. After defining, the knowledge (e.g., names of the parts of the car and traffic signs) and skills (e.g., merging into traffic and identifying road signs) needed for driving a car, these components are taught separately one after the other until they are mastered. The learner moves from one teaching step to another after, a complete mastery of a given skill is reached. Supposedly, at the end of instruction, the learner would be able to integrate harmoniously the elements learnt disjointedly in real life context (Peyser, Gerard, & Roegiers, 2006).

This new way of teaching was further supported by the work of Tyler (1949) who set up a new system for planning teaching. Tyler set up the following steps in syllabus design: the identification of the teaching objectives, the teaching experiences (tasks), and evaluation of the achievement of the instructional objectives. This means the starting point is the identification of the objectives of teaching, that is, for example, driving a car; then, the teaching tasks for driving a car are identified and taught separately one after the other; finally, the achievement of the objectives are evaluated (whether or not the learner can drive a car).

Moreover, this competency model that started as a systems approach by Taylor (1911) and Bobbitt (1918) and propelled by Tyler's (1948) objectives-based approach was meshed with the skinner's (1957)

operant conditioning or behaviorism. The novel teaching approach came to apply the pedagogy of behaviorism to education. Habit formation through repetitions and drillings were used to master perfectly the different parts of a competency.

Later, Mager (1962) and Gagné (1965) further popularized this approach and Gagné added a new component to the objectives-based teaching-namely, a terminal task. The latter refers to the fact of proposing a final task at the end of instruction to test whether the learner has acquired to perform the task. Earlier, only the different parts of a competency were tested. With the formulation of the terminal objective task, the students are tested on the accomplishment of the whole competency. In short, in Bobbitt's and Tyler's systems, the objectives of teaching are identified from the analysis of the target task. Then, the identified parts of the tasks (knowledge and skills) are taught discretely until they are fully mastered. Finally, the achievement of the objectives is tested one by one. Gagné, however, added the evaluation of the whole competency through performing a whole task rather than testing its different parts.

In the 1970s, waves of immigrants and refugees, especially, from South-East Asia, entered the USA (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). These new-comers lacked English language proficiency to operate efficiently in the American socio-economic order; consequently, survival and life skill syllabuses were designed to equip these guest workers with the necessary language skills they needed to do things and get things done in the host country.

Rather than teaching this mainly adult population general English, the American authorities drew on systems and the objectives-based approach to teach immigrants only the skills they needed to survive in the American society. This is because it was urgent for this portion of the population to acquire the essential forms of English and it was impossible for them to pursue regular English language courses as they were mostly adults and already employed. At this point, competency-based approach was introduced to Adult English Second Language Learning (AESL-Auerbach, 1986) and it was later (1990s) called competency-based language teaching (CBLT).

### 3. Competency-Based Language Teaching

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), CBLT is the application of the principles of competency-based education to language teaching. As discussed earlier, CBA evolved in mainstream education, that is, in teaching technical subjects mainly in the world of machinery. Because of the limitations of the objective-based approach that focused only on the teaching of separate objectives derived from task analysis, competency-based teaching extended this system of instruction by giving the learner the opportunity to solve complex tasks in the classroom. CBLT equally analyses the language tasks needed for teaching and teaches them separately, but it gives a chance to the learner to solve that analyzed task in the classroom right after the mastery of the elements/skills of the task.

### 4. Definition of competency

Basically, a language competency consists of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Knowledge refers to information and facts; skills refer to the ability to do certain activities; and attitudes refer to positive manners that an individual should observe while carrying out a task (Scallon, 2004). Richards and Rodgers (2001) defined the concept competency as follows: “competencies consist of a description of the essential skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours required for effective performance of real-world task or activity” (p. 144). Implied in this definition is that competencies include the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to perform a given real life task.

For example, in teaching making a phone call, the teacher/syllabus designer needs first to identify and teach the knowledge needed such words *cell phones*, *hold a call*, *put someone through*, and *hold on*. Then, he/she determines the necessary skills of this task such as *reading correctly phone numbers*, *greeting people on the phone*, and *redirecting calls*. Finally, the course designer decides on the positive attitudes for performing this communicative task such as *being polite*, *using a friendly tone*, and *asking the caller if he/she further needs something else*. After teaching and mastering these elements of the competency of phone calls, the students are invited to apply them in an integrative way in a complex task, in which they make genuine phone calls.

