

EFL Teachers' Problems in Implementing the Competency-Based Approach in Teaching Writing "The case of EFL Secondary School Teachers in Biskra"

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Résumé:

In spite of the implementation of the competency-based approach in teaching in the Algerian school, middle and secondary school teachers find it difficult to teach according to this approach. This article aimed to investigate and analyze the main problems encountered by EFL secondary school teachers in teaching writing. What are the main problems encountered by them? To answer this question, we hypothesized that their main difficulties involve lack of theoretical background on the competency-based approach in addition to lack of in-service training. To test this hypothesis, a questionnaire was administered to ten secondary teachers in Biskra. This tool was supplemented by a semi-structured interview with three participants. The results of this research reveal that most of the participants rely on traditional methods mainly because they lack theoretical backgrounds concerning the competency-based approach and training in teaching writing and the other skills under this approach, which requires a new conceptualization in teaching. As a pedagogical application, we suggest the process- genre approach to be used in order to develop students' writing.

المخلص:

على الرغم من تنفيذ مناهج التدريس بالكفاءات في المدرسة الجزائرية، لا يزال معلمي المدارس المتوسطة والثانوية يجدون صعوبة في التعليم وفقا لهذا المنهاج. تهدف هذه المقالة إلى كشف وتحليل المشاكل الرئيسية التي تواجه استاذة اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية في المرحلة الثانوية في تدريس مهارة الكتابة. ما هي المشاكل الرئيسية التي يواجهونها؟ للإجابة على هذا السؤال، افترضنا أن الصعوبات الرئيسية التي يواجهونها تشمل عدم وجود الخلفية النظرية عن المقاربة على بالكفاءات، بالإضافة إلى نقص التدريب أثناء الخدمة. لاختبار هذه الفرضية، تم توزيع استبيان لعشرة استاذة في المرحلة الثانوية في بسكرة. واستكملت هذه الأداة عن طريق مقابلة شبه منظمة مع ثلاثة افراد من العينة. بينت نتائج هذا البحث أن اغلب الاستاذة مازالوا يعتمدون على المناهج التقليدية وذلك لعدم وجود الخلفية العلمية والمعرفية بشأن هذا المنهاج وانعدام التدريب في تعليم الكتابة والمهارات الأخرى في إطار هذا المنهاج، الذي يتطلب تصور جديد في التدريس. كحل تربوي وبيداغوجي، نقترح مقاربة process- genre approach (عملية الكتابة مع التحكم في النوع الادبي) التي يمكن استخدامها من أجل تطوير الكتابة لدى الطلاب.

Introduction

The role of English as the language of international trade, the global informational technology and the imminent path of globalization are factors which cannot be ignored if Algeria hopes to become a highly competitive player. Therefore, as there is a clear need for future generations to master the language, the Competency-Based Approach, a socio-constructivist and cognitive design, has been set with the purpose to install competencies in the learner. This new vision concern not only English, but education in general, and was the result of the influence of socio-constructivism and new life demands. It is why a number of countries, including Algeria, have adopted the Competency-Based Approach. In this perspective, teaching and training are considered as instruments for the development of autonomous individuals able to face challenges and to adopt critical positions in order to adapt to new situations, believing that the accent on the development of competent individuals necessitates a new conceptualization of teaching. For more precision, this approach has been implemented in both middle and secondary education to enable learners to reach an acceptable level of performance which allows them to communicate in a written or oral form whenever it is needed, especially in the era of globalization and job requirements.

Writing plays a vital role not only in conveying information, but also in transforming information to create new knowledge in such a demanding life. It is thus of central importance for students in academic, second and foreign settings. It is also a complicated cognitive task because it is an activity that demands careful thought,

discipline and concentration. It thus appears to be a challenging task for EFL learners including the Algerians, who still find difficulties in producing an adequate piece of writing in spite of the implementation of the Competency-Based Approach based on the development of competencies among which writing is an important one (Chelli, 2011).

Although the teaching of writing has undergone major changes and in spite of the change undergone in middle and secondary education in the last two decades, the implementation of the Competency-Based Approach and the teaching of writing remains traditional. It is predominantly form-focused due to the fact that writing teachers who grew up learning to write in traditional product-oriented classes would bring into their own writing classes the same preconceptions that have been forged through their own learning experiences. Another reason is that EFL teachers, in particular, view themselves as language teachers rather than writing teachers. Therefore, their students' compositions are seen as products to be judged solely for the assignment of grades. In addition, heavy emphasis is put on examination as the only yardstick for measuring academic achievement in the Algerian educational system.

The writing skill continues to be neglected due to many factors among which we can mention teachers' problems in teaching writing under this new implemented approach. This research intends to investigate and analyze the main problems encountered by EFL secondary school teachers in teaching writing. We hypothesize that their main difficulties involve the lack of theoretical background on the competency-based approach, the available writing approaches and

in-service training which are essential in developing and refreshing teachers' knowledge in the field.

1. The Competency-Based Approach

Educational reform in many parts of the world is expressed in terms of competencies to develop in learners. Competencies are attained after various activities to reach excellence in doing specific skills enabling young people to adapt to the changing world. One of the approaches that seen as appropriate to the educational content is the Competency-Based Approach - an outcome based approach- which focuses on measurable and useable skills and abilities. It claims that learners should mobilize their values, knowledge, attitudes and behaviour in a personal way to address the challenges successfully.

This alternative approach applied in the Algerian educational system is expected to allow learners to attain a level that makes them rely on themselves and compete with other people around the world either in the field of work or in other situations. However, we should note that on the one hand that it is considered by many advocates as the panacea for all the ills of education and training, and the solution to various problems faced by education for many decades. On the other hand many antagonists have denounced the approach as overly product-oriented, narrowly mechanic and too fragmenting. Thus, what is required is more reflection and discussion about its efficacy and appropriateness, contexts and issues, planning and implementation.

2. Writing Approaches

Writing plays a vital role not only in conveying information but also in transforming information to create new knowledge in such a demanding life (Weigle, 2002: 2). It is thus of central importance for students in academic, second and foreign language learning. Therefore, selecting the most appropriate approach to teach this skill is something primordial. The evolution of the approaches to writing started from classical to current ones; in other words, from the product approach to the process approach then to the genre approach which is the most recent one.

Writing in the product approach is viewed as a simple linear model of the writing process which proceeds systematically from pre-writing to composing and correcting (Tribble, 1996). Besides, instructors and learners believe that the planning stage in text-based approaches begins and finishes in the primary period of composition. In spite of the acceptance of this approach, it has been criticized because it gives little attention to the audience and the writing purpose and overemphasis is given to grammar, syntax and mechanics, in addition to the lack of motivation on the part of learners.

The introduction of the process approach has motivated by dissatisfaction with the product approach and the current-traditional approach (Kroll, 2001:15). This approach places more emphasis on the stages of the writing process than on the final product. According to Zamel (1983:147), "writing is a process through which students can explore their thoughts. Early studies were strongly influenced by cognitive psychology and particularly by ideas of Bruner, Piaget and Vygotsky who assert that one way of understanding and observable

behaviour such as writing, one must understand the mental structures that influence writing correlates with human linguistic and intellectual development. English language learners need to move through the writing process as it is done by proficient writers who gather ideas from resources, then organize them. They ask what others think and revise making changes to clarify their meaning. After that, they edit for capitalization, punctuation, grammar and spelling. Finally, they publish their work. However, the process approach was criticized as been unable to provide solutions to all the issues involved in learning to write. In addition, viewing writing as a social and cultural practice implies that writing is not simply a matter of manipulating some cognitive practice such as prewriting, drafting, revising and editing but above all a means of connecting people with each other in ways that carry particular meaning (Hyland, 2003:27).

The genre approach has been advanced as a solution due to the fact that more attention was paid to the nature of writing in various situations. This approach focuses on models and key features of texts written for a particular purpose. By setting out stages, or moves of valued genres, teachers can provide students with explicit grammar of linguistic choices, both within and beyond students, to produce texts that seem well-formed and appropriate to readers (Martin, 1992; in Hyland, 2004: 19). This means that this approach is interested in form and function of the written productions. To apply this approach, the stages followed are: joint destruction, joint construction and individual construction. All these approaches have been criticized and no single approach fits all kinds of learners, it is why there is a tendency in the

post-method area to combine more than one approach seeking better results in language learning and writing. Hyland (*ibid:xi*) asserts that writers need realistic strategies for drafting

And revising but they also must have a clear understanding of genre to structure their writing experiences according to the demands and constraints of particular contexts. So, this calls for the combination of the process and genre approach for more effective teaching of writing.

3. Method

3.1.Participants

The participants used in this research study consisted of ten secondary school teachers (n= 10) randomly selected from Biskra schools to answer the questionnaire. Among these participants, three from Driss Omar School were used in the semi-structured interview. All of the participants have an experience of more than fifteen years, which means that they worked using the communicative approach and recently the competency-based approach. This can allow us as researchers to get insights of the real problems facing EFL secondary teachers in teaching writing.

3.2.Research Method and Data Gathering Tools

The research method used in this research can be considered as both quantitative and qualitative in that the first research tool used to gather data was a structured questionnaire supplemented by a semi-structured interview. The former was expected to provide data that can be quantified whereas the latter is viewed as purely qualitative. The use of triangulation serves the purpose of validating the results. It is

seen as a valid technique to check the consistency of the gathered data (Brymon, 2004; Cohen *et. al.*, 2007).

3.3.Procedure

The questionnaire was administered via the internet in order to gain time and effort. All the participants sent it back in a week's time. Just after it, the interview was conducted with the three participants, chosen for convenience because they live in the same place as the researchers. On the one hand, the data gathered from the first tool were coded and then quantified, using the mean and standard deviation for each of the items included in it, and then interpreted. On the other hand, those collected from the interview were discussed as shown below.

4. Research Questions

The present study was an attempt at answering a set of questions related to teachers' problems in teaching writing under the Competency-Based Approach. The objectives of the investigation were guided by the following research questions:

1. What are secondary teachers' problems in teaching under the Competency-Based Approach?
2. What are secondary teachers' problems in teaching writing under the Competency-Based Approach?
3. Do they really teach writing in this level?
4. Are their problems due to lack of theoretical background on the competency-based approach?

5. Are they due lack of theoretical background on writing approaches?

6. Or are they due to other factors?

5. Hypothesis

We hypothesized that secondary teachers' main difficulties in teaching writing involve lack of theoretical background on the competency-based approach in addition to lack of in-service training.

6. Analysis and Interpretations of the Results

The results of both the questionnaire and the interview reveal that the main problems mentioned by most of the participants include lack of in-service training according to the competency-based approach. When asked specific questions about the principles of such an approach, their answers show that their theoretical background concerning this approach is not sufficient to enable them to put it in practice. So, if teachers lack knowledge about a certain approach or method, how can they apply it and succeed to make their teaching effective. This requires a great deal of commitment from both teachers and trainers. The former need to develop awareness about the seriousness of the situation which means to reflect about their teaching. This cannot be achieved without the development of the teachers' scientific level in the field. The more the teachers are trained and supplied with necessary knowledge as well as practice in teaching the different skills, the more they will be effective in teaching because theory teaches practice. On the other hand, the latter also need to be trained in order to be able to train teachers. If they are not well trained and aware of the principles of the competency-based approach and

how it is being applied and adapted in the other countries how these can be achieved in the Algerian context?

In addition to the teachers' lack of theoretical background and training according to the competency-based approach, they do not really teach writing as the activities found in the course books are usually given as homework and rarely done in the classroom to be judged for the final product in terms of content and mainly accuracy. Most of the participants complain about lack of time which does not allow them to complete the programme and the big number of students in the same class, which does not facilitate teaching in general. This shows that they rely on following what they are provided with in the course books and preparing the students for the baccalaureate exam rather than trying to make the students develop their competencies in the language. When asked about the writing approach that can suit the competency-based approach, none of the participants (teachers) was aware of the existing writing approaches. Thus, how this skill be taught and developed?

Conclusion and Implications

This study has provided us with insights into secondary teachers' problems in teaching writing under the competency-based approach. This has been done for the purpose of identifying an important area which needs to be widely investigated because many learners come to the university with a low level in writing. This also intends to stress the need that writing needs to be taught starting from the middle and secondary school to enable learners develop their writing competence required to reach academic success. This cannot be achieved without the improvement of middle and secondary teachers' scientific level in the field in terms of theory and practice. After a deep examination of the evolution of the writing approaches, we came to the conclusion that that the process genre approach is the one which complies with the principles of the competency-based approach because on the one hand this approach is cognitive, problem solving and social constructivist in that it encourages students to construct new knowledge through social interaction. On the other hand, the process genre approach, a combination of two approaches encourages them to improve their cognitive skills as they are involved in such higher skills as analysis, synthesis and evaluation of their pieces of writing, or those of their peers in the process of writing. These skills are necessary for problem solving and decision making. In addition to communication with the teacher and their peers, students deepen their knowledge and understanding of the different genres needed in everyday life. All of this will help them evolve as independent writers able to express themselves formally and informally and situate their position in the global world.

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