TESTING IN A COMPETENCY-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING CONTEXT[i]

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Abstract:
Tests are part and parcel of the teaching and learning process. The objectives of the research are to explore the design of tests within the framework of the competency-based approach under implementation in the Beninese secondary education system and to describe the challenges teachers face in the process of designing competency-based tests. A focus group was organized with six EFL teachers from two secondary schools in the South of Benin in order to collect relevant data for the study. The findings show that the respondents test their learners to gauge their level of understanding of lessons and to find out if they are teaching well. In addition, the respondents indicated that all the tests they administer are criterion-referenced. Some of the criteria mentioned include recognizing details in a text, showing mastery of grammar, vocabulary and functions, rephrasing sentences, and expressing opinions. The respondents equally indicated that it is difficult for them to find adequate texts for their tests, to design appropriate contexts, and to frame the directions of the tasks. It is therefore recommended to continuously train teachers in the field of testing.

Keywords: testing; EFL; secondary education; competency-based language teaching

Résumé :
Les évaluations font partie intégrante du processus d'enseignement-apprentissage. Cette étude vise à explorer comment les professeurs d'anglais conçoivent les évaluations dans le cadre de l'approche par compétences mise en œuvre dans l'enseignement secondaire au Bénin et de décrire les difficultés auxquelles les professeurs d'anglais sont confrontés dans le processus de conception des évaluations basées sur les compétences. Un entretien de groupe a été organisé avec six professeurs d'anglais de deux établissements d'enseignement secondaire au sud du Bénin. Les résultats montrent que les participants évaluent leurs apprenants pour jauger le niveau de compréhension des cours par ces derniers et voir s'ils enseignent bien eux-mêmes. De plus, les participants ont indiqué que

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toutes les évaluations administrées sont critériées dans la mesure où elles sont fondées sur des critères comme la reconnaissance de détails dans un texte, la démonstration de la maîtrise de la grammaire, du vocabulaire et des fonctions, la reformulation des phrases et l'expression d'opinions. Les participants ont également signalé qu'ils éprouvent des difficultés à trouver des textes adéquats pour les évaluations, à concevoir des contextes appropriés et à formuler les consignes des tâches. Il est alors recommandé d'assurer la formation continue des professeurs sur l'évaluation.

Mots clés : évaluation ; ALE ; enseignement secondaire ; enseignement des langues basé sur les compétences

1. Introduction

Language teaching and testing in an educational environment are like two sides of the same coin. Testing enables to know how well the teaching is evolving. Ideally, wherever there is teaching, testing needs to be organized to find out if the learners have learnt what has been taught. Since the curricula reform that took place in the Beninese secondary education system in the early 2000s, many studies have been conducted on the implementation of the reform. However, testing has received limited attention despite the paramount role it plays in the teaching and learning process.

The study is primarily concerned with exploring the issue of testing in a competency-based context. The specific objectives are to explore the design of tests within the framework of the competency-based approach under implementation in the Beninese secondary education system and to describe the challenges teachers face in the process of designing competency-based tests. In other words, the central question at the heart of the study is "What are the issues surrounding the design of competency-based tests in the Beninese secondary education system?" This central question has been split into two research questions including (a) How do EFL teachers design competency-based tests in the Beninese secondary education system? And (b) What challenges do EFL teachers face in the process of designing competency-based tests?

The study covers EFL teachers in two secondary schools in the Mono Region in the Republic of Benin and does not involve any learners. However, many of its findings can be generalized to the entire country given that the format of the tests is the same all over the country.

2. Literature Review

This section provides some insights into the competency-based language teaching and testing in competency-based language teaching.

2.1 Some Hints about Competency-Based Language Teaching
Competency-based language teaching (CBLT) is nothing but the application of the principles of competency-based education (CBE) to language teaching. CBE is *"an*

approach to teaching that focuses on teaching the skills and behaviors needed to perform competencies" (Richards and Schmidt, 2010, p. 104). CBE is therefore an educational approach which consists in instilling competencies in learners. For Mrowicki (1986), "*Competencies consist of a description of the essential skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors required for effective performance of a real-world task or activity*" (p. 2). At the end of the day, what is important in the notion of competency is the ability to perform an actual task, which means that there is not much room for theory. That is the reason why Richards and Rogers (2001) pointed out that CBLT is all about the outcomes of the learning process rather than the learning itself.

