

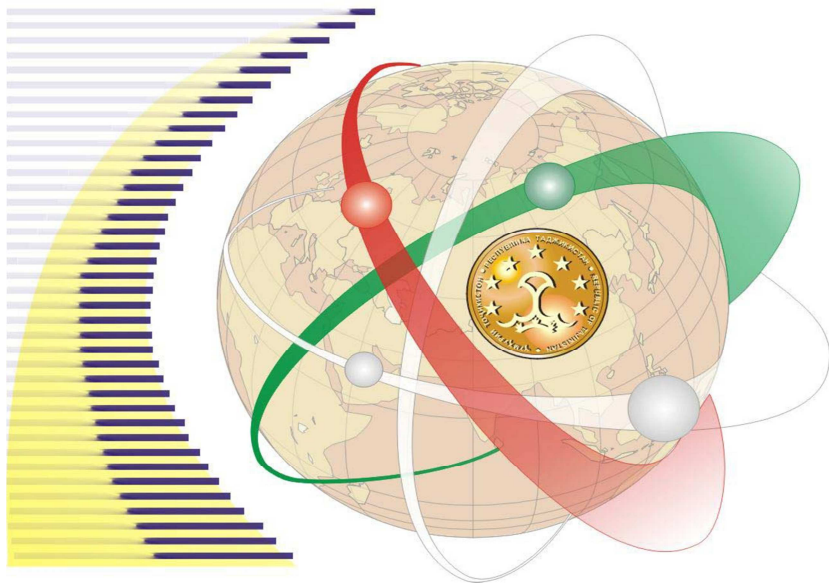


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COMPETENCY-BASED ENGLISH TEACHING IN BENIN: MYTH OR REALITY?

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ABSTRACT

In Benin, the implementation of a competency-based curricula reform in secondary education began in 2001. The objective of this study is to find out whether the English curricula are truly competency-based. To that effect, some members of the curricula development team were interviewed and the curricula as well the textbooks of all four grade levels covered by the study were reviewed. The findings of the study revealed that the procedures followed to develop the curricula are not consistent with available frameworks for developing a competency-based curriculum (Weddel, 2006; Mrowicki, 1986). Not only are the selected competencies too broad and unspecific but the assessment criteria were not developed before the actual implementation of the curricula. In addition, individualization of instruction, which is one of the key features of the approach, is difficult to apply given the large number of students in Beninese secondary school classrooms. Finally, most of the materials in the textbooks are contrived and as such they are not likely to prepare students for real-life situations. All these shortfalls are certainly due to the fact that the curricula development team members interviewed did not seem to be very conversant with the competency-based approach. All in all, the English curricula currently

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implemented in Beninese secondary schools are far from being competency-based.

Key words: Curriculum, Competency-based approach, Secondary Education

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, researchers and the educational community in general have strived to find better approaches to teaching languages. Such approaches include but are not limited to the communicative language teaching, the task-based language teaching, and the competency-based language teaching (CBLT). The competency-based approach to language teaching is at the heart of the secondary education curricula reform launched in Benin during the academic year 2001-2002. Since then, the reform has never been evaluated to determine its strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, teachers have not been well-trained and the quality of materials developed as part of the reform does not seem to be adequate.

The purpose of this paper is to determine if the innovated English curricula are truly competency-based. To that effect, it (I) analyzes the procedures followed to develop the curricula; (ii) explores the curricula development team members' perceptions about the competency-based approach. In other words, the paper is an attempt to provide an answer to the following question: Are the innovated English curricula currently implemented in Beninese secondary school truly competency-based? After shedding some light on the competency-based approach, the methods and procedures, the details of the findings of the study are presented.

Historiography of the Competency-based Approach

The temporal as well as spatial origins of the competency-based approach (CBA) are not easy to trace. However, most scholars believe that the CBA dates back to the 1960s and 1970s. According to Findley



and Nathan (1980), it started in the States of Oregon, Florida, and California in the United States in 1975 and 1976. The movement spread quickly to language teaching insofar as language institutions were required to indicate competencies to be acquired by learners and how the competencies should be assessed (Findley and Nathan, 1980). Auerbach (1986) is also of the opinion that the competency-based approach (CBA) started in the United States in the 1970s in response to the educational crisis of the 1970s and in a bid to holding teachers more accountable. The CBA was used in teacher, elementary, high, and adult education programmes.

Furthermore, Tuxworth (1989) contends that the CBA was introduced in response to the educational crisis of the 1960s in the United States. At the time, it was believed that there is a strong correlation between teacher competence and student learning. As a consequence, the US Office of Education gave ten grants to higher learning institutions to develop elementary school teacher training programmes with the specification of competencies to be acquired. For Richards (2001), the CBA emerged in the USA in the 1970s and it was widely used in vocational education and adult ESL programmes. In the same vein, Richards and Rodgers (2001) advocate that the CBA “had been widely adopted by the end of the 1970s, particularly as the basis for the design of work-related and survival-oriented language teaching programs” (p. 141) for adult migrants to enable them to function in the American society. The focus here again is on adult education and language teaching in particular.

Apart from the United States, the competency-based language teaching also developed in Europe in the 1970s through the Council of Europe Syllabus that was based on functional competencies developed by van Ek in 1977. However, Hirtt (2009) posits that the competency-based approach was introduced in the Netherlands in the 1990s and recently in Belgium in 2008 but the approach was severely criticised in the Netherlands in the 2000s because of the confusions related to the concept of competency. In Australia, Docking (1994) indicates that he was involved in a project whose objective was to specify the competencies related to over one hundred trades in 1968 for purposes of



curriculum development. Furthermore, “the economic origins of the competency-based approach can be traced back to an OECD report from 1968” (Docking, 2009, p. 9). It is not clear whether Docking’s project was part of the OECD report.

Notwithstanding the foregoing facts, the available literature also suggests that the origins of CBE in the United States can “be traced further back to the 1920s, to the ideas of educational reform linked to industrial/business models centred on specification of outcomes in behavioural objectives ...” (Tuxworth, 1989, p. 11). It can therefore be said that CBE was born out of attempts to apply business principles to education. During the same period, Bobbit (1926) used his analysis of functional competencies adults need to live in the United States to develop curricular objectives. Other sources also indicate that the idea of CBE originated in the 1860s. At the time, Spencer believed that his analysis of major aspects of human activity should be used to design curricular objectives (Griffith and Cervero, 1977). The idea here is that curricula should be developed taking into account what learners are going to do in the future. But this seems unrealistic because human activity is changing constantly and it is difficult to predict what an area will be like from one year to the other. This short historiography shows that even though the CBA can be traced back to the mid-19th Century, it gained momentum from the 1970s in the United, Europe and Australia, and OECD countries in general. Therefore, what are the major features of the CBA?

Key Features of the Competency-based Approach

Like any curricular approach, the competency-based approach has its own defