Competency-Based Instruction in Communicative Language Teaching

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Abstract: *Competency-based language teaching (CBLT) is an application of the principles of competency-based education. It concerns accountability, management and quantification. CBLT focuses on the competencies and outputs. If teaching competencies becomes an end in itself, stakeholders become the object rather than the subjects of the educational process. On the other hand, if competencies are seen as tools to enable learners to act for change in their lives, critical thinking will be promoted. After a brief history, this article introduces competency-based language teaching. Then it will be followed by how it will be evaluated. Finally the pros and cons of this kind of instruction are elaborated in details.*

Keywords: *Competency-based curriculum, output, input.*

Competency-Based Language Teaching is an application of the principles of Competency-Based Education. Unlike the other language teaching approaches and methods that focus on the (language) learning input, this approach focuses on the outcomes or outputs of learning. It begins with what the learners are expected to do with the language – language competencies.

Competency-Based Education begins with a description of the essential skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors required for effective performance of real-world task or activities. This, then, advocates the formulation of educational goals in terms of precise measureable descriptions of knowledge, skills, and behaviors that students should posses at the end of a program or course study. It is based on the assumption that the quality of teaching and students' learning will be enhanced by the clear specification of expected outcomes and the continuous feedback that the competency-based assessment can offer. Most recent realization of the competency perspective is found in the "standards" movement, which has dominated education discussions since the 1990s.

In terms of language perspective, Competency-Based Language teaching is based on functional and interactional perspectives. It seeks to teach language in relation to social contexts in which it is used. Language always occurs as medium of interaction and communication among people for the achievement of specific goals and purposes, such as specialist or professional abilities. Competency-Based Language Teaching is also built around the notion of communicative competence, like Communicative Language Teaching, and seeks to develop functional communication skills. Thus, this approach shares the features of Communicative Language Teaching.

There are eight key features that characterize the implementation of Competency-Based Language Teaching, as follows.

A focus on successful functioning in society. The goal is to enable students to become autonomous individuals capable of coping with the demands of the world.

A focus on life skills. The students are taught just those language abilities required by the situation or context in which they will function.

Task or performance–centered orientation. The goal of teaching is what the students can do as a result of instruction.

Modularized instruction. Objectives are broken into narrowly focused sub-objectives so that both teacher and students can get a clear sense of progress and achievement.

Outcomes that are made explicit a priori. Outcomes are obvious for both teacher and students and specified in terms of behavioral objectives so that students know exactly what expected behaviors are required.

Continuous and ongoing assessment. Learning achievements is assessed based on test results that are objectively quantifiable.

Demonstrated mastery of performance objectives. Rather than the traditional paper-and-pencil test, assessment is based on the ability to demonstrate pre-specified and predetermined behaviors.

Individualized, student-centered instruction. In content, level, and pace, objectives are defined in terms of individual need. Instruction is not time-based. Students progress at their own rates and concentrate on abilities for which they lack competence.

Competency-based education can be traced back to the philosophy of experimentalism and to the work of John Dewey in the early 1900's. Its antecedents include vocational education and progressive education (Flowers 1990; Stoffle & Pryor 1980). Nunan (2007) reviews ESL instruction over the last twenty years and states that standard-based approaches to instructional design developed within a behavioral paradigm. These approaches include the objective movement, competency-based education and the standards movement. In the objectives movement, objectives were defined in terms of performance by which output were emphasized rather than input. Behavioral or performance objectives describe what the learner rather than the teacher is to do. They also specify observable learner behavior. According to Nunan (1988) performance objectives include three elements. First, there is a performance component which states what the learner is to be able to do. Second, a condition component specifies the circumstances and conditions under which learners are to perform the task. The third element is a standards component which indicates how well the task is to be performed.

In the 1970s objectives-driven curricula were criticized. Critics assert that the important outcomes of education were under-emphasized. Furthermore, they believe specification of objectives a priori prevents teachers from taking advantages of opportunities occurring unexpectedly in the classroom. In addition, it was argued that outcomes rather than behavior change are important in education. Another problem was that there were hundreds of details to be taken into account in curriculum development.

Those who support standards believe that they can provide guidelines for practice. Furthermore, they can assist governments to monitor educational systems by assessment. Supporters believe that standards can provide information about relative progress by comparing individuals, schools and systems (McKay, 2007). Providing diagnostic feedback on learners' progress is another advantage of CBLT (Nunan, 2007).

Taking disadvantages of CBLT into account, Auerbach (1986) points that critics of CBLT argue

this approach carries hidden assumptions about reality and social order. It is value governed in that it imposes its own norms. Therefore, it is determinist prescribing social roles for students and reinforcing the power structure. In addition, teaching overt behaviors seems mechanical, inhibiting critical thinking. CBLT is also considered within reductinist approach by its critics. That is, the sum of the discrete objectives does not equal the essence of the complexity of the whole language. CBLT advocates bottom-up processing which make students not to see the forest for the trees. CBLT emphasizesobservable outcomes. However, much learning can not be observed. Only focusing on results obscures the complexity and dynamism of language and teaching process, therefore, creativity and innovation may be suppressed. The nature of language is creative and unpredictable. It does not include successive acquisition of discrete forms.

