Elucidating the Place of the Standards Movement in the Algerian English Language Syllabuses

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توضيح مكانة حركة المعايير في مناهج اللغة الإنجليزية في الجزائر

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Abstract

The Algerian English language syllabus designers have adopted the standards of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for defining the leaning objectives of the 2002 School Reform. However, the prominence and popularity of competency-based approach has overshadowed in literature, the important place of the standards-based approach in the English language syllabuses. This study elucidates the nature of standards movement in education and gives synopses of its application in the Algerian English language syllabuses. Basically, this model of teaching is focused on the outcomes of learning and starts with a broad and functional statement of the language teaching targets, which is operationalized as specific learning objectives.

Keywords: Algerian syllabuses, Competency-based approach, Language skills, Standards Movement, Outcome-based education.

Résumé

Les concepteurs des programmes algériens de langue anglaise ont adopté les standards du Cadre Européen Commun de Référence (CECR) pour définir les objectifs de l'enseignement/apprentissage de la réforme scolaire de 2002. Cependant, l'importance et la popularité de l'approche par les compétences ont éclipsé dans la littérature, la place importante de l'approche par les standards dans les programmes de langue anglaise. Cette étude élucide la nature du mouvement par les standards en matière d'éducation et donne des résumés de son application dans les programmes de langue anglaise en Algérie. Principalement, ce modèle d'enseignement est axé sur l'aboutissement

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de l'apprentissage et commence par un énoncé général et fonctionnel des objectifs d'enseignement des langues, qui est opérationnalisé en tant qu'objectifs d'apprentissage spécifiques.

Mots-clés : Programmes algériens, Approche par compétences, Compétences linguistiques, Mouvement des standards, Education basé sur les résultats.

ملخص

تبنى مصممو مناهج التعليم للغة الإنجليزية في الجزائر معايير الإطار الأوروبي المرجعي الموحد (CEFR) لتحديد أهداف الإصلاح المدرسي لعام 2002. ومع ذلك، فإن بروز وشعبية منهج المقاربة بالكفاءات جعلها تطغى في الأدبيات على المنهج القائم على المعايير رغم تبني هذا الأخير في مناهج اللغة الإنجليزية. توضح هذه الدراسة طبيعة حركة المعايير في التعليم وتقدم ملخصات لتطبيقها في مناهج اللغة الإنجليزية في الجزائر. عموما، يركز نمط هذا التدريس على نتائج التعلم ويبدأ ببيان واسع لأهداف تدريس اللغة، والتي يتم تفعيلها كأهداف تعليمية محددة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مناهج التعليم الجزائرية، المقاربة بالكفاءات، مهارات اللغة، المنهج القائم على المعايير، المنهج القائم على النتائج .

1. Introduction

The competency-based approach (CBA) has been in constant evolvement since its appearance in the beginning of the 20th Century in a form of systems approach, that is, a teaching design that analyses real life tasks and teaches and assesses the sub-elements of the tasks separately one after the other (Refer to Taylor, 1911 and Bobbitt, 1918). After-being meshed with the Tyler's (1949) curriculum scientific management (i.e., division and teaching and learning objectives into specific objectives), it was espoused in the 1960s with the objective-based approach and used in the US in the 1970s to teach adult English second language learners survival skills (Auerbach, 1986). Later, in the 1990s, CBA again was adopted with the standards movement advocated by the Council of Europe and the United States.

CBA is an outcome-based approach, that is, it is interested in the product of learning, rather than the teaching/learning

process. Accordingly, it approaches teaching through an analysis of what the learner wants English for, then it turns the students' wants and needs into sub-objectives and teaches them one after the other. Once these specific objectives are mastered, they are tested holistically in a real-world task. The standards movement, likewise, is a teaching approach that sets up a series of standards to be achieved at the end of a course (outcome-based); next, these broad standards are sub-divided into specific objectives which are taught and assessed separately. Since the standards-based approach is focused on the outcomes of learning, it uses the procedures of competency-based system and it is labeled as a competency-based approach; and Nunan (2010) considered it as the latest realization of CBA or CBE (competency-based education).

