Competency-Based Language

Teaching in the English Classroom:

Challenges and Strategies

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Abstract

Over the years, education has evolved and it is constantly updating its teaching-learning system. That is why in the current context, there are internal and external demands to choose or adapt the curricular approach to competencies in institutions. There is evidence that a competency-based approach is being well-thought-out as a pedagogical model in our country by the fact that it fosters life competences for problem solving. However, the competency-based approach may shed a light of uncertainty on how to properly address it on challenging fields such as foreign language teaching. El Salvador displays a growing number of English language learners.

Due to that, it is important to clearly understand the concept of importance to properly define the competency-based approach, characteristics and classroom practice. In El Salvador, Universidad Don Bosco adopted the competency-based approach at the School of Languages which previously implemented Competence-based Language Teaching. After six years of competency-based approach to teaching at the School of languages, it becomes of utmost importance to carry out a study to analyze the experience the School of Languages with this approach.

Key words: competency. approach. strategies. teaching. language. abilities. characteristics, competency-based language teaching.

Resumen

A lo largo de los años, la educación ha evolucionado y se actualiza constantemente en su constantemente su sistema de enseñanza-aprendizaje. Por lo tanto, en el contexto actual, existen demandas internas y externas para elegir o adaptar el enfoque curricular a las competencias en las instituciones. El enfoque basado en competencias se incluye hoy en día en el modelo pedagógico en nuestro país porque involucra competencias para la vida con el fin de resolver problemas. Sin embargo, todavía hay algunas dudas sobre cómo trabajar por competencia y, a veces, podría ser un desafío hacerlo especialmente cuando se enseñan idiomas. En El Salvador, hay muchas personas que aprenden inglés y muchas personas que lo enseñan como idioma extranjero.

Debido a eso, es importante comprender claramente el concepto de cuál es el enfoque basado en competencias, cuáles son sus características y, finalmente, cómo ponerlo en práctica en un aula. En 2013, en El Salvador, la Universidad Don Bosco decidió adoptar este enfoque basado en competencias como parte de su método de enseñanza-aprendizaje en la Escuela de Idiomas. Después de casi 6 años de implementación, es de gran importancia realizar un estudio para analizar la experiencia de la Escuela de Idiomas con este enfoque.

Palabras clave: competencias. enfoque. estrategias. enseñanza. idioma. habilidades. características. competency-based language teaching.

The Competency-based Language Teaching

"You have not mastered a subject if you only possess skills and facts in isolation and can only produce them on demand in response to prompts. Mastery must be tested using authentic tasks and scenarios at the heart of "doing" the subject." (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Indeed, Wiggins and McTighe define the genuine mastery of a subject as the product of exercising your skills in meaningful and authentic scenarios that go far beyond reciting memorized data or doing well on a test. Being able to master a skill requires that the learner is exposed to an experience where developing competences is the main focus.

One of the most popular and accepted approaches in the language learning community is the Competency-based Language Teaching (CBLT) approach. This approach focuses on helping learners acquire the competencies they require to communicate effectively in real situations through the various uses of the language. (Madya, 2003). Even though this framework is widely popular among educators and institutions who teach English as a foreign language, there are several factors that can represent a challenge for educators while teaching under this approach.

Since the competency-based approach encompasses the characteristics teaching and learning currently requires, Universidad Don Bosco in El Salvador resolved to adopt it as part of its teaching-learning approach. The School of Languages of Universidad Don Bosco implemented CBLT in 2013. After almost 6 years, it becomes of utmost importance to carry out a study to explore the results of this implementation. It is necessary to determine the areas of success and opportunity of its practice. This research aims to explore the

challenges that educators of the School of Languages at Universidad Don Bosco have encountered in the classroom while teaching under the competency- based approach and most importantly, the strategies they use to overcome such challenges in order to create an effective CBLT experience in their courses.