Another critique is that although CBLT claims to be student-centered, it takes control of learning out of students hands by extensive information gathering process prior to instruction as well as prespecifying standardized competency lists. For CBLT to be learner centered, needs have to be identified collaboratively as a result of trust and experience rather than as a precondition for instruction. Corder (1967, as cited in Aurebach, 1986) believes that only through classroom interaction a learner-based syllabus can be determined. Taking cultural differences into account, CBLT begins with only one presupposed culture. Sullivan (1995) adds that unless training and follow up assistance is provided for the teachers, there is a tendency to slip back into the role of the traditional teacher. Tollefson (1986) argues that there are no valid procedures to develop competencies for most programs. On the other hand, many of the areas are impossible to operationalized. Richards and Rodgers (2001) add that CBLT is seen as prescriptivist in that it "focuses on behavior and performance rather than on the development of thinking skills" (p. 148). They mention that CBLT reflects a banking model of education in which the function of education is to transmit knowledge or skill according to the values of the dominant socioeconomic group.

McKay (2007) state that critics of standards believe that they are both administrative and political. Moreover, since standards underpin individualism and competition, they are considered as intrusive by many teachers. Brindley (1998) suggests that tensions between purposes of policy-makers, administrators, and practitioners impact on the validity of standards.

As Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) necessitates active class participations, its implementation may then become more complicated especially when related to the learners' culture. The basic features of CBLT seem to be contradictory to the learners' dominant cultural values and beliefs of Javanese as reflected in the forms of total obedience, the unquestioning mind, the concept that the old know all, andthat the teachers can do no wrong (Dardjowidjojo, 2003). The implication of these views in classroom contexts is that the best students are alwaysobliged to their teacher's instructions, and that they must have no interest in challenging their teacher on the discussed topics.

In conjunction with class success, it is argued that any educational or instructional success may not solely be derived from the effectiveness of a particular teaching approach, well-designed curriculum, syllabus and teaching materials, but it is also affected by the efficacy of the students' learning strategies. Many other problems are textbooks, class size, assessment, language environment, teachers' qualifications, attitudes and motivation, school facilities, and students' mastery of the language. Due to the above barriers, this paper intends to explore and evaluate the extent to which CBLT is properly implemented in English classes in Indonesia. Two techniques of data collection are employed--classroom observation and interview. The first uses video camera recordings in that classroom interactions are video-taped and analyzed, and the second employs questions with representative samples of respondents—teachersand students under investigation. Five outstanding senior high schools in the metropolitan city of Jakarta became the target of this study so as to comprehensively depict a portrait of CBLT practice in class.

Teachers' lack of motivation is still another problem for class success. The reasons rest, to some extent, in the shortage of English teachers and, to some other extent, their insufficient income. As a result, teachers work in more than one school and thus consume their energy and leave little time to professionally prepare their teaching. CBLT by its nature demands active learning in its classroom practice. In order to enhance the dynamic learning, a big class has to be broken down into small ones, leading to a great number of new classrooms throughout the country. This will unquestionably be too costly for both state and private schools, and as such makes it impossible to realize. With regard to students' motivation, CBLT in classroom practice will encounter some obstacles on the part of the students. As English is compulsory at high schools, students are obliged to learn it. As a result, the majority do not find it useful as Indonesians live in an environment in which knowledge of English is not mandatory. This situation becomes morecomplex when related to the students' previous academic backgrounds. Consequently, class interactions and participations are largely dependent upon the levels of their prerequisite knowledge—the higher the level, the more lively the class will be.

As discussed before, the implementation of CBLT confronts in classroom practice is hindered by cultural barriers, for it requires students' active learning. For most dominant ethnic groups in Indonesia, silence, passiveness, and obedience mostly constitute a standard cultural norm in which they believe. Therefore, students are normally not encouraged to actively participate in classroom discussions. This makes it difficult for CBLT to be implemented in class as it may significantly mitigate, if not eliminate, the possibility of class interactions.

From the findings, it can be concluded that CBLT fails to be implemented in the five schools under study. There are many factors causing the failure. First, teachers are not well informed about the basic tenets of this instruction nor do they feel knowledgeable of the approach. Consequently, they cannot implement it in the class. Second, their mastery of English is still inappropriate. The majority of the teachers quite often still use Indonesian to communicate in the class.

Third, their class management and teaching preparations are inadequate. Most teachers restrict their preparations to textbooks only. As students come from different schools with different disciplines and academic trainings, their knowledge and mastery of English vary from individual to individual. As a result, the class success is greatly dependent upon the students' active roles in class discussions. Students' dominant cultural values and beliefs also significantly become educational barriers in the implementation of CBLT. Students remain passive in class and have no interest in challenging their teachers and in initiating a discussion as active class participations may contradict their cultural values.

Other major obvious aspects affecting the failure include a big class size and time allotment. Big classes will certainly be ineffective in teaching-learning interactions. When a lockstep teaching activity is conducted, the teacher cannot individually supervise the students. Time allocation is another problem English teachers face in class. At high schools, English is taught four or five times a week, each lasting for forty-five minutes. This limited time slot will certainly cause ineffective learning in that the class cannot finish doing the exercises within this time frame nor can they have sufficient time to elaborate the discussed topic. As a result, teachers cannot give their students ample opportunities to interact and to practice the language in class.

In sum, many aspects and variables definitely affect the class success. The linguistic and non-linguistic factors certainly contribute a great deal to the failure of the implementation of CBLT in Indonesia. However, there is no need for pessimism as this kind of failure, to a greater or lesser degree, is not exclusively Indonesian. Any country that teaches a foreign language to young learners may result in similar outcomes.

To sum up, CBE in general is a movement that focuses on the competencies or outputs. CBLT is an application of the principles of CBE to language teaching. It concerns accountability, management and quantification. In this approach, if teaching competencies "becomes an end in itself, students and teachers become the objects rather than the subjects of the educational process" (Auerbach, 1986, p. 425). On the other hand, if competencies are seen as tools to enable learners to act for change in their lives, critical thinking will be promoted.

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