## 5. Competency in Algerian English Language Syllabuses

The definition of competency depends on the type of competency-based approach adopted for teaching, organizing the curriculum, and evaluation. The Algerian first-year secondary school English language syllabus (2005) defines competency as follows:

La compétence est un savoir agir qui intègre un ensemble de savoirs (connaissances), savoir-faire (capacités) et savoir-être (attitudes) mobilisables pour résoudre une catégorie de situations problème. (SE1, p.7)

This definition suggests that competency is mainly composed of knowledge (savoir), know-how (savoir-faire), and know-how to behave (savoir-être). Accordingly, the concept of competency in the secondary school syllabus means the ability to demonstrate in an integrated way the knowledge of language (savoir) and language skills (savoir-faire) together with the social skills (savoir-être) in order to use English appropriately in different situations.

These components of competency are embedded in the following basic language abilities targeted in the Algerian EFL syllabuses.

- *interacting orally in English*
- *interpreting oral and written texts*
- *producing oral and written texts. (SE1 Syllabus, 2005)*

In other words, the life skills which constitute the major drive of CBA are integrated within the teaching of language competencies or, simply said, language skills.

## 6. Teaching the Four skills In Competency-Based Approach

One way to teach language skills in competency-based language teaching is through embedding them in life skills. Naturally, CBA is focused on teaching real life skills, not interested in teaching skills for general purposes. Consequently, the language skills are taught with the life skills that the students will need for the here and now. If we want learners to write letters, the language skills will be embedded in this topic. Below, an outline of the teaching of language skills is provided.

## 6.1. Teaching Listening

If the aim of the teacher is to train his/her learners to locate a place in a town, then he/she has to introduce an authentic or a made-up listening text about people doing this target task. That is, for example, a visitor to London asking people in the street about a given place in the town. Interpreting the message of the listening task will be the target task and the final objective of teaching. However, before presenting this authentic task to students to solve, the teacher has to take his/her students through various stages and preparations, which are outlined below.

a) *Stating the objective of the course*: At this stage, the teacher publicly presents the learning intents saying, for example, to the students that you are going to learn to listen to instructions about the location of a place in a town. Then, he/she asks the students to review the content of the course, as presented in Table 1 below.

Knowledge	Skills	Attitudes
E.g., Names of buildings in towns/cities (e.g., post office, town hall, bank)	E.g., Listening for the gist	E.g., Listening intently

Table 1. Learning Objectives for Listening Skill (author's data)

b) *Activating the background knowledge*: The teacher has to activate the background knowledge relative to the target topic. This could be done through various activities such as elicitation questions (where do you live? /where is your house situated in town?), mind mapping (e.g., listing words of building in the town), matching words and synonyms/antonyms/ definitions/pictures, and ordering jumbled sentences.

c) *Presenting a model listening text*: After activating schemata, the teacher presents the context of the listening activity (e.g., who the speakers are, where they are, what the topic is).

d) *Explaining the instructions of a listening activity*.

e) *Listening for a gist* (e.g., what is the topic discussed? / does the respondent sound friendly?).

- f) *Listening for details*: (e.g., fill in the gaps, questions of comprehension, listening and showing the location of an entity in the town).
- g) *Interpreting*: (e.g., is the respondent happy to help the inquirer?)
- h) *Focusing on key vocabulary of the listening script*: (e.g., finding synonyms/antonyms of words/using new vocabulary in different activities such as filling the gaps and in new sentences).
- i) *Practicing grammar*: The most important grammatical structures portrayed in the listening texts are highlighted and practiced through activities such as “How did the first speaker ask about the location of a given place?”, “What other ways can you use to enquire about a given place?”, and “How did the respondent describe the location of a given place?” These consciousness-raising activities can be followed by practice activities like matching language forms and functions, using new functions in sentences, and multiple-choice-questions. Moreover, pronunciation tasks can be used to correctly pronounce the new language forms and vocabulary and identify the stress patterns and tone.
- j) *Assessment of the elements of the competency through a grid*: As Gerard and Roegiers (2009) argued, CBA adheres to alternative assessment methods. Consequently, at the end of the competency-based sequence, the learners are invited to self-assess their achievements and readiness to implement the target competency. A grid such as the following one could be used.