The Algerian School Reform of 2002 has applied competency-based teaching to ensure a paradigm shift from the teaching of knowledge to the teaching of life skills. The competency-model applied, notably to the Algerian English Foreign Language (EFL) syllabuses and textbooks, is embedded in the European standards-based approach. The proficiency levels identified by the CEFR (2001-Common European Framework of Reference) have been applied to determine the learning objectives for each level and grade from the first-year of middle school to the third-year of secondary school. As a way of an example, the B1 and B2 levels (i.e., independent users of English) are used for the secondary EFL classes (AEF, 2009, p. 1). At this level of proficiency, with regard to reading, the learner is supposed to be able to interpret the main ideas of complex texts on both concrete and abstract topics.

Nevertheless, to the researcher's current knowledge, no study in the Algerian context has attempted to throw light on how this competency-model is employed in teaching and designing textbooks and syllabuses. Actually, this movement is little known even among the Algerian competency-based scholars. Many

studies have been devoted to the Algerian School Reform of 2002 (e.g., Benadla, 2013; Rezig, 2011) and many studies (e.g., Chelli, 2010; Bacher, 2013) have dealt with the use of CBA in the Algerian EFL classes and syllabuses, but none of them has elucidated this hidden dimension of the Algerian competency-based model.

This study aims to illustrate the concept of the standards-competency-based movement and explain how it is applied in the Algerian syllabuses and textbooks. Additionally, it will attempt to explain the origins and the theoretical framework of this latest competency-based teaching approach. Furthermore, it will endeavor to show how this approach to teaching has merged with CBA.

The study is considered significant as it attempts to familiarize both the Algerian teachers and scholars with the standards movement, which is nowadays considered a prominent competency-based model of teaching throughout the world. Hopefully, it will open a debate among academics and trigger evaluations of the application of this proficiency level approach to the teaching of EFL in the Algerian middle and secondary schools. It would be, for instance, worthwhile to consider the extent to which the European EFL proficiency standards are appropriate to the level of the Algerian students.

2. Standards movement

The standards movement has become the state-of the-art approach to language teaching. According to Nunan (2010), the standards movement "is the latest iteration of the behavioral approach to instructional design" and it "has close links with both the objectives movement and the competency movement" (p. 428). As seen in this quote, the standards movement is an updated realization of CBA that has evolved from objectives-based pedagogy. As an indication, in Richards and Rodgers (2014) book, *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*, the

authors extended the topic of CBA by including for the first time a section to explain this approach that has gained prominence since the 1990s. In the earlier versions of 1986 and 2001, the authors did not discuss this approach in relation to competency teaching. Although this model differs slightly from the competency system, the following authors consider it as a competency teaching paradigm: Nunan, 2007; Richards, 2010; Richards & Rodgers, 2014.

This new system of teaching bears resemblance to CBA and objective-based pedagogy in that it starts from the identification of the learning objectives (outcomes of learning), then the design of the language activities that tap at these initial objectives, and finally the assessment of the learning targets. This fact makes this teaching model an outcome-based form of education.

2.1. Definition of the standards-based approach

The standards movement can be defined as an outcome-based approach in education. It derives its teaching objectives from the pre-set standards or benchmarks, and the assessment of the learning of outcomes is done against these scales which are turned into assessable items. With regards to the methods of teaching, this teaching paradigm does not specify any given method; however, the methods of teaching should guarantee the achievement of the learning targets.

Standards are broad in nature; they need to be broken down into specific objectives which are amenable to teaching and defining learning tasks and experiences. Here is an example of standards for teaching English: "Students adjust their use of spoken, written and visual language to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes" (Nunan, 2007, p. 428). As seen in this example, a standard is vague and the syllabus designer has to identify concretely what adjusting spoken, written, and visual language to various audiences entails. This could involve writing formal and informal letters, interacting

in writing with friends and institutions, making formal and informal phone calls, interacting orally in a friendly and official manner, and using appropriate verbal language for official speeches and presentations.

2.2. Two types of standards movements

There are two standards movements' versions that had evolved in parallel throughout the world in the 1990s, one is the American and the other is the European. Each of these factions has a distinct background, but they have a common characteristic, which is their competency-based orientation. In what follows, the background of each model is provided.

2.2.1. Standards movement in the United States

The standards movement appeared in the United States with the issuing of the Nation at Risk report in 1983. The National Commission on Excellence in Education reported in this document that the United States was lagging behind in terms of educational achievements compared to many other countries. According to Bell (1983), the report focused on the mediocrity in the students' achievements, especially in languages and mathematics; consequently, it insisted on the necessity of setting up standards of achievements as a reference point of success to upgrade the learning level.

