

CHALLENGES OF TEACHING THE SPEAKING SKILL WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE CBA IN THE ALGERIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The speaking skill is perhaps the most important of the four language skills, in the Algerian foreign language learning contexts. This study investigates the Algerian secondary school EFL environment, to explain the persistent gap between what is intended to be taught, according to the CBA and what is actually produced, by the Algerian EFL pupils. It will explain the reasons behind their difficulties, to express themselves in the target language and that, after seven years of studying the English language. Indeed, increasing speaking competence, for the Algerian learners tends to be a crucial issue, among EFL teachers and inspectors. The objective of this research is therefore, to highlight the factors that contribute to the Algerian secondary school EFL pupils' reluctance, to speaking meaningfully in the target language. For this purpose, quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed. The findings suggested that, teachers were attempting to implement the new approach (CBA) to education in EFL classrooms, required by the educational reform of 2003, which required both teachers and pupils to develop new teaching and learning strategies. Based on the research findings, some recommendations were made for both teachers and learners.

KEYWORDS: EFL Learners, Teaching The Speaking Skill, CBA & Reform in the Algerian Educational System

INTRODUCTION

English teaching in Algeria is often criticized on the grounds, that it has been slow to progress. Indeed, although the English language is studied during seven years, starting from the age of eleven and continuing up, until graduation from secondary schools at the age of eighteen and that the primary objective of the syllabus, prescribed by the Algerian Ministry of Education is to stress the importance of developing the pupils' ability, to use English for the purpose of oral communication, the Algerian learners continue to experience difficulty in using the target language.

Historically, teaching, speaking has not always been the main objective of language learning and teaching, but it is emphasized in current approaches and it is the skill that, learners and teachers strive for and struggle with most often. Therefore, as the calls for a more communicative approach increase, there has been much debate, with regard to the best way to achieve this objective and thus, to improve the speaking ability of Algerian learners, which represents the one of the ultimate target of the Ministry of Education. The latter has, since 2003, implemented the Competency Based Approach (CBA) methodology, on a multi-level scale and part of this educational reform concerns EFL teaching and learning.

The speaking competence has become more central in EFL language teaching, with the advent of Communicative Language Teaching. The ability to communicate in the target language can be accomplished, when the teaching is tied to the instructional goals, i.e., language outcomes of the syllabus. However, there are many difficulties involved in the construction and administration, of any speaking task. This forms the core of the present research study.

The Speaking Skill in the Algerian EFL classes remains an elusive challenge, for many teachers. EFL pupils need to learn how to speak, in order to be fully proficient in the target language. The teaching and learning of the speaking skill encompass the whole language teaching process. Without a real assessment in oral proficiency, it is extremely difficult to gauge how the pupils are progressing, with their studies.

The present research study worked with pupils, who were enrolled in the Scientific Stream. Then, the researcher wanted to determine how, after many years of English learning, Algerian pupils were not able to communicate in the target language. The second reason was determined by the fact that, most of those pupils will follow scientific fields of study, at the university and even if 95% of undergraduate and post-graduate courses in the sciences or in medicine, are taught in French language (Miliani, 2000), the role of English in the Algerian educational system became a controversial issue and its teaching is in competition with the French language, at all levels of education and that from the first grade level of middle school. In fact, the Algerian learners are becoming aware of the importance of the English language, mainly for those who want to pursue their studies at a higher level.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study has the following objectives:

- To investigate the problems that the Algerian EFL pupils face, during their speaking activities;
- To examine the actual state of teaching and learning the speaking skill in three secondary schools in Tlemcen, namely Ahmed Ben Zekri Secondary School, Boumechra Secondary School and Ibn Tofail Secondary School;
- To find out the extent to which the newly introduced CBA is implemented, in the teaching of the speaking skill in Algeria, and;
- To examine the speaking components of the English syllabus, the speaking materials currently used in the classrooms, and the evaluation of speaking skills administered at the secondary school level.