Content of the competency	Yes	No
E.g., I can use the expressions such as next to, opposite to, and on the right		

Table 2: Self-Assessment of Listening Competency (author’s data)

- k) *Integration work*: After the mastery of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, the learner is directed to integration work (Roegiers, 2018). Consequently, once the learners have practised the knowledge, skills, and attitudes in regard to the competency of locating a particular place in a town, they are led to integrate all these elements of the competency in a situation of integration. The latter refers to the application of the newly-acquired knowledge and skills in a complex task (Roegiers, 2003) and



this task should be preferably an authentic listening text to reflect real life activities.

In the case of the illustrative example cited in here, the students are required to listen and use the acquired knowledge and skills to better interpret the location of a place in a town. A series of listening activities should be used to test listening for the gist, listening for details, and critical listening. The focus of the activities should be on conveniently understanding the message conveyed in the listening text and the grammar and lexis acquired earlier should be reinvested as tools to comprehend the text. Roegiers (2005) held that it is possible to integrate some language form activities to a competency test framework, but their percentage should not exceed 25 % of the content of the test.

## 6.2. Teaching Reading

Reading is similar to listening in that they are both receptive skills. Consequently, almost the same principles are used for both skills in teaching them through competency-based principles. If the aim of the teacher is for, example, to inculcate the competency of reading stories, the following steps could be followed to prepare a competency-based reading sequence.

- a) *Explicitly stating the learning objectives:* (like Table 1)
- b) *Activating background knowledge*
- c) *Presenting a model story*
- d) *Explaining the activities of the text*
- e) *Reading for gist*
- f) *Reading for details*
- g) *Interpretive reading*
- h) *Practice of new vocabulary words*
- i) *Practice of grammar forms such as the use of the past simple and occasionally past perfect*
- j) *Practice of pronunciation of some complex words or expressions*
- k) *Self-assessment:* See Table 2 for an example.
- l) *Integration situation:* Again, at this stage the students are invited to reinvest the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they acquired in the sequence to read an authentic story and exhibit their understanding of the message through answering questions of comprehension and identifying fine shades of meaning.

### 6.3. Teaching Speaking

Speaking is a productive skill. It could concern the production of an oral message or face-to-face interaction (SE1 Syllabus, 2005). In CBA framework, as outlined above, the teacher should prepare the learners in terms of language forms, skills, and attitudes to solve a real world speaking problem. The following steps could be employed to teach speaking under competency-based approach. The target task detailed in this section revolves round making a phone call.

- a) *Stating the learning targets explicitly*: Refer again to Table 1.
- b) *Activating background knowledge*: (e.g., do you have a cell phone/ what is your phone number/ what do you use it for?)
- c) *Presenting warm up activities to practice key words and expressions used for telephoning*
- d) *Presenting a model telephone conversation*
- e) *Asking questions of comprehension about the dialogue*
- f) *Practice of vocabulary used in the conversation* (e.g., distinguishing between formal and informal language)
- g) *Practicing language forms employed in making phone conversations*
- h) *Practicing pronunciation of new words related to telephoning*
- i) *Self-Assessment*: See Table 2 for a sample grid.
- j) *Integration situation*: Once the students have reasonably acquired the indispensable components of a competency, they are requested to invest the newly acquired knowledge in an integrative task. If the students have not mastered the necessary tools (knowledge skills and attitudes) that Boterf (1995) named “resources” (cited in Roegiers, 2004, p. 59), they are proposed remedial activities (Roegiers, 2010). However, for those students who have acquired the necessary tools of the competency, they are invited to do more complex activities or enrichment activities (Gusky, 2010).

A speaking integration situation could ask the students to write down a simulated dialogue between a job-seeker, the head of the recruitment, and the secretary of the recruiting company. Then, the students demonstrate through an oral performance their knowledge, skills, and attitudes in open class.

k) *Peer- assessment*: When the students are acting out the dialogue, other students could be asked to rate the performers through a peer-assessment grid like the following:

Evaluation criteria	0.5 point	1 point	2 points	3 points
E.g., The students opened the conversation correctly				
The students used appropriate formal/informal language				
<b>Total</b>				

Table 3. Peer-Assessment Speaking Grid (author's data)

