Challenges in Implementing Competency-based English Language Teaching at University Level

Angelika Riyandari
Soegijapranata Catholic University

Abstract: Competency-based curriculum has been widely implemented by many higher institutions in Indonesia. It is expected that the competency-based curriculum, which puts more emphasis on the needs of job market, prepare students for specified tasks. Competency in a general sense can be seen from the task performance. English language competency is one of the basic competencies which should be acquired by a university graduate in order to enter international market and survive the global competition. The institution which offers English language as part of their curriculum must answer the demand for an English language competent graduate by preparing the best way to teach the language. This article examines the steps to develop a competency-based English language teaching where student's attitude and achievement comprise the important segments of evaluation. It focuses on the challenges, which will probably be faced by the teachers in implementing this competency-based teaching at the university level.

Key words: competency, based curriculum, university level

Findley and Nathan (1980: 222) define competency-based education as a philosophical system or model in an educational service where 'competency is the specification of a capability in designated areas of knowledge, assessed through student performance.' The competencies be acquired by an individual are those needed to function in a society.

Furthermore, on the adult education, Parker and Taylor (in Auerbach, 1986: 413) state that 'competency based adult education is a performance-based process leading to demonstrated mastery of basic life skill necessary for the individual to function proficiently in society.'

There are three areas prepared for the students to implement competency-based education (Madsen, 1975: 362). They are:

(1) Basic skills including all communication skills, mathematics, and physical fitness

(2) The natural and physical world, humanities and fine arts, and social systems

(3) Rigorous intensive experience in a selected area such as foreign languages for statistics.

In the language area, according to Grognet & Crandall (in Auerbach, 1986: 413), 'a competency-based curriculum is a performance-based outline of language tasks that lead to a demonstrated mastery of the language associated with specific skills that are necessary for individuals to function proficiently in the society in which they live'. Therefore, language needs are only the requirement of an individual or a group of people which emerges as a result of the use of the language in the social and work situations (Findley and Nathan, 1980: 223).

The stress on the competency-based approach is not on what the students know about a language anymore but more to what learners can do with language (Auerbach, 1986: 413). Language learning's goals are individual goals which should be achieved by the students. In the case of adult learners, they learn better when the materials are related to life experiences and practical needs.

COMPETENCY-BASED CURRICULUM

In the competency-based curriculum, the products, in this case English, must be taught efficiently (Tumposky, 1984: 307). According to Findley and Nathan (1980: 229), for second language students, the learner and what he/she will be expected to do in his/her life are the centred of the teaching and learning process while the content of the academic subjects or the grammatical structure of a language comes next.

Competencies are not only the knowledge of the grammar of a language but also the capabilities to perform the language function at least the basic functions to survive in society. But, before the students can per-

form the function successfully, they must have the knowledge about certain aspects of the grammar of the language. The acquisition of the knowledge about the grammar of the language is at best obtained through communicative exercise.

Madsen (1975: 359) divides competencies into three areas which can be reach through tutoring, courses, or self-instruction through programmed materials. Those areas are:

1. Knowledge
2. Skills
3. Students outputs

Clifford Prator (in Madsen, 1975: 357-358) puts more emphasis on the area of skills in the language learning since the areas are the objective of most TESL. He, later, adds that in teaching skills, the principle of specificity in learning a skill should be employed. The teacher should know exactly the behaviour the students are expected to produce, the conditions under which it is to take place, and how well the student is expected to perform (in Madsen, 1975: 357-358).

Using the competency-based system, the learners have several alternate routes to the acquisition of a skill. The activities such as tape recordings, slides, films, or games are used as well as doing work in a workbook because it will help the students to master the same objective (Findley and Nathan, 1980: 227). Additionally, the schoolwork and the learning process are brought closer to real life as the focus of the system is the language use and its user (ibid, p. 229).

Since the competencies are the basic to function properly in work place or society, there is a standard for minimal competency. The terms usually use for this minimal competency are 'survival skills', 'coping skills', and 'adult literacy' (Carvelti, 1977 in Findley & Nathan, 1980: 221).

However, provided with at least minimal ability to communicate in the language is not enough because teachers should be able to measure the accomplishment of the students as a result of their teaching. Findley and Nathan (1980: 223) show aspects of six basic functions which were agreed upon by the Council of Europe. They are:

(1) imparting and seeking factual information;
(2) expressing and finding out intellectual attitudes

(3) expressing and finding out emotional attitudes
(4) expressing and finding out moral attitudes
(5) getting things done (suasion)
(6) socializing

Van Ek (1976) in Findley and Nathan (1980: 223) specified the topic areas which bring a student to the threshold level, i.e. 'personal identity, house and home, life at home, education and future career, free time and entertainment, travel, relations with other people, health and welfare, shopping, food and drink, services, places, foreign language and weather'.