METHODOLOGY

The research deals with an evaluation of the teaching of the speaking skill, in three different secondary schools in the Wilaya of Tlemcen. Thus, a multiple case study will allow the researcher, to analyze within each setting and across settings. The researcher makes experiments in three secondary schools in the same manner and using the same research tools, to be able to understand the teaching of the speaking skill, within the framework of the CBA and then to examine the results of the different cases, trying to understand the similarities and differences, in the implementation of the new approach to EFL teaching.

SAMPLING

The study participants were 10 EFL teachers, from three secondary schools in Tlemcen and their third year Scientific Stream pupils. The three secondary schools, where the study took place are: Ibn Tofail, Miloud Boumechra, and Ahmed Benzekri.

The EFL secondary school teachers, also known as PES in the Algerian educational context, were interviewed in this research study, in order to try to elicit information, about the way they handle the teaching of the speaking skill under

the CBA, the difficulties they face and the pedagogical changes that could be brought to improve the teaching of this skill in the Algerian school.

In addition to that, the subjects of this study were 150, third year secondary school pupils. They were preparing their baccalaureate exam and learnt English for seven years, throughout the four years in the middle school and three years of the secondary school, at a rate of three hours per week for each year, and during which teachers followed the CBA principles. The subjects were the pupils of the EFL teachers, who participated in the research study. During this phase of research, the pupils kindly accepted to participate in the current study.

These pupils, who are in the age group of seventeen to nineteen years old, have almost identical learning backgrounds. Their Mother Tongue (MT) acquired at home is the Algerian Dialectal Arabic, and for some of them, the French language. Modern Standard Arabic is taught in schools, and it is the official language of Algeria, since 1962.

Table 1: Participants

IBN TOFAIL Secondary School				MILOUD BOUMECHRA Secondary School				AHMED BENZEKRI Secondary School			
Teachers		Pupils		Teachers		Pupils		Teachers		Pupils	
A.F	R.F	A.F	R.F	A.F	R.F	A.F	R.F	A.F	R.F	A.F	R.F
3	30%	60	40%	4	40%	65	43.33%	3	30%	25	16.66%

INSTRUMENTS

In the current research, methodological triangulation, using quantitative and qualitative research methods is used to provide a more complete set of findings. Using a single method gives the researcher, only a partial view of a complex situation, Cohen and Manion (1994). However, by using multiple methods, the researcher will gain confidence, and obtains more valid results.

Because, it is the researcher's belief that triangulation is a valuable tool, for the validity of any research study, the researcher has used the following tools to gather data: the classroom observation. This instrument was used to answer the questions, that revolved around the way Algerian EFL teachers handle the speaking skill under the CBA, and the difficulties they face in the implementation of this newly introduced approach.

A questionnaire was also addressed to secondary school learners, to find more about the pupils' response and willingness, to learn to speak under the CBA. Then, an interview was conducted with the teachers, in order to answer the questions dealing with the pedagogical changes, that might be brought to improve the teaching of the speaking skill, in the Algerian secondary schools.

Hence, the data gathered via this triangulation procedure were interpreted quantitatively and qualitatively. Practical conclusions were then drawn, at the end of each investigative procedure, hoping that the findings would ultimately illuminate the path to be followed, to tackle the problem of the teaching of the speaking skill in EFL classrooms, under the CBA.

DATA COLLECTION

To obtain the empiric information for the current research work, three research methods were used: a questionnaire was administered to pupils, an interview was conducted with EFL teachers, and a classroom observation was undertaken. Firstly, in an attempt to develop appropriate survey instruments for this study, a pilot questionnaire was

administered to five pupils, with the help of an EFL teacher. The pilot questionnaire served to identify those items, which were unclear, repetitive and unnecessary. Preparing a questionnaire and an interview is not an easy task, as this activity requires much care and objectivity. The researcher wanted to be as accurate and concise as possible, in formulating the questions, in order to avoid confusion and also not to influence the informants, when answering. Indeed, it is generally assumed that, the manner in which a question is put influences the answer. For this reason, the researcher preferred to pilot the questionnaire and the interview, prior to their administration. The same thing was for the classroom observation, as the researcher designed the classroom observation sheet, before it took place.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analyzed, in terms of absolute and relative frequency counts. It shows the present level of the pupils' speaking skill, their range of problems, the teachers' activities and their role in teaching the speaking skill, and the Algerian secondary school in the "Wilaya" of Tlemcen.