As it appears from the foregoing, CBLT is product-oriented and for that reason, the products that are to result from the educational process are clearly defined from the outset and made public and learners have the opportunity to assess their relevance and the progress made in the acquisition of such competencies (Bataineh and Tasnimi, 2014). In the same vein, Marcellino (2005) views CBLT as a performance-based approach that focuses on output. He further emphasized that output or expected outcomes of the instruction must be clearly defined. For him, CBLT "*Seeks to teach language in conjunction with social contexts in which it is used.*" (Marcellino, 2005, p. 33). The social contexts here must be construed as the future professional environments in which learners will be using the language. Besides in CBLT, language is not taught for the sake of being taught. It is taught for specific purposes that must be defined and made public before instruction begins (Auerbach, 1986, Iwikotan, 2015).

Furthermore, in CBLT, each of the educational stakeholders has a specific role to play. Teachers become facilitators of the learning process by making materials and instructional activities available to learners and devoting time to assess students and provide feedback. On the other hand, students have to work hard in order to meet the instructional expectations expressed in the competencies by motivating themselves and applying what they have learnt (Griffith and Lim, 2014).

From a different perspective, the above description of CBLT should not lead to overlooking its limitations. Its critics advocate that it is a reductionist approach which is likely to perpetuate social inequalities as it focuses heavily on outcomes (Bataineh and Tasnimi, 2014). The application of the CBLT in a foreign language context is also problematic. In a study conducted in Indonesia, Marcellino found out that teachers lack of proficiency in English, the shifting away of attention from grammar teaching were factors that hampered the implementation of CBLT. That is the reason why it is advisable to provide training and follow-up assistance to teachers so that they do not fall back into previous ways of teaching (Sullivan, 1995; Bataineh & Tasnimi, 2014). Therefore, teacher training is a key ingredient in the successful implementation of CBLT.

2.2 Testing in Competency-Based Language Teaching

Assessment plays a pivotal role in any language teaching approach as it enables to know if what is supposed to be learnt is being or has been learnt. Testing is the most frequent way of assessing students' progress towards the mastery of competencies and it is well positioned in the CBLT process which includes six points: selection of competencies,

establishment of objectives, establishment of indicators of achievement, definition of activities, collection of evaluation data and reflection on the evaluation data for decision-making (Muñoz & Araya, 2017). In this process, evaluation which is often materialized through testing plays a key role but for it to be effective in playing that role, achievement indicators or evaluation criteria must be defined beforehand and shared with the learners (Muñoz & Araya, 2017).

Furthermore, a key feature of assessment in CBLT is that it should be authentic. According to Griffith and Lim (2014), "*Paper-and-pencil tests cannot be used to assess a competency unless one is assessing a writing competency*" (p. 5). This implies that if teachers do not want to test their learners' writing activity, they cannot test a competency through writing. Learners should be tested in real-world situations to find out if they can function adequately in those situations. However, the large number of students in classrooms, especially in developing countries, makes the paper-and-pencil tests unavoidable. In those classroom situations, the tests are contextualized, which means that instead of asking direct questions, teachers create real-life problems in the tests and learners use their knowledge to solve such problems. For instance, instead of asking learners to write down the parts of the body or to conjugate verbs in the present tense, teachers can ask such learners to describe a medical problem, that is to use their knowledge of parts of the body and the present tense in context (Griffith & Lim, 2014).

Another important feature of competency-based testing is that it should be criterion-referenced. According to Richards and Schmidt (2010), a criterion-referenced test "*measures a test-taker's performance according to a particular standard or criterion that has been agreed upon*" (p. 144). In actual practice, the test can be based on one criterion or many. The role of the criteria is to specify requirements, limit subjectivity, and substantiate teachers' or graders' judgements (Burton, 2006; Ramsden, 1992; Scarino, 2005). As it appears, the criteria protect both teachers and learners as they ensure objectivity and clarity. In addition, criterion-referenced tests enable teachers to provide effective feedback to their learners because in the process not only criteria are defined but performance standards that enable to determine the extent to which each criterion has been met are also designed in order to make tests and grading as objective, reliable, and transparent as possible (Crooks, 1988, Teaching and Educational Development Institute, 1999).

3. Material and Methods

This research work is descriptive and it uses a purely qualitative approach to data collection. It covers all the EFL teachers in two public secondary schools in the Mono Region in Benin. The snowball sampling strategy was used as the researcher is not very familiar with the EFL teachers in both schools (Yin, 2011). The researcher explained to one of the principals of the two schools the criteria to be used to select participants in the study. Such criteria include a mixture of young and experienced teachers and having been teaching in either school for at least two years. Six teachers were selected to participate in the study, including two from one school and four from the second school.