#### 6.4. Teaching Writing

In what follows, we outline the necessary steps for teaching writing under competency-based approach. The topic employed for illustration is about writing a business letter. It goes without saying that writing and speaking are productive skills and share almost the same procedures of teaching.

a) *Stating the leaning objectives, as illustrated in Table 1.*

a) *Brainstorming*: The teacher introduces the topic of letter asking such question as “have you written letters to friends?”, “have you written letters to administrations?”, “in what ways are letters different from other writing types like storytelling?”, “ what do we include in writing letters?”.

b) *Preliminary activities*: (e.g., distinguishing between formal and informal language of letters/ reordering the structure of a jumbled letter).

c) *A model letter*: The teacher introduces a model letter to be read to answer questions of comprehension.

- d) *Questions of consciousness raising activities about the layout of the letter*
- e) *Highlighting the jargon and language forms used in letters and practicing their use*
- f) Self-assessment: See Table 2.
- g) *Remedial work and enrichment activities*: The teacher goes through the students' self-assessment grids and decides what language skills need further work and, then designs appropriate activities to remedy to the students' lacks (Roegiers, 2010). More able students who perform well in this assessment are given more complex activities to perfect their mastery of the elements of the competency.
- h) *Integration situation*: After this ground work and the acquisition of enabling skills (Nunan, 2004), the teacher proposes for the students to write a letter of enquiry, giving them some materials such as adds from newspapers. Consequently, the students have to react appropriately to the ad and write the letter in accordance to the requirements of this advertisement.

If the integration situation is not used for certification (Roegiers, 2010), the teacher can apply process writing as follows.

- a. Brainstorming the topic and jotting down ideas
- b. Forming cooperative groups
- c. Writing the first draft
- d. Exchanging drafts among the different groups
- e. Writing a feedback letter to the group being corrected.
- f. The students correct their letters in accordance to the feedback provided by their mates
- g. The students write the final draft and edit it for the language mistakes
- h. The spokesperson of the group reads the letter aloud and a group of students could use the peer-assessment grid, as in Table 3.

## **7. Conclusion**

This paper has addressed the practical part of CBLT. It has illustrated the teaching of language skills following the principles of competency system. It has given an illustration for each language skill (i.e., listening, reading, speaking, and writing). This concrete elucidation has been motivated by the fact that CBLT is a teaching approach that does not define explicitly the teaching procedures. According to Richards (2006), CBA almost does not care about the methodology being used as long as the outcomes (i.e., final objectives) are achieved. Indeed, all competency-driven approaches are focused on the outcome of learning rather than the process.

Consequently, this study has attempted to apply the broad principles of CBA to the teaching of the language skills. Essentially, CBA recommends first the teaching of resources (i.e. knowledge, skills and attitudes of a competency) separately until they are appropriately mastered and assessed. Then, a performance-based task is proposed for the students to demonstrate their capacity to integrate the composites of a competency. Usually, these final global tasks, also called integration situations, (Roegiers, 2003) are real world and problem -solving tasks that require working on higher order educational skill like reasoning, synthesizing, and creativity.

In the teaching of language skills, it is then fundamental to embed them in real life skills. This is because CBA seeks to teach people to be competent citizens and it is not interested in teaching abstract knowledge or the good-to-know (Roegiers, 2010). Knowledge and skills are used as tools to achieve a real life competency. As can be noted in the illustrative examples provided in this study, the four language skills are embedded in real life tasks such writing a letter, making a phone call, reading stories, or locating a given entity in a town.

As concerns the teaching framework, it is based on first teaching the language and skills required by the competency and assessing their achievements, then integrating them concretely in a final global task. Different types of assessments are used including letters, self-assessment, peer-assessment, and demonstrations. The assessment of the resources (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) is carried out during the learning process, but not for summative and certification purposes (Roegiers, 2010).

Finally, this article suggests for teachers to practically attempt to design competency-based sequences following the guidelines outlined above. Competency-based teachers start with the analysis of a real world task to identify its components in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Next, teaching experiences are devised to teach these composites one after the other until they are realistically mastered. Finally, they devise an integration situation in which all these newly-learned composites are integrated harmoniously to solve a real life task. Moreover, this study recommends for teaching supervisors to encourage teachers to design integration situations in workshops because these situations are, according to Roegiers (2010), the cornerstone of competency-based syllabuses: there is not competency teaching without integration situations.

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