As a direct consequence of the gloomy report of the Nation at Risk, six achievement standards were established and interpreted into learning objectives by the United States educational authorities. These principles are as follows:

1. All children in America will start school ready to learn.

2. The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.

3. American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter, including English, mathematics, science,

history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.

4. U.S. students will be the first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.

5. Every adult American will be literate and will possess knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

6. Every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning. (Harnischfeger, 1995, p. 109)

The above cited objectives were modified in The Goals 2000: Educate America Act (Harnischfeger, 1995).

Based on the six standards, employed as a benchmark of the educational objectives, each State was instructed to craft its own objectives in accordance to its means of education and delivery procedures. Consequently, educational authorities and academics started working on interpreting the standards into learning objectives and teaching materials.

The second stage in the development of the standards movement in the United States is linked to George Walker Bush act of 2001, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This act constrains learners and teachers, with no exception, to achieve better results. It included the following principles.

Accountability for results

Increased flexibility and local control

Expanded options for parents

Emphasis on teaching methods that have proven to work (Bush, 2001, p. 2)

As can be noted, these measures focus on the outcomes of learning and optimal ways to achieve them successfully. What matters are the results and, for example, the students can adhere to any instructional pathway as long as they manage to display competency in accordance to the national standards. In other words, students are free to attend or skip courses and transfer the skills and credits they have gained elsewhere to their registered course providing that they meet the criteria of assessment in the final test.

On the whole, the American standards movement focuses on accountability and the outcomes of learning, neglecting the delivery procedures such as the learning methods, the pedagogical resources and means, and even the background of the students. Moreover, it is based on the assumption that the educational parties (i.e., teachers, students, and administration) are not doing enough. Consequently, according to Harnischfeger (1995), schools could be led to shut down if they do not reach the national standards.

After the application of the standards movement in mainstream American education in the 1990s, English as a Second Language (ESL) embraced this movement relatively late in 1997 (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The standards for ESL were developed in 1997. The Washington-based center of applied linguistics developed them in a form of a framework of functional use of English for foreign and second language learners.

ESL standards were derived from three broad language educational goals and were sub-divided into descriptors, progress indicators, and classroom vignettes with discussions (Nunan, 2007, p. 428). The standards refer to the goals of teaching (i.e., the criteria of success and the functional dimension of English); descriptors are the identification of the behaviors of the students when using language; progress indicators describe the behaviors the learner should exhibit explicitly to meet the standards of

success, and vignettes describe instructional sequences. These concepts can be illustrated as follows.

Goal: To use English to communicate in social settings

Standard: The learner will be able to interact with spoken and written English for personal expression and enjoyment

Descriptors: sharing and requesting information, expressing needs, feeling, and ideas/using non-verbal communication in social interaction (Adapted from Nunan, 2007, pp. 428-429)

Moreover, the TESOL standards frame categorized five levels of language qualification which are as follows: Starting, Emerging, Developing, Expanding, and Bridging.

Similarly, Richards (2010) outlined how standards are used in syllabus design. He specified the following steps:

- Identify the domain of language use the learners need to acquire (e.g. reading, writing, listening, speaking).
- Describe standards and performance indicators for each domain.
- Identify the language skills and knowledge needed to achieve the standards.
- Select teaching materials and activities. (Richards, 2010, p. 26)

More clearly, the syllabus designer identifies why the learner needs the language, whether, for example, for promoting oral communication or for writing. Next, after defining the language aspects needed, the levels required to be attained by the students are specified. Subsequently, the content in terms of language skills and linguistic competence is determined. Finally, the methodology of teaching is selected.

Overall, the American standards ESL movement derived teaching objectives from broad social goals of the language proficiency. The goals are interpreted into standards (criteria of

performance), and the standards are illustrated into descriptors, progress indicators, and classroom vignettes.

2.2.2. Common European framework of reference

In parallel to the American standards movement, a European standards movement has evolved-namely, CEFR. The latter describes and sub-divides language ability into different levels, and it does this dissection on a functional level, that is, by describing the purposes for which language is used, not the description of language per se. This can-do model of description makes it possible to apply it to other language, not just to English. For example, it states that a language beginner can understand basic English and use it to introduce himself/herself to others. This principle could be applied to any language. In fact, CEFR is applied to many European languages and it has been adopted by several other countries in Africa and Asia.