The data collection method used was the focus group. This method was used because it enables in-depth investigations in relatively limited timeframe; it is also flexible and the group dynamics it generates enables participants to open up (Babbie, 2010; Yin, 2011). To control for group conformity or group think that is a situation in which one individual dominates the interview and prevents others from expressing their ideas, the researcher decided to systematically give the floor to each of the participants on all the issues discussed (Babbie, 2010). In fact, all six participants were invited to one of the schools for the focus group because, as suggested by Babbie (2010), "*In a focus group, typically 5 to 15 people are brought together in a private, comfortable environment to engage in a guided discussion…*" (p. 322). For the purposes of this study, the participants were gathered in a well-ventilated classroom in one of the schools. A set of ten questions was prepared to kickstart the interview but probe questions were asked where appropriate. The researcher was supported by a research assistant. The researcher acted as a moderator but both took extensive field notes to ensure reliability of the data as the focus group was not recorded.

The data collected were analyzed following the order in which the questions were asked using a color-coding approach and MS word. Some aspects of the data collected were also substantiated with the analysis of the content of sample tests collected from the participants. According to Neuman (2014), "*Content analysis is technique for examining the content or information and symbols contained in written documents…*" (p. 49). The context and assessment criteria in the sample tests collected were analyzed.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Presentation of the Results
4.1.1 Exploring the Process of Designing Competency-based Tests
During the focus group discussion, the participants were asked to explain the purposes for testing students. One of the recurrent answers is that tests enable teachers to know if students have learnt what they have been taught. This transpires clearly in the following statement made by one of the participants: "*We use (sic) to test students to check if they master the different knowledge, we teach them through the learning situations.*" Apart from the fact that tests provide teachers with the opportunity to know students' level or degree of mastery of lessons, the participants also think that tests can prompt teachers to organize remediation activities in case there are gaps in students' knowledge. In addition, some of the participants view tests as teachers' assessment tools. To that effect, one of the participants made the following comments: "*The test also helps us to see where we have failed. When we are teaching, we make mistakes and through those tests, we can find out about those mistakes.*" This implies that tests also act as barometers to measure teachers' performance and as such can point to some weaknesses in the teaching processes.

Furthermore, the participants indicated that two major competencies are often tested and those competencies are framed in French to facilitate understanding by students, given that Benin is a French-speaking country. Nonetheless, the sample tests collected from the participants after the focus group show that the competencies are not

worded in the same way. Sometimes, the first competency reads "appropriate reaction to a written text" or "react precisely and appropriately to read texts" or "react appropriately to messages read or heard." The three skills involved are reading, listening, and writing while in actual facts, the skill that is tested is reading. The second competency would read "Production of texts of varied types and functions" or "Produce appropriately texts of varied types and functions" or "Produce precisely a particular type of text with varied functions." In this case, it appears without any doubt that the skill tested is writing.

Once the teachers decide on the competencies to test, they also define criteria to be used to grade students' papers. According to the respondents, the criteria used are almost the same in all the schools. The variations that can be seen depend on the grammatical or function items the teacher wants to test. Some of the criteria often used are translated below as they appear on the test papers collected:

- Recognizing some details in the text;
- Answering questions on the text;
- Showing your mastery of vocabulary, grammar, and functions in the text;
- Filling gaps with appropriate words;
- Expressing opinions;
- Making appropriate choices;
- Rephrasing sentences;
- Translating a paragraph of the text into French

During the focus group, the participants explained that the number of criteria is the same as the number of items in the test, which means that not all the aforementioned criteria appear in a single test.

In addition to the foregoing, the participants also mentioned that there are specific criteria that are used to grade students' written production, including the context and type of text, logic, grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling. The sample tests collected provide the specific wording of the criteria:

- Respecting the context;
- Logical organization of the text;
- Building grammatically correct sentences;
- Using appropriate spelling, vocabulary, and punctuation.

The criteria are numbered C_1, C_2, C_3, C_4, etc. and grades are assigned to each of them. However, one of the participants stated that it is difficult to apply those criteria when the type of writing assignment given to students is a gap filling exercise.

Concerning the interaction between testing and the teaching and learning process, the respondents indicated that current testing practices are likely to have a positive impact on the teaching and learning process. In fact, according to one of the respondents, in the past, students were tested using isolated sentences taken from different contexts but today, students are evaluated in given contexts. Those contexts are written in French to allow students to better understand them. The translation of some of those contexts read as follows: "The quest for mineral resources has some risks that lead to casualties"; "Finding a job today is a true conundrum for young African graduates"; "The dowry is a traditional ceremony that materializes marriage in Africa"; "Many factors account for

school failure"; "Showing solidarity is one of the key characteristics of African societies." All these contexts are limited to one sentence. A quick perusal of the texts that come after the contexts shows that the latter are just a statement containing the topic of the texts. It is true that these can help students to have an idea of the content of each text, but they cannot be perceived as guidance on the test in general.

