New Prospects
in the Light of the Competency-Based Approach

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Abstract

The new educational reforms launched by Algeria's policy-makers in collaboration with the UNESCO education experts aim at achieving a modern and efficient educational system. And the choice of a competency–based model is said to enhance the learners' performance and prepare them to cope with the job-related issues.   The ingredients to materialize these reforms could be seen in these areas: an innovative teaching methodology, a new syllabus specification and the publication of new instructional manuals… However, the effectiveness of any pedagogical approach is very often closely tied up to the textbook implementation. As teachers in a Teacher Training School, we have the responsibility to evaluate how efficient these teaching materials are, and how well fitted they are to the theoretical paradigm. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to assess the quality of a course book (*New Prospects* S.E. 3rd year), bringing out its merits and demerits in the light of the CBA principles.

ملخص

تهدف الإصلاحات التعليمية الجديدة في الجزائر، بالتعاون مع خبراء التعليم في اليونسكو، إلى تحقيق نظام عصري وفعال باختيار نموذج قائم على الكفاءة لتعزيز أداء المتعلمين وإعدادهم للتعامل مع القضايا الهامة المتعلقة بعالم الشغل. وتتمثل المكونات الجديدة لتجسيد هذه الإصلاحات في المجالات التالية: منهجية تدريس جديدة متجددة، ومواصفات جديدة للمنهج، واعتماد كتب تعليمية جديدة... ومع ذلك، فإن فعالية أي منهج تربوي كثيرا ما ترتبط ارتباطا وثيقا بمتابعة تنفيذ المناهج وطريقة استعمال الكتب المدرسية. وبصفتنا مدرسين في المدرسة العليا الأساتذة، لدينا مسؤولية كبيرة لتقييم نجاعة هذه المواد التعليمية، وكيفية تركيبها بشكل جيد. فالغرض من هذه المداخلة، إذن، هو تقييم نوعية الكتاب المدرسي (آفاق جديدة، للسنة الثالثة ثانوي)، وإبراز مزاياه وعيوبه في ضوء مبادئ المقاربة بالكفاءات.

Background

In 2003, the Algerian Ministry of Education in collaboration with the UNESCO curriculum development specialists[1] launched an important educational reform. The drive for this reform was prompted by the inadequacy and inefficiency of the previous educational system ("l'enseignement fundamental") which proved unsuccessful to meet the country's new economic challenges. Every year, not less than 50% of the school learners leave the institution without any qualification, and more than 40% of the university degree holders find it impossible to get employment[2]. The global aim of this reform was therefore intended to enhance the quality of education and to prepare the young learners to cope with the modern world professional and technological exigencies. The pedagogical ingredients to materialize this reform could be seen in these areas:

- an innovative teaching approach
- a new syllabus specification
- The publication of new instructional manuals…

The choice of a competency- based model as a major approach in this reform could be regarded not only as a response to a domestic need but also as a result of an international movement that urged many countries to turn their educational policies towards pragmatic and practical learning. This new learning paradigm, which according to Voorhees (2001:5), constitute the foundations of "a learning revolution", has been developed as an alternative model to the long and costly traditional university format. The competency-based learning model is an educational learning shortcut that

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[1] PARE : le Programme d'Appui de l'UNESCO à La Reforme du système Educatif Algérien

[2] Results of a survey run in 2006 by le Centre national d'études et d'analyses pour la population et le développement (CENEAP),

focuses primarily on the skills needed for employment and the tasks encountered in real-life situations. This model, which has initially been developed for vocational or occupational purposes courses where English is the medium of communication, entails important changes when applied to the general ELT class. It not only shifts the learning focus, modifies the instructional content (syllabus, materials, & classroom activities), but it also changes the roles of both the learners and their teacher.

In the light of these changes, the purpose of this paper is to analyze a sample of the published material (*New Prospects*) in order to find out whether the textbook complies with the new theoretical paradigm, and also whether it is an appropriate response to the educational goals set by this reform.

1. Foundations for a Competency-based Approach

According to Richards *et al* (2001: 143), the competency-based approach (CBA) draws its philosophy from the social view of language and derives its language learning theories from the interactional, the functional as well as the communicative perspective.   CBA is based on the assumption that language learning is inextricably bound to the social context in which it is to be used. From this theoretical belief, a set of pedagogical principles can be derived:

- Language teaching should be determined in relation to the learners' needs and the situations in which they are going to operate.
- Learners should be taught **onl**y th*e* language and the skills that are relevant to the target situations.
- Language forms that are likely to be encountered in the targeted situations should be predicted, analyzed and split up into smaller units to be taught gradually.
- Syllabus design should take into account the learners' background knowledge and individual abilities
- Learning is an on-going process which is based on the learner's progress. The pedagogical work should go on till the targeted performance is achieved.
- The learning goals should be defined in terms of measurable descriptions.