To design and reach the threshold, Auerbach (1986: 414-415) extracted eight features serving as a framework for the analysis of curriculum-based competency both for adult learners and English for second language learner. They are as follows.

(1) The goal of this curriculum is to enable students to function properly in society and fulfil the demand of the world.
(2) This curriculum is designed to teach language as a function of communication. The forms/skills taught are those which will be needed for a certain situation to produce.
(3) The students are expected to be able to perform language skills as a result of instruction.
(4) Language learning is broken down into small chunks where the objectives are narrowed into some sub-objectives in order for the teachers and students to get a clear sense of progress.
(5) Outcomes are known and agreed before the teacher and students start the teaching learning process so the students know exactly what behaviours are expected of them.
(6) Assessments are done continuously. Students are pre-tested to determine what skills they lack and post-tested after instruction in that skill.
(7) Assessment is based on the ability to demonstrate pre-specified behaviours not the traditional paper-pencil tests.
(8) Instruction is individualized, students-centred. Instruction is not time-based because the students may concentrate on the areas in which they lack competence. Objectives are defined in terms of individual needs.

In short, competency-based curriculum is indeed a learner-centred

curriculum which deals with the demand to function or at least survive in society by using a curriculum which is oriented on the mastery of the performance rather than theory. The curriculum is broken down into very specified objectives which are set based on the learner needs and the expected outcomes and through continuous and on going assessment.

Besides the learners' needs, the discussion on the readiness of the teacher is also important since the teacher is a part of the process in implementing competency-based approach. Madsen (1975: 354) writes that the teachers who teach the competency-based curriculum should be prepared through a program which is designed based on the analyses of the competencies and skills required for effective teaching. It should include three things.

(1) There should be a specified instructional objective where the students knows exactly what is expected of him/her
(2) Individualisation becomes an important element for it gives freedom for the students to move at their own pace
(3) It emphasise the performance – through microteaching, demonstration techniques and lessons and in bona fide teaching within the public schools. (Madsen, 1975: 358)

STEPS TO DEVELOP COMPETENCY-BASED CURRICULUM

Findley and Nathan (1980: 222) discuss four major steps to develop and apply at least minimal competencies for functional communication using the Threshold level of the Council of Europe as a common core. They are as follows.

Needs Assessment

The students' needs to function in communication are the first thing to consider, so the design of the curriculum should not only stress on the students' knowledge of grammatical forms but also students' ability to communicate. Need assessment which is learner-centred not language centred begins by asking the learner what they want to b able to do or what function he/she needs to perform in the target language, which then will give a clue on what aspects of language are required to fulfil those functions.

With regard to the procedures for needs assessment, Findley and Nathan (1980: 223) state that there are now 'a well developed procedure workable taxonomies for looking at parameters of communicative competence in terms of situations, roles, topics, notions and grammatical structures.' Those procedures will be applied by teachers and curriculum designers to establish an inventory of competencies for each new program.

The inventories are based on some factors, i.e.:

(1) A general characterization of the type of language activities the learner will involve in;
(2) The setting (the social and psychological roles) that will be played in the foreign language;
(3) The topics dealt with;
(4) What the learner will be expected to do with regard to each topic. (Van Ek, 1976: 7) in Findley and Nathan (1980: 223)

Furthermore, according to Auerbach (1986: 422), needs assessment is done by conducting interviews, giving questionnaire and having placement test before the instruction where the students are asked 'about goals, reasons for entering the program, educational background, interests, and special needs, as well as testing for language and basic skills.'

Finally, feedback mechanism is needed to keep monitoring the needs of the students because as Trim (1977) in Findley and Nathan (1980: 224) says that needs analysis is an ongoing process instead of preliminary to course planning.

Identification of Objectives

The result of the needs assessment is later used to formulate objectives. The term *behavioural objective* is used to name the resulting specification of expected outcomes. There are four aspects included in behavioural objective needs.

(1) The student as the subject;
(2) An action verb that defines behaviour or performance to be learned;
(3) Conditions under which the student will demonstrate what is learned;
(4) Minimum level of performance required after instruction, as specified by a criterion-referenced measurement strategy.

An example given by Findley and Nathan (1980: 226) is.

Given an oral test request *(condition)*, the learner *(student as subject)* will say *(action verb that defines behavior)* his/her name, address and telephone number to a native speaker of English and spell his/her name, street and city so an interviewer may write down the data with 100% accuracy *(level of performance)*

Training Procedures

Training must focus on .the well-defined objectives based on students' needs in order for the teacher and students to perform efficiently (Findley and Nathan, 1980: 227). Needs assessment which gives a better idea about students' needs helps the teacher develop an appropriate training. The training has instructional strategies, learning activities, facilities and materials appropriated with students' needs and characteristics. The learning modules are also constructed based on the students' needs and characteristics which offer the learner choices of classroom arrangement (group, small group, or individual) and modalities (visual, auditory, or kinaesthetic).