Under the Competency-Based Language Teaching approach, the role of the teacher changes from one of being an information-giver to a designer of learning experiences. Both the quality and authenticity of such learning experiences are key for the effective implementation of the approach (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). However, it is common for educators to believe they are teaching under a CBLT approach when in reality they are still relying on traditionalist methods (Richards & Rogers, 2001). It is vital for educators to reflect on genuine and meaningful practices that foster real-life scenarios on students. Precisely, this research is important for professors and authorities of the School of Languages at Universidad Don Bosco as it delves into challenges and practices for overcoming puzzles.

1. What is CBLT?

Competency-Based Language Teaching is a teaching approach which focuses on what students are able to do with the language rather than what they know about it. In other words, CBLT is designed not around the notion of subject knowledge but around the notion of competency (Williamson, 2007). Indeed, the mastery of competencies is the key in the CBLT approach. When designing the curricula, instructors are required to think first of the set of competencies students are to acquire in each class that will be significant to operate in the real world.

In addition, Bogoya (2000) points out that CBLT involves performance, aptitude, flexibility, and variability. He points to CBLT as a concrete task in a meaningful context that provides a varied solution. Bogoya points out several components of the CBLT approach. Thus, Learners should be able to perform with aptitude and should have the capacity to adapt to different contexts by autonomously solving problems. If learners have acquired the competency, they will be able to function in the real world without the teacher's assistance. If learners can only operate in the safety of the classroom under controlled conditions, they have not acquired useful skills. Competencies consist of effective intervention in different areas of life through actions in which attitudinal, procedural and conceptual components are mobilized at the same time and in an interrelated manner (Zabala and Laia, 2007).

2. Characteristics of CBLT

CBLT has four key aspects that should be considered when working under this approach (Williamson, 2007). The first one is the performance, the second one is meaningful context, the third one is autonomous learning, and the fourth one is the problem-solving skills.

Performance is an action to accomplish a task. Students must be able to incorporate skills, thoughts, knowledge, and values in a comprehensive manner (Guerra et Berdugo, 2014. Therefore, a student that has already finished the B2 level must be able and understand main technical discussions of specialization. Also, a student must be able to interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Furthermore, a student at this level

must be able to produce clear, detailed texts on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options (University of Cambridge, 2011).

Moreover, in order for students to perform, teachers need to find out meaningful contexts that help students to execute those actions. It is essential for a teacher to provide context where students will use the vocabulary they are learning instead of just learning vocabulary by heart. For example, students can learn the vocabulary related to the school (places, objects, subjects, actions, etc.). In addition, learners can make a short school tour where students will talk about the places and the activities we can do there. This example illustrates a meaningful context since they spend a lot of time in the classroom and they can better relate to their environment.

Current teachers must create strategies that can help students develop their own learning. In other words, students are now part of their own learning. According to Crowl et al. (1997) an effective teacher searches strategy so as to perform tasks in real life. In addition, the Organization of American States (2006) mentions that teachers in the current world have changed from being an information-giver to a facilitator. It means that teachers are no longer just transmitting information; they are looking for activities related to the specific skills to fulfill competency requirements. Students, on the other hand, are invited to think critically or to point out reasons for learning certain topics.

Students need to be autonomous in their own learning process. It means that they need to be capable of making decisions, to do some tasks, and to be motivated to learn. It is necessary for teachers to create a supportive learning environment, to provide feedback to

students all the time, to challenge students with different tasks, and especially to be engaged in the process of learning (Burchell & Woolhouse, 2016).

Another characteristic is problem-solving skills. Philippe Perrenoud (2006) mentions that it is essentially linked to a social practice of certain complexity. That means that students must know how to handle situations in life, and how to put into practice what he/she is learning. One of the examples is to understand how to use the past tense in English. It is not only a matter of learning the verbs in the past and to say everything that you have done during the day but also to go beyond that specific task. It is sometimes necessary to talk about an event in that past that was important, for instance, if you have to testify about an accident, students will need to use the past tense to demonstrate what he/she learned in a real situation.

What are the Competencies for a B2 level English learner should have?