The methodology advocated by the CBA is collaborative and interactive. Teachers are no longer viewed as knowledge dispensers. They are expected to help the learners acquire the language by engaging them in some form of active learning process. Learners, on the other hand, are expected to use their own strategies for learning. They work on problem-solving situations and task projects which are grounded in their real life experience. These situations often generate their decisions-making, stimulate their cognitive abilities and develop their autonomous and individual learning styles.

Moreover, teachers are encouraged to develop a cooperative pedagogy. They negotiate the learning content with their learners so as to

increase their interest and motivation. They are also urged to develop an interdisciplinary cooperation that sets free the boundaries that have long separated the language teaching from other disciplines.

Finally, teachers are expected to assess their learners' task performance rather than their knowledge. Evaluation takes into account the extent to which the learner has been able to perform a given task. In other words, assessment should be "criterion based" rather than "norm–referenced" (Docking *in* Richard *et al*, ibid). Assessment is neither concerned by how much the learner knows nor constrained by how long it takes to do it. CBA views assessment as regards the degree of difficulty of the task and the extent to which the learner has been able to develop his abilities. Assessment is somehow some remedial way for building up competencies by trial and error.

In sum, the CBA is a collection of "ideal" pedagogical principles which can only be made operational if embodied into effective teaching materials. Often the quality of these resources mirrors how successful an approach is and how well suited it is to the educational objectives and aims of the course. Along these lines, we analyze *New Prospects*.

2. *New Prospects*: An Example of the CBA Implementation.

Designed to develop the Algerian learner's competencies in the general English language class, *New Prospects* is the third volume of a three course book package intended for all third year students attending classes in all streams of secondary education. According to the authors, *New Prospects* is based on a Competency-based, a learner centered, and a project geared methodology. "Do the aims, content and methodology of *New Prospects* embody the principles underlying the CBA"? is the question we seek to answer in the following:

- **The Aims**

Although the specification of educational goals is an absolutely essential criterion in the design of any instructional material (Cunningsworth: 1995), *New Prospects* does not have a clearly stated aim. The course book, in our opinion, has failed to define what competencies the learners are intended to achieve and what standards they are expected to meet. The material has made no reference to the social roles the learners are being prepared for, the needs they are being catered for, and the social situations they will have to function in.

If we examine the material, we notice that the textbook offers the learners with a large spectrum of discoursal, functional, structural and lexical input .This range of linguistic display is said to help the learners produce the project work. It seems as if the project work is the achievable "goal" or the targeted "competency" as reads in this extract from book 2 in the package:

> Here we come to the project itself as an outcome of the constituents of language and of the skills acquired in each unit…They (learners) will have the opportunity to combine primary and social skills and thus display their individual achievements.(*Getting Through* p.vii)

This belief, in our opinion, runs counter to the CBA which considers the project work as an enabling task that helps learners develop a given competency. Perennoud (2002:12) views the project work as a working tool which is necessary for the development of competencies. In the quote below, he goes on to argue that problems solving-situations and projects are complex tasks that trigger the learners' abilities. In his own words, he states:

> Pour développer des compétences, il faut avant tout travailler par problèmes et par projets, donc proposer des taches complexes, des défis qui incitent les élèves à mobiliser leurs acquis…

And Nunan (2007:425) explained that "… competencies contain a task and a number of "how well statements" implying that tasks are real-world performances; whereas competencies are somehow an idealization of the performance. Following the same line of thought, Richards *et al*, 2001:144 have distinguished between competencies and task performance:

> Competencies are the essential skills, knowledge, attitudes & behaviours required for effective performance of a real-world task or activity. These activities may be related to any domain of life, though have typically related to linked to field of work and to social survival in a new environment

"Writing a charter of ethics", "Designing an educational prospectus", "Designing an astronomy booklet", or "writing a leaflet on how to cope with strong emotions"… cannot be equated with competencies. These are merely tasks which bear no relevance to any real-life or practical situation which our learners are likely to encounter. According to Nunan (1990:423), to be regarded as competencies (formal objective performance), course designers need to specify three elements: (a) a *performance* or *task* statement, (b) a *conditions* statement, and (c) a *standards* or *criterion* statement. Whereas (a) specifies what is to be performed, (b) determines the situation in which the task is performed and (c) defines the standards to be achieved. *New Prospects* determines neither the criteria nor the social context in which the project task is to be performed. The question that ought to be asked is: What profile and what settings is *New Prospects* preparing the learners for?