To help teacher to choose activities which will facilitate students to acquire the language skills, Poynor (1997: 1) lists the proficiency level in ESL standard:

(1) Intermediate: students understand more complex speech, but still may require some repetition;
(2) Advanced: students' language skills are adequate for most day-to-day communication needs;
(3) Students with limited formal schooling (LFS): students with LFS are generally recent arrivals to the US whose backgrounds differ significantly from the school environment they are entering.

Findley and Nathan (1980: 228) also state the instructional methods which includes three alternate routes to master the skill desired, namely:

(1) calls for role-play and kinaesthetic use of materials in a small group setting;
(2) uses videotape; and
(3) uses a community-based exercise.

Evaluation Procedures

Evaluation is an important part of the competency-based system. The evaluation procedures include. several parts. The first part is the pre-test where the students must be assessed to determine the necessary skills she/he already has. The pre-test determines the proper starting point for the student. After given the training, the students will be post-tested to find out whether they meet the objectives defined. If they fail the evaluation, they need to repeat the training in order to be successful in the following test. As Madsen (1975: 363) says that 'pupil attitude and achievement will constitute important segments of evaluation.' Therefore, Findley and Nathan (1980: 228) suggest the criterian for the evaluation.

(1) It directly measures outcomes in a real world situation if at all possible.
(2) It simulates the performance in its real setting if condition #1 above is impossible.
(3) It includes all the elements described in the objectives.
(4) It does not include elements not in the objective.

CRITICISM ON COMPETENCY-BASED CURRICULUM

No matter how good a system is, some weaknesses are always found. With regard to competency-based curriculum, there are several criticisms to consider.

The first criticism is regarding the objective. As mentioned before the objective of competency-based curriculum is in the observable and measurable changes in behaviour called behavioural objective. Tumposky (1984: 299) regarding the behavioural objective in the competency-based system states that although behavioural objective is good in concept, many people think that it is the cure for all educational ills while neglecting the fact that some problems persist in implementing the objective. Tumposky (1984: 300) says that the criticism among English teachers on the behavioural objective is based on the fact that the objective assumes that a person only learn a particular thing he/she is studying at time while actually the process of instruction and the realistic teaching situation which is dynamic and complex may lead to the emerges of various outcomes which are not specified in the objectives.

Furthermore, Tumposky (1984: 303-306) lists some simplistic or faulty assumptions about behavioural objective.

1. *Behavioural objectives are something new*
2. *Successful foreign language learning can be accomplished by mastering pre-specified, hierarchically arranged, discrete items (be they grammatical or communicative).* Valette (1980: 157) in Tumposky (1984) argues that 'Language leaning ... is not the sum of the myriad parts; it is not by leaning 1000 grammar rules, 1000 verb forms, and 3000 items of vocabulary, for instance, that one can suddenly read, speak, or understand the language.'
3. *It is possible to master a linguistic skill* because the language which is creative and sometimes unpredictable, a teacher cannot predict exactly what language functions and forms the students will need to produce in the real life.
4. *Knowledge can be translated into observable behaviour.* Learning and the outcomes are not always observable.
5. *Everything taught must be capable of post-instructional assessment.* The teachers tend to evaluate only the most observable behaviour. They also will tend to measure the competency the teacher are capable of administering.
6. *Poor performance on the student's part is the result of poor or inefficient management on the teacher's part.* This assumption is unreasonable because the students' performance in the second language acquisition is determined by many factors such as the teacher, the students' motivation or personality, the class management, the material, and the methodologies. Therefore, teacher is only a part of the whole system.

Another criticism comes from Auerbach (1986: 416) who says that 'the mode of curriculum itself carries hidden assumptions about reality and the social order which serve to support the current socio-economic order.' Citing Kozol (1980: 54), Auerbach (1986) writes 'competencies might include reading directions or following orders in a job, but not the ability "to change or question the nature of that job".' Although schools have selectively taught occupational skills or other skills needed by industry, now competency based curriculum openly put the objective of serving the industry as one of its aim thus preparing students to fulfil em-

ployers' needs (Auerbach, 1986: 418). The effect of this simplistic objective is the teacher must eliminate any curriculum which does not relate directly with the employment: "cutting off anything not related to getting people into jobs guarantees that they'll never get anything but the lowest level jobs" (Auerbach, 1985).

Auerbach (1986: 416-417) feels the necessity to distinguish between curriculum as fact and curriculum as practice as proposed by Greene (1971). Curriculum as fact deals with the function of education which is to transmit knowledge and socialize learners according to the values of the dominant economic group. The success to transmit skill is the most important point in teacher's job. Curriculum as practice focuses on how the students can synthesis and generate knowledge. The process of making sense out of reality is the students concern and it is the job for both the teacher and the students to accomplish the knowledge.

Other problem is when the students are asked to focus their language development on the behaviour and performance, they will not be able to develop their cognitive skill. Auerbach (1986: 419) quotes the work of Pottinger, Klemp, and McClelland (1979) which shows that the teaching of skills which focus on behaviour associated with specific jobs fail to reach significant areas of competence because in fact, the development of cognitive skill in the acquisition of knowledge is more useful than the use of knowledge. Klemp (1979) in Auerbach (1986: 419) mentions three abilities to be critical:

(1) the ability to organize diverse information.
(2) the ability to see many sides of a complex issue.
(3) the ability to learn from and apply experience in a new situation.

Those abilities will prepare students for critical thinking, a high order skill. Without them, the students will only be prepared for the most mechanical, low-level competence.

On the competency-based English Language teaching material, the criticism is about the fact that the linguistics competence is taught in chunks in which the language learnt is specific. Learning only the specified language competency makes the students only be able to assemble, not create (Auerbach, 1986: 420). The fact that a language is complex and dynamic also makes many teachers feel 'guilty' when the class discussions are unrelated to the target competency (Auerbach, 1986: 420) be-

cause competency is usually equated with observable and measurable behaviours and it tends to omit matters which cannot be observe clearly (Madsen, 1975: 356-357).

The process of assessment itself leads to another problem, in term of the acceptability of student's responses in tests which are often subjective. Therefore, the implementation of competency-based curriculum emerges a dilemma on 'the curriculum that must be static in that outcomes are predetermined and dynamic in its ability to respond to students demands' (Auerbach, 1986: 423).

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING COMPETENCY-BASED CURRICULUM

Hudelson (2002: 2) on the competency-based curriculum applied in Morocco finds that 'the appropriateness and variety of materials, expectations for student achievement, the challenges of motivating learners, the feeling that they have limited input into educational decisions made are the problems faced by Moroccan educators.'

Below are the challenges that will probably be faced by the teacher teaching English language at university level in implementing competency-based curriculum based on my experience.

(1) There is still a confusion whether teaching English at university level, especially for English Department students, is to prepare students with the specified functions they are going to use in work place or society or to help the students to develop their cognitive skills.

(2) Formal needs assessment in which the students are asked about what they want to study and what function of English they are going to perform in their future work is often neglected by the institution which offers English as part of its curriculum. Most of the time the teachers basically only run the course outlines which are developed based on their own assumptions about the needs of the students or based on the informal inputs from some students/graduates without really considering the needs of the students they are teaching.

(3) The fact that most of the students do not know where they are going to work or what they are going to be or do after they graduate cause them not to know what function they need to perform later on in the work place or society. This is a potential cause of confusion for both the teacher and the students in implementing competency-based approach.

(4) Needs assessment which ideally should be done to the users of the graduates i.e. the industries which provide the work place for the graduates is often neglected although the inputs from the users can be used to design English language teaching materials which will be really useful for the students to win the competition to get specified jobs and survive the work. This might be the impact of the students' uncertainty about their needs.

(5) English for most Indonesian is a foreign language not a second language based on the fact that the learner lives in an environment where the dominant population speaks a language other than English (Judd, 1981: 60). Therefore, generally the learners' fluency and registers of English are limited because they are hardly exposed to the real use of English language. As a result, teachers are expected to teach the students the minimal competency in English language as well as providing and creating the environment. The matter gets worse in case of teaching ESP since the teachers are often unfamiliar with the specified environment. For example, an English teacher has to teach English language used in the court for Law students while he/she never experiences a trial.

(6) For the competency-based approach is new for Indonesian teacher and students, many teachers do not really understand the concept of competency-based teaching. Therefore, while the material is intended to be a competency-based material, the way the teacher delivers the material is conventional.

(7) There are limited materials for competency-based curriculum especially for non-English department students studying English for specific purposes.

(8) With regard to evaluation, teacher's ability to be objective toward the students' individualized goals needs to improve.

(9) Individualization as one of the characteristics of competency-based curriculum is difficult to apply because culturally Indonesian students tend to be not very confident when they work alone. They prefer to work together with friends.

CONCLUSION

Considering the concept of competency-based approach, the criticisms and the protential challenges discussed above, it is a necessity to decide whether competencies are the starting and ending point of curriculum development, and competencies as tools to enable student to act for change in their lives. We have to be very cautious in implementing competency-base English language teaching in order to really answer the students' and industries' needs, not only the short-term needs but also the long-term needs. The seriousness to deal with this matter is needed since there is a tendency that competency-based approach is used only as an empty label, because it is marketable. Finally, there are still a lot of things that the policy maker, the material and curriculum planner, and the teacher in Indonesia to develop and improve before this approach can be implemented thoroughly.

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