According to the Common European Framework of Reference, B2 level speakers understands the main points of clear standard inputs of daily life such as work, school, leisure activities familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. In addition, B2 level learners can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Learners can also produce simple connected text on topics, which are familiar, or of personal interest. Learners can also talk about experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

Methodology

This research aimed to assess the experience of the School of Languages working with the CBLT approach through the analysis of the challenges that educators of the School of Languages at Universidad Don Bosco have encountered in the classroom while teaching under CBLT. Also, the strategies they use to overcome such challenges in order to create an effective CBLT experience among B2 level courses B2 courses. This research included in service English facilitators and students from the B2 level of the School of Languages at Universidad Don Bosco. For this exploratory case of study observation of classes and surveys were carried out.

Results and Discussions

During the collection of the data, observations and surveys were used. First, there was an observation session per group. Three groups were observed from the Reading and Conversation classes. Second, both students and teachers in these classes answered a survey in which they described their experience with CBLT.

The purpose of implementing these instruments was to identify the areas of success and opportunity that teachers working with CBLT have encountered. The instruments assessed specific characteristics that are key to CBLT. These key elements are listed below. Each element is supported with studies of experts and it is compared to the findings of this research taken from the class observation and teachers' surveys:

Performance

Richards and Rodgers, (2001) defined "Task- or performance-centered orientation. The focus is on what the students can do with the language and certain behaviors instead of knowledge of the language" (p.146). Besides, Guerra and Berdugo (2014) add that students must be able to join skills, thoughts, knowledge etc. Furthermore, the study found that teachers encouraged learners for acquisition of new vocabulary by placing students as the center focus and thus maintaining teacher guidance in all the classes, teachers planned a class with a lot of activities that students were the focus subject because they were participating and performed all the time with the teacher's guidance.

In order to diagnose the presence of this element, three classes were observed and the following evidence was found that displayed that teachers promoted performance in the class:

Class 1: At the end of the class, the teacher asked students to write a paragraph using vocabulary log learned in class. This activity helped students to think about how to use the vocabulary learned during the class. It helped students to put into practice their knowledge and to know if they really got the meaning of the vocabulary.

Class 2: In this class the instructor directed students to provide statements based on El Salvador´s social context. The activity of giving an answer applying in El Salvador context helped students to analyze and think about how to use the language in context.

Class 3: In this class, the facilitator a series of questions those students that students would answer base on Salvadorian trivia knowledge. Learners participated actively and expressed meaningful communication about their surrounding environment.

Meaningful context

Tobón (Cited by Guerra and Berdugo, 2014, p120) considers that the context is ideal to develop the knowledge that is essential in competency training. It will be easier for students to remember the vocabulary if they apply it in a context that is meaningful for them. So that, according to the observation some examples of meaningful contexts for communication are as follows:

Class 1: At the end of the class, the teachers asked students to write a paragraph using the learned in class. Some of the students wrote an event or story that meant something for them. This is proof that the teacher promoted practice based on meaningful context for the students.

Class 2: In this class, the teacher gave a couple of questions and students should relate their answers with El Salvador context. Some students were answering the questions about the country's most famous festival in El Salvador. They talked about San Miguel's carnival, others about August's holyday. Those festivals meant special days for some of them. In this case, the teacher also used a strategy to promote meaningful context for students by allowing them to personalize the topic.

Class 3: In this class, the teacher presented a video of Father's Day and some students were very happy talking about how they celebrate that day. The same case happened when the teacher asked them about how they celebrate their birthdays. One of the students was very excited talking about the cake, the food etc. It was very interesting to see how he was using the language in a real-life context and it proves students were encouraged to use the language in a meaningful context for them.

Autonomy

Students need to be capable of making decisions to do some tasks by themselves. They should be part of their own learning process. However, the autonomy was hardly noticed in none of the three classes because the activities were guided by the teacher the whole time. Even though students looked up for meaning of words during the class (because the teacher sometimes asked them to do it) the activities were not promoting autonomy; students relied on mechanical responses which lacked genuine speech.

Problem-solving skills

Since students were studying scanning as a reading technique, teachers used exercises that were book-based. However, autonomy was not promoted to develop problem-solving skills. Instead, teachers could have asked them to use scanning or skimming in real-life situations to solve problems they may encounter in the real world. For example, they should be able to find out a telephone number quickly, words in a dictionary, a specific purpose. However, in none of the three classes observed, this technique was just applied in the reading and not in a real-life situation. As a result, students would not know when to put into practice in real life and they would associate the technique in a reading context.

Students' survey results

Students in the Reading and Conversation class were surveyed in order to get know their experience learning under CBLT. Students pointed out that the strategies that teacher's use more is: memorization of vocabulary lists, repetition, note-taking, listening to audiovisual materials, role-plays and class presentations.

Table 1.

Memorization of Vocabulary Lists
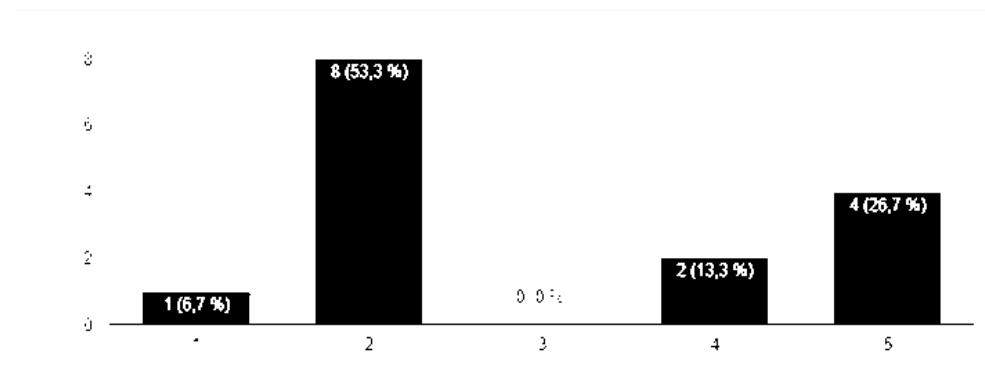
The graph shows that the 53.3% of students thought that memorization of vocabulary lists is very frequent in class. While the 26.7% of students agreed that it is not frequent. The use of memorization as a class strategy demonstrates that

When asked about the level of participation they had in class compared to their teachers students stated that they had more participation than their teachers.
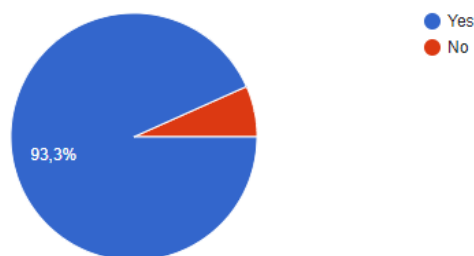
Table 2.

Level of participation
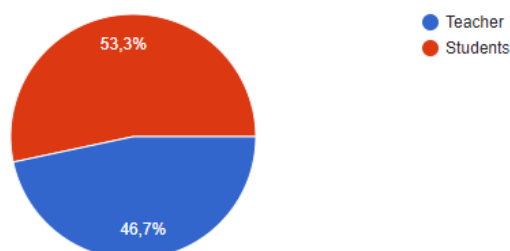
The pie chart shows that students participate more in class than the teacher. The percentages are slightly different.

Students were also asked if they considered the learning they had acquired during the class was meaningful for real-life contexts.

Table 3.

Language Useful in a Real-Life Situation.

This pie chart reflects that the 93.3% of students consider that what they are learning is useful for a real context.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the teachers who served as subjects of study in this research had understanding of the theoretical principles of CBLT. In the surveys, teachers were able to define CBLT as well as give concrete examples on how they implement it in class. This was also demonstrated during the observation that was carried out. In the observed classes, teachers promoted meaningful learning through real-life scenarios that prepare students for situations they may encounter in the real world.

However, it was also noticed that autonomy is hardly promoted by teachers in class. Students are constantly told what to do and have very little chances to be creative and autonomous with the language. In CBLT, autonomy is a key element that helps learners be independent users of the language. In the surveys, teachers stated that they have not received formal instruction on CBLT and this may be one of the reasons why they still struggle to perform activities that promote autonomy in class.

Finally, it is recommended that teachers receive formal instruction on CBLT. This will strengthen the areas they already master of CBLT and will help them reinforce those which still represent struggles for them. This will result in more confident teachers that will provide with a better learning environment for their students.

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