- **The Contents**

As pointed out earlier, in CBA, the language content is determined in relation to the social context from which the language forms to be taught are

derived. NewProspects does not seem to have derived its linguistic units from an analysis of any target situation, and the language dealt with doesn't appear to have undergone any contextual selection:

a) Although the authors claim that the coursebook has a topical format, the material covers a completely random assortment of general interest topics for which no criteria of selection are made visible. We believe that any syllabus should be based on a set of criteria, be it topical, functional or task-based. The requirements for specification are even more when we are concerned with a competency-based one.

b) A quick look at the language forms shows that the grammatical units dealt with focus on form than on use. They reproduce the prevailing features of the structural syllabus (the passive, conditionals, modals…), giving more concern to accuracy than to fluency. Also, these do not exhibit any features of the function they are to fulfill.

c) The vocabulary practice mainly consists of those common core word building techniques (affixes), which make no reference to particular settings but rather foster mechanical word formation habits.

This lack of focus on particular target situations as far as language choice is concerned, is also made apparent in the authors' selection of text types and focus on language skills:

Text types: The manual introduces the learner to various text types derived from different fields: business letters, research and experimental reports, charts, poems,.graphs etc. These are imported wholesale, without operating any choice or giving priority to a given type. But as none of these genres is reinforced on later stages, this makes the learning too `general, superficial and perfunctory.

Skills: In a competency based syllabus, the focus is put on the performance of tasks. This assumes that the different skills should not be looked at independently. Each serves, each completes the other. NP advocates this integrated methodology which is clearly shown in the research project work. Though the proportion of work on each skill seems to be equally distributed; reading, listening and speaking give support to the writing activity. For example, "say it in Writing" is an aural activity that makes learners write out of a listening task, but writing *per se* is essentially an outgrowth of reading tasks.

We note, however, that although, the course designers have tried to cover the four language skills, to deal extensively with sub-skills (as skimming, scanning, guessing…) they have omitted to initiate the learners to the reference and library skills. These are undoubtedly the most essential ones to the production of the project work. As a result of this deficiency, using bibliographies and using the internet sources have become a real source for copying and for plagiarism.

- **Methodology**

The value of communicative and interactive activities for the CBA has been advocated on several occasions . These are said to trigger greater motivation for learning, enhance the learning quality, develop autonomous learning, provide opportunities for expression etc. A CBA based material should stimulate learners to develop exchange among them and encourage them to make extensive use of pair and group work.

With regard to this, *New Prospects* makes use of a wide range of activity and exercise type: individual, pair and group work. The exercises vary from guided to free; from comprehension to production, from practice to use etc. We note, however that these activities are mostly of a passive and monotonous type, consisting of the traditional filling a blank, matching, transformation and conversion exercises... These activities hardly encourage what is known as "the negotiation of meaning" or promote "positive interdependence". The so-called pair activities consist of tasks that ask learners to work alone then compare or discuss their answers with other learners. None of the activities gives the learner a feeling of learning from others or building upon each other's work.

Moreover, these activities are rarely of problem-solving types that call for the learner's cognitive abilities, and creativity. These mainly tend to focus on the acquisition of language forms. Though intended to develop autonomous learning, the material does not encourage individual learning. The aids that make the learning independent are missing, and the learner's only recourse is the teacher. How can a learner be self-reliant if he doesn't have a key to answers, if he doesn't have any supplementary material, if he doesn't have any tapes, CDs etc?

Nevertheless, if the content is judged unrealistic and sometimes too much demanding for the learner, and if the activities are thought to be not very stimulating for creative and original feedback, NP offers an attractive organization. The instruction is based on the PPP sequencing (presentation, practice and production). The learners are getting started with some questions and visual aids (pictures, diagrams,) that help generate their schemata of content. Through a brief presentation, learners are made familiar with some strategies and techniques that they will have to practice immediately after listening to or reading the selection. Last, they are required to provide some oral or written production. The learning objectives open each section, informing both the learner and the teacher what the expected outcome is.

The overall design is considered good, but one striking weakness can be spotted: the textbook lacks a back cover quick reference that shows the educational goals and the methodological underpinnings. Also, the contents page is a series of repetitive and redundant sections indicating the page number without any reference to the content to be taught

Conclusion

New Prospects is an ordinary English Language textbook, which efficiency can still be verified. It offers an important range of language input, but it does not make the language teacher rave about the competency-based approach. Obviously, the textbook draws from many theories of language learning where the structural view mingles with the functional perspective and where the communicative approach mates with the task based one. In a word, the textbook is an "all in one" course that borrows its learning units from the different types of syllabuses.

The pedagogical aims need to be determined and the content requires refocus and unloading. Claiming that the book develops the learner's abilities and competencies to enable him to cope with real-life issues is a goal that we find beyond *New Prospects*' scope. But asserting that the textbook is a tentative response to the need of a home-made product is an aim that we believe fully achievable.

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