To reach the objectives of the research, it was designed as a quantitative and qualitative study, which produces both descriptive and exploratory explanations, more specifically; this research used a case study method, in order to contextualize the research, within the real life environment of Algerian secondary school classrooms. Additionally, it allowed different data collection tools, such as the questionnaire, the interview and the classroom observation.

FINDINGS

Generally speaking, there was a consistency among data from classroom observation, pupil questionnaire and teachers' interview. The results obtained from the collected data are discussed in this section. Actually, from the data analysis, it was found that, four factors caused the low proficiency of the Algerian pupils, in using English in the language classroom. These are discussed as follows.

The Algerian EFL Teachers Deliver Materials in the Traditional Way Focusing on Reading and Writing

EFL teachers reported that, the Ministry of Education has promoted curriculum reforms, in order to meet the principles of the CBA. However, EFL teachers are informed to some extent, about the vast reform, which has been undertaken, since 2003. The EFL teachers use different methods of pupils' speaking performance. According to the classroom observation, it was noticed that, the teachers give importance to the specified objectives of the syllabus and the factual content, but they are not well aware of the competencies introduced in the CBA. At the same time, they stated that, there was no true congruence between teaching/ learning and evaluation. The current method of pupils' speaking skill teaching and evaluation, used in EFL classes does not reflect the CBA, as the biggest worry for the teachers, as well as for the pupils still remains the "BAC exam".

In fact, most of the teachers focus on grammatical correctness, on the expense of fostering, in learner's degree of oral ability. Taking charge of teaching 3rd year learners, the appropriate grammar under such unsatisfactory conditions was far from being realistic, and this has urged the observed teachers, to adopt a traditional way of grammar teaching, that seems far from being communicatively oriented. In the light of such teaching circumstances, English language teaching is more teacher-dominated, than learner-centered and communicatively-oriented.

The Major Difficulties That Teachers Have to Cope with in the Use of the CBA

Indeed, the educational changes should have a significant effect on pupils' oral performance. However, it should be noted that, according to the result obtained, there are some difficulties, encountered by the Algerian EFL teachers. Actually, the response has shown that, the teachers are facing concrete problems, dealing with over loaded syllabus and textbooks. In addition to that, one tendency among teachers is to teach textbook contents, rather than the syllabus. Nevertheless, the main problem is that, the teachers have been taken by surprise at the beginning of the reform. They have not been prepared to face such a sudden change, as they still have that feeling of being disconcerted. From the third research tool, the lack of congruence between the objectives of teaching English, according to the syllabus and the methods, the respondents suggested more training by true specialists. Thus, teachers should be trained, as they do not perceive the reasons and the objectives of the CBA quite well. The teachers should be provided with more appropriate training, in order to apply them in their appropriate way. Teachers are sometimes reluctant to undertake changes in their own, as they feel more confident in their routine.

As far as the pupils' speaking skill evaluation is concerned; the recent educational reform, to improve teaching facilities for the attainment of communicative goals in foreign language teaching, the idea that teachers should also improve pupils' evaluation has been neglected. Some official instructions, on how teachers should evaluate their pupils' learning process have been established, such as pedagogical guides, which have been designed by the Ministry of Education, as well as the inspectorate of English. However, on the other hand, the teachers had received no adequate training, in how to implement these changes in pupils' speaking teaching and evaluation tasks.