CEFR has emerged as a result of the work of the Council of Europe (i.e., an intergovernmental European cultural and educational organization). After World War Two, waves of immigrants from the formerly colonized African and Asian countries entered Europe (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). These new-comers needed a functional language that they could use to do things and get things done in the host countries, not general English. Consequently, the Council of Europe was instructed to carry out a European language needs analysis and the establishment of the basic level for learning foreign languages (Matthies, 1983). The first result from the work of this inter-governmental council culminated in 1975 in the publication of the threshold level (van Ek, 1975, as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 165), that is, the basic functional level of English language use.

After the establishment of the threshold level, enthusiasm had grown for developing more levels. Consequently, different levels of language qualifications have followed one after the

other. In 2001, the Council of Europe published its final work (i.e., CEFR) which included the following language proficiency levels:

Mastery	C2
Effective Operational Proficiency	C1
Vantage	B2
Waystage	B1
Threshold	A2
Breakthrough	A1

Table 1. *Names of CEFR for language proficiency levels* (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 165)

The names in the table above are classified in the hierarchical order from the beginner (breakthrough/threshold), to intermediate (waystage/vantage), and to advanced language user (effective operational proficiency/mastery).

These labels of language proficiency are also abbreviated as levels A1/A2, B1/B2, and C1/C2, as illustrated in a vertical manner in the table below**.** The levels A1 and B1 correspond to basic language user; the levels B1 and B2 refer to independent language user, and the level C1 and C2 match up with proficient language user. The right column of the table indicates the levels of language attainments. The latter is expressed in terms of what the learner can do with regard to language functions.

	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarize information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
Proficient User		

	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent User	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex texts on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected texts on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

Basic User	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others, and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Table 2. *Common reference levels: global scale (Trim et al. 2001, p. 24)*

As seen, table 2 summarizes the six levels of proficiency for the basic language competencies (i.e., interpreting, interacting, and producing) couched in functional perspectives of the language.

2.3. Algerian English language standards

English is taught in the Algerian classes at the middle school stage for four years and at secondary school grade for three years. The textbooks are written by Algerian teachers, teacher supervisors, and university teachers. Earlier before the 2002 School Reform, these EFL textbooks were accompanied by a superficial syllabus that is usually written after the design of the textbooks. Since the School Reform and through the assistance of the UNESCO

(United Nation Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization), new textbooks were designed along with their detailed syllabuses and accompanying documents. This new era in the Algerian educational history has been marked by the introduction of competency-based teaching into the Algerian EFL curricula and syllabuses.

The espousal of CBA in the Algerian EFL textbooks and syllabuses since 2002 has led the curriculum designers to apply CEFR to define the benchmarks of achievements for each level and stage. As CEFR is a cross-language and adaptive framework and in the absence of a National referential for language proficiency, the Algerian EFL curriculum and syllabus designers resorted to CEFR to flesh out the competency intents of the School Reform.

The National Commission of Programs (CNP, Commission Nationale des Programmes, in French) has adapted CEFR for the Algerian context and named it the Algerian English Framework (AEF, 2009). The latter is the description of the levels of English language proficiency as well as the objectives of teaching and assessment criteria. Moreover, this curriculum document specifies the topics and the breadth of language the students can use (AEF, 2009).

AEF is framed round the teaching of the three basic language competencies of interpretation (listening/reading), interaction (speaking), and production (speaking and writing). For speaking and writing, the framework indicates the language functions the student can perform. In regard to reading and writing, it denotes the learning objectives about the genres learners can read, listen, and write (AEF, 2009, p. 1). For example, the general goal of the production competency for the first-year secondary school states the following purpose: "the production of a message to inform, describe, narrate, argument, using writing genres and acquired sources" (SE Syllabus, 2005,

p. 13). This language competency is embedded in communicative functions that the learner will need in real life or academic career.

The table below is an adapted summary of AEF; it illustrates succinctly the standards of performance for the competency of interaction across the high school levels.