Even though they do not contain any contexts, quizzes are also part of the testing system. When the respondents were asked if they warn their students before administering quizzes, some of them stated that they never warn their students because if they do, the students will not learn their lessons on a daily basis. This is what one of the respondents expressed in the following terms: "This is not good. Students won't learn their lessons except when quizzes are announced." Another one stated that not warning students of quizzes enables the teacher "to know if they are really learning at all times, to see if they are ready at any time." Other respondents mentioned that sometimes they warn the learners because a quiz is not a punishment and, in the competency-based approach, "It is required to inform the students of the quiz and even the lessons on which the quiz is going to focus." Sometimes, they do not warn the students because in language learning, the teacher can administer a quiz at any time.

4.1.2 Difficulties in Designing Tests

The respondents voiced a number of difficulties they often face in the process of designing tests. First, they complained about the fact that sometimes, it is difficult to find the appropriate text to be used as support for the whole test, especially a text that contains grammatical structures and topics that had been studied with students in class. Sometimes, some grammatical structures studied in class with students are not tested because the teacher cannot find a text which reflects them. In some cases, this difficulty is worsened, especially when teachers are not informed about the date of the test well in advance. Teachers need time to find texts that reflects the topics they had covered with their students. Besides, teachers teaching the same grade may not reach the same level in implementing the syllabus and it is difficult to design a test that can be administered across the board. Students who are taught by the teacher who has made more progress are likely to have an edge over those taught by the teachers who have made less progress. The respondents also explained that in cases when the gap between teachers teaching the same grade level is too big, they end up designing different tests for the learners.

Apart from those general difficulties, there are some difficulties specific to each section of the test.

Concerning the context, it is difficult to find the appropriate words to formulate it in two sentences maximum without summarizing the text, especially for young teachers. As stated by one respondent, "it is a problem finding a context; you have to find the appropriate context so learners can know what they are going to deal with on the test." With regard to the tasks, the respondents unanimously recognized that they are difficult to word in such a way that students would understand them clearly. This is especially true of Item 2 which often focuses on answering questions on a text. When the questions are not clearly put, students have a hard time understand them and they provide answers

that do not contain the specific information the teacher is looking for when asking the question in the first place. The last difficulty discussed is related to the writing section of the tests. All the respondents complained that they have never received any training on how to teach and test writing. Even during the professional development workshops, the issue of writing is never raised. For that reason, teachers try to teach various aspects of writing in their own ways. That's the reason why it is difficult for them to design writing assignments and grade them appropriately.

4.2 Discussion of the Results

The findings revealed that there are many issues surrounding the design of tests in the investigated secondary schools. The participants explained that they test their learners in order to know students' levels or degree of mastery of lessons taught so as to organize remediation activities if necessary. Here, the participants emphasized the diagnostic aspect of testing which consists in identifying learners' weaknesses and strengths (Brindley, 2001; Nunan, 2015; Rapi and Miconi, 2014). However, to be able to fulfill this purpose adequately, teachers need to devote some time to carry out an in-depth analysis of the students' graded test papers in order to spot major errors and define a small taxonomy of such errors. This will enable teachers to better focus their remedial activities. They further testified that tests also serve as teachers' performance indicators. This means that if students perform well on a test, teachers can easily infer that their teaching was effective. On the contrary, in case students perform poorly, teachers should understand that there is something wrong with their instructional practices. Decisions can then be made to bring about some change in the way of teaching and the instructional materials as well (Brindley, 2001).

Furthermore, the participants informed that only two competencies are often tested: "React appropriately to messages read or heard" and "Produce appropriately texts of varied types or functions." Even though they are framed like this, a close look into the sample texts collected following the focus group shows that two skills are tested instead of competencies. These are reading and writing. Listening comprehension is not tested at all as the first competency might insinuate. Skills-based rather than competency-based testing is practiced in the two schools. A competency-based testing is supposed to focus on specific competencies within those two skills.

For the purposes of grading students' test papers, some criteria are developed and included in the tests as shown through the data analysis. The criteria include recognizing some details in a text, answering questions on a text, showing mastery of vocabulary and grammar, making appropriate choices, to mention but a few. These criteria are used to grade questions based on a text as well as grammar and vocabulary questions. The only problem that can be raised about them is that they are not supported by performance standards to ascertain the acquisition of the competencies as suggested by Burton (2006). Performance standards enable to avoid unfair grades and they take the form of 'excellent', 'good', 'satisfactory' and require the anticipation of students' strengths and weaknesses (Burton, 2006). It is certainly because of the difficulties related to the development of the performance standards that teachers shy away from them.

In addition to the above discussed criteria, the respondents also stated that they develop specific criteria for the writing section of the tests such as logical organization of the text, building grammatically correct sentences, and using appropriate punctuation and spelling. Those criteria are critical in the grading of students' written productions as they force teachers or graders to reflect on specific aspects of the productions before assigning a grade. It is the sum of the grades assigned to each criterion that constitutes the grade of the written production. The criteria can be interpreted as a major breakthrough in the Beninese educational system because in the past, teachers often read the productions and assign a general grade which may not necessarily reflect the actual quality of the production. In other words, the criteria prevent the teachers from cheating on their students by assigning unsubstantiated grades (Ramsden, 1992).

Concerning the designing of tests, the respondents also reported that they are confronted with some difficulties. The first one is finding an appropriate text for the test. This difficulty stems from the fact that the text to be selected has to be on one of the topics discussed in class with the learners. Apart from the topic, the text also has to contain instances of grammatical structures studied in class. Finding a text that meets these two criteria is quite challenging to the extent that some respondents reported that they are obliged to drop the testing of some grammatical structures studied in class because they cannot find any text on them. This difficulty can even become more complex in remote areas where access to the Internet is limited and there are no well-equipped libraries where teachers can have access to relevant books. The corollary of this situation is that teachers keep using the same texts over the years. The same texts may also be used in neighboring schools where the teachers have the possibility to share tests or to see each other's tests.

Furthermore, the respondents expressed difficulties concerning the framing of questions on the text. In fact, when the questions are not well framed, students provide answers that do not reflect the information the teachers expect them to find out in the text. The same respondents also complained about the framing of the writing section of the tests and explained that for lack of training, they do not know how to teach and assess writing. These two difficulties raise the issue of reliability and validity of the tests administered to students because the likelihood of having equivocal questions is high. A test is said to be reliable when it provides consistent results across a wide range of learners and a reliable test measures what it is supposed to measure (Thaine, 2010). In this case, tests with unclear directions cannot measure what they are supposed to measure and their results cannot be consistent. Therefore, some of the tests administered to the learners in both schools may be invalid and unreliable.

5. Recommendations

Testing has an instructional purpose as it contributes to the educational process by enabling learners to see how well they are doing (Cheng and Fox, 2017). To that effect, teachers need to receive adequate training in test designing and administration. The ins and outs of testing should be provided during the training which should be both

theoretical and practical. The training should also be continuing because testing is a dynamic field and teachers should be informed about recent development to better assess their learners.

Concerning research, it is advisable to conduct in-depth investigation in the design of actual tests from different schools in the country to identify the limitations and positive aspects of those tests. Such an investigation will further strengthen the continuing training to be provided to teachers.

6. Conclusion

Testing is part and parcel of the teaching and learning process in the classroom. That is the reason why it deserves as much attention as teaching itself. The objectives of the research are to explore the design of tests within the framework of the competency-based approach under implementation in the Beninese secondary education system and to describe the challenges teachers face in the process of designing competency-based tests. A focus group was organized with teachers from two secondary schools to collect data which showed that teachers test their learners to find out how well they have assimilated lessons and to assess the quality of the instruction provided by the same teachers. The tests are also criterion-referenced and some of the criteria often used by the teachers include recognizing details in a text, filling gaps with appropriate words, expressing opinions, rephrasing sentences, logical organization of a text, building grammatically correct sentences. A context is developed for each test in order to avoid testing items in isolation. The context plays an important role inasmuch as it helps students to have an idea of the topic of the text on which the test focuses.

Further, the respondents experience some difficulties in the process of designing tests. First, it is difficult for them to find a text that reflects one of the topics and some of the grammatical structures discussed in class with the learners. The respondents also find it difficult to frame unequivocal directions and tasks. For that reason, some of the tests administered to the learners may not be valid nor reliable. In view of these challenges, the study suggests the training of EFL teachers in assessment in general and testing in particular. Finally, further research should be conducted on actual tests in many secondary schools in the country so as to find out limitations in such tests and better inform the continuing training process.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

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