Dealing with the difficulties that could be encountered by the EFL teachers, the focus is on the lack of training. There is a lack of documentation about the CBA, as teachers need more guidance in their everyday practice in the classes, i.e. the way they should evaluate their learner competencies, how to adapt the textbooks in order to meet their pupils' needs, and then to be congruent with their levels. The EFL teachers cannot cope up, along with this new approach that, why they need specialized training in the new method of teaching and evaluating their learners.

Third Year EFL Secondary School Pupils' Attitudes Towards Studying English

According to the results of the investigation and after several observations of third year secondary school English classes, it revealed that, Algerian EFL pupils lack interest in communicative language use. Based on classroom observation data and teachers interview, we can dare to say that, the EFL classes were still not fully competency based, and communicative oriented, because of the difficulties they have to face with learners' lack of motivation. When, for instance, the pupils were asked to work in groups, not all of them were eager to contribute their opinions in English. Some of them participated actively, but the others spoke very little or not at all. This is due to the constraints of the teaching programme, as well as the final examination, "BAC", which focuses more on reading and writing, than speaking and listening.

The Curriculum, Teaching and Evaluation Need to be Developed in a Concordant Way within the Framework of the CBA

Evaluation is of primary importance, in every teaching/learning situation. And then, teachers are the cornerstone of the evaluation of their pupils' learning and progress. According to the EFL teachers, evaluation is used to verify learning progress, with a view to provide support for learning, to make precise diagnoses, to verify the level of competency development and to recognize prior learning. Indeed, today, evaluation practices have two main characteristics. They are

based on the evaluation of competencies, in accordance with the new education programme. Secondly, the emphasis is on evaluation to support learning, resulting in evaluation activities integrated into the learning and teaching processes. Hence, this is why, training for a teacher is essential in a way that, the evaluation methods should be congruent with the teaching methods.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many factors have made the teaching and the learning of the speaking skill of the target language unsatisfactory. This section has been concerned with providing English language teachers, with suggestions and recommendations, regarding the teaching of the speaking skill, at third year secondary school pupils that, such recommendations would be fruitful and help them make reflections on their own teaching methodology.

Oral production is an essential component of learning a foreign language. As such, it should have a central place in the foreign language classroom, in both areas of instruction and assessment. Though, when little time is devoted to the evaluation of oral language, the underlying message is that, oral language is not important. Evaluation of oral language can and should be an integral part of language learning and teaching.

The vision presented here places speaking skill evaluation, at the centre of the learning process. This constitutes a powerful factor, in helping pupils learning and supporting teachers, as it could guide the Algerian EFL pupils in their learning. Thus, training for EFL teachers, plays a central role in every teaching /learning situation and it is for researchers, to consider the purposes of language evaluation, since it cannot be denied that, the first function of learning a language is for a meaningful message delivery, rather than the use of language form.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper investigated the real causes, behind the Algerian EFL learner' failure, on using the language for oral communication and the investigator managed to diagnose any variable, capable of influencing the teaching / learning sphere.

The researcher was primarily interested in finding some evidence, for the lack of congruency between the stated objectives of English language teaching, by the Ministry of Education and the teaching methods, of the speaking skill in EFL classrooms. The researcher has mainly focused on the teaching of the speaking skill in EFL classrooms, as well as on the constraints that EFL teachers usually face, when dealing with a speaking task, if done. Accordingly, a case study of third-year secondary school EFL pupils was undertaken, to find out the reasons behind the lack of congruence between teaching and evaluation of the speaking skill, in EFL classrooms.

Raising teachers' awareness of the vast area of oral language teaching, and evaluation in EFL classrooms stressing, on the crucial role of oral evaluation, in the process of teaching and learning, as well as the recognition of its importance to learning, that should not be considered as an add-on feature of instruction, but as an integral part of the teaching learning process.

The limitation of this study is that, it had been conducted in only three secondary schools in the city of Tlemcen and in a period of time, not exceeding a week for each secondary school. It would have been interesting to attend EFL classes, for a longer period of time, in order to have a broad view of the teaching of the speaking skill.

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