Competency	Secondary School: Year 1	Secondary School: Year 2	Secondary School: Year 3
Interaction	- The learner can interact orally to start and maintain a conversation on topics of concrete nature. - Can carry out common functions involving two people in a small range of settings. - Can plan for, use, and evaluate the effectiveness of spoken interaction, for example, to maintain a conversation.	- Can interact orally to start and maintain a conversation on current issues. - Can carry out common functions involving two people in varied situations. - Can plan for, use, and evaluate the effectiveness of spoken interaction, for example, to communicate and check understanding.	- Can interact orally to start and maintain a conversation on current issues, events and contemporary issues. - Can carry out common functions involving two people in a variety of contexts. - Can plan for, use, and evaluate the effectiveness of spoken interaction, for example, to get and give turns in a conversation.

Table 3. *Algerian English framework of reference (AEF, 2009, p. 5)*

On the basis of the above standardized criteria, the textbook designer could specify the content and the activities required for their achievement. The middle school levels (1-4 year) corresponds to the levels of A1 and A2 (basic language user) and

the secondary school levels (1-3 year) correspond to the levels of B1 and B2 (independent language user) in the CEFR (AEF, 2009). From this can-do model, the life competencies are identified and the language forms specific to the target language are equally spelled out.

Apart from the language basic competencies of interpretation, interaction, and production targeted in the Algerian English language syllabus, AEF also specifies the linguistic competencies (i.e., lexis and grammar). However, structural training in a competency-based program is not an end in itself; it is rather a means to the achievement of life competencies (tasks). As Savage (1993) explained, "For example, if the objective is to write a check (life skill), the learner must first be able to write money amounts in words and to write dates (enabling skills)" (p. 20). Therefore, the overall plan of a competency-based syllabus is task-based and structural training is subordinated to the achievement of life skills.

As for the descriptors, as seen in the American ESL program, they describe what the learner should know and be able to do in regard to each of the language competencies (i.e., interactive speaking, interpretive listening and writing, productive writing and speaking, and grammar strategies). An example of descriptors of the interaction competency in the Algerian secondary school EFL syllabuses is provided below.

> *The learner can interact orally to start and maintain a conversation (e.g. greetings, asking questions and follow-up questions, answering in detail, giving and seeking facts, reasons, advice and opinions and agreeing and disagreeing)*

> *• on topics of interest and familiar matters (e.g. current events and contemporary issues, and concrete issues related to personal life and found in media such as film, books and music)*

> • *using a range of appropriate simple language (AEF, 2009, p. 4).*

This descriptor determines the content and the standards of assessment. They can be used by teachers and syllabus designers to develop lessons and materials. The difference between the standards of performance and the descriptors is that the former is more general and the latter are more specified in that they determine to content and the criteria of assessment.

3. Conclusion

This study has given an account of the standards movement to English language teaching. It has explained the background of this educational movement that grew in parallel in the United States and Europe. In the former, it was prompted by the government calls for accountability in education and in the latter it came as a result of the work of the Council of Europe that has attempted to regulate language learning across Europe since the 1960s. In Algeria, this educational approach has been integrated within the framework of the 2002 School Reform.

The standards movement is considered as an iteration of competency-based teaching or as its latest version (Nunan, 2007). It is considered a competency approach because it pre-specifies the learning outcomes and almost pays no attention to delivery methods (methodology). Additionally, it is based on the functional view of the language, that is, the purposes for which language is used. Furthermore, this movement supplies the language framework of reference from which syllabus designers can devise language courses and it specifies more accurately the levels of language proficiency.

By and large, this inquiry has been motivated by the fact that the standards movement, although used in the Algerian EFL syllabuses, is almost unfamiliar to the Algerian teachers and scholars. Consequently, this study has given a bird's eye view of

the background of this pedagogy and illustrated how it is applied and fleshed out in the teaching foreign languages.

The Algerian EFL syllabus designers have applied the standards approach in the design of both middle and secondary school syllabuses and textbooks. Consequently, CEFR has been used as reference framework to devise AEF, from which the objectives of English language teaching and the assessment criteria have been derived.

In practical terms, standards define the broad learning goals; they are broken down into specific objectives, which describe what the learner could be able to do with the language and how well he/she can perform. Since standards are formulated in the can-do model, they specify what social language uses of language to teach, what topics, what context, and how the learner can exhibit their achievement.

Finally, this study recommends for future researchers to look at how CEFR is adapted to the Algerian context, investigate its cultural appropriateness in terms of language use, and examine the congruency of CEFR levels of proficiency with the current levels of the Algerian students in each level and grade. Moreover, scholars can look at the achievement of standards of success of CEFR at different stages of English language teaching.

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