The Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT)

The Competency Based Education (CBE) is an educational movement which emerged in the US in the 1970s. Its main focus in the development of instructional programs is the outcomes of learning. In other words, the CBE addresses what the learners are expected to achieve at the end of a course or program. Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 141) explain that the CBE "advocates defining educational goals in terms of precise measureable descriptions of the knowledge, skills, and behaviors students should possess at the end of a course of study". Learners, in this view, are expected to develop the ability to use what they have learned in real life situations. These abilities (or outcomes of learning) are referred to as competencies.

The Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) is the application of the principles of the CBE in language teaching. This approach to language learning and teaching is based on a "functional and interactional perspective on the nature of language" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 143). That is, language is taught taking into consideration the social context in which it is used and the communicative needs of the learners. In addition, the CBLT emphasizes the notion of competencies. These competencies which are the basis of the competency-based curriculum comprise "the essential skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors" learners need to develop in order to be able to use the target language in real-life situations (ibid., p. 144). The emphasis here changes from what learners know about language to what they can do with it. In this respect, Russell Docking (1994) states that:

CBLT by comparison is designed not around the notion of subject knowledge but around the notion of competency. The focus moves from what students know about language to what they can do with it. The focus on competencies or learning outcomes underpins the curriculum framework and syllabus specification, teaching strategies, assessment and reporting. (as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 144)

Elsa Auerbach (1986) identifies eight key features that characterize the competency-based curriculum:

1- *A focus on successful functioning in society:* The competency-based curriculum aims to enable learners to function properly in society and to fulfill the demands of the world.

2- *A focus on life skills:* Language is taught as a function of communication. And only language forms/skills which will be needed for a certain situation are taught.

3- *Task- or performance-centered orientation:* The emphasis is on what learners will be able to do with the language (overt behavior) as a result of instruction and not on knowledge about language and skills.

4- *Modularized instruction:* Language learning is broken down into small chunks. That is, objectives are narrowed into sub-objectives. This way, both teachers and learners can get a clear a sense of progress.

5- *Outcomes that are made explicit a priori:* Learning outcomes are known before the teaching learning process starts. They are specified in terms of 'behavioural objectives'. Consequently, learners know exactly what behaviours are expected of them.

6- *Continuous and ongoing assessment:* Assessments are done in a continuous and ongoing way. Learners are pre-tested to determine what skills they lack and post-tested after being instructed in that skill.

7- *Demonstrated mastery of performance objectives:* Assessment is based on the ability to demonstrate pre-specified behaviours rather than on the traditional paper-pencil tests.

8- *Individualized, student-centered instruction:* Learning is individualized and learner-centered. That is, objectives are defined in terms of individual needs. Also, learning is not time-based and learners have the freedom to move at their own pace. They can concentrate on the areas in which they lack competence (as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 146).

This approach has been used in many parts of the world, particularly in vocationally oriented language teaching programs. It was introduced in Algeria in 2003 as a result of the educational reforms in the primary, middle and secondary schools. In this respect, the Algerian Ministry of Education (2005, p. 81) claims that the CBA (Competency-Based Approach) aims to make a link between learning carried out at school and the context of use outside school. The Ministry explains that the new approach assigns new roles to both teachers and learners as shown in the tables (see pictures).

Definition of Competency

A competency is the ability to act using a range of skills and knowledge in various situations that may differ from those in which they were learned. An individual's

competency in a certain area develops over time. A competency is firmly linked to a context-of-use. In other words, students will be prepared to use English effectively in real-life situations by drawing on and manipulating what they have learned in school.

In the competency-based curriculum , language is viewed as a set of interacting competencies. Therefore, the ability to *use* language as a speaker, listener, reader and writer is critical in the goals of the curriculum. The program is therefore always centred on the students and the development of their capacities in order for them to acquire, in the most effective way possible, competency in English. Competencies are linked to their in-school and out of school needs. Students learn to speak, listen to, read, write and re-use what they have learned in new situations. These skills are taught in an integrated way, since in real-life that is how they are used.

By framing the aims of the curriculum in terms of competency, the focus is on what learners **can actively do** with the language rather than on a discrete list of items they are expected to remember.

Language competencies and supporting competencies

1- Language competencies: Language involves three basic competencies:

- Interactive competency
Interactive competency is the ability to use language orally to interact with others in order to create social relations, express needs, understand and address needs of others and to get things accomplished. Engaging in a discussion is an example of using one's interactive competency.

- Interpretive competency

Interpretive competency is the ability to understand written language through reading or spoken language through listening and to interpret it appropriately. Reading is the ability to understand and interpret written texts; listening is the ability to understand and interpret oral language. Reading and listening are thus addressed separately in the curriculum.

- Productive competency

Productive competency is the ability to produce coherent, appropriate and relevant messages in writing and speaking. It is also the ability to effectively express ideas and organize thoughts appropriately. Productive competency is more often associated with writing because writing involves producing texts such as letters or essays. Productive speaking competency is also the production of texts; it differs from interactive speaking competency in that it does not involve interaction with other speakers. Giving a lecture or a presentation are examples of using one's productive speaking competency.

2- Supporting competencies: In order to develop interactive, interpretive and productive competencies, language learners also need to develop supporting competencies:

- Linguistic competency

Linguistic competency includes the learning and mastery of grammar, pronunciation and the vocabulary needed in a given context.

- Language Strategies

Language strategies are ways that help students to acquire, remember, organize and use information on an ongoing basis. The language strategies are incorporated into the competencies, rather than listed separately.

Reminder:

Communicative competence

Communicative competence, a term coined by linguist Dell Hymes in 1972, refers to a learner's ability to use the language correctly and appropriately to accomplish communication goals. Communicative competence is made up of four competence areas:

1. **Linguistic competence**: it is the knowledge of the language code, i.e. its grammar and vocabulary, and also of the conventions of its written representation. The grammar component includes the knowledge of the sounds and their pronunciation (i.e. phonetics), the rules that govern sound interactions and patterns (i.e. phonology), the formation of words by means of e.g. inflection and derivation (i.e. morphology), the rules that govern the combination of words and phrases to structure sentences (i.e. syntax), and the way that meaning is conveyed through language (i.e. semantics).

2. **Sociolinguistic competence**: it is the knowledge of sociocultural rules of use, i.e. knowing how to use and respond to language appropriately. The appropriateness depends on the setting of the communication, the topic, and the relationships among the people communicating. Moreover, being appropriate depends on knowing what the taboos of the other culture are, what politeness indices are used in each case, how a specific attitude (authority, friendliness, courtesy, irony etc.) is expressed etc.

3. **Discourse competence**: it is the knowledge of how to produce and comprehend oral or written texts in the modes of speaking/writing and listening/reading respectively. It's knowing how to interpret the larger context and how to construct longer stretches of language so that the parts make up a coherent whole. Thus, discourse competence deals with organizing words, phrases and sentences in order to create conversations, speeches, poetry, email messages, newspaper articles etc.

4. **Strategic competence:** it is the ability to recognise and repair communication breakdowns and how to work around gaps in one's knowledge of the language. For instance, the speaker may not know a certain word, thus will plan to either paraphrase, or ask what that word is in the target language. During the conversation, background noise or other factors may hinder communication; thus the speaker must know how to keep the communication channel open. If the communication was unsuccessful due to external factors (such as interruptions), or due to the message being misunderstood, the speaker must know how to restore communication. These strategies may be requests for repetition, clarification, slower speech, or the usage of gestures, taking turns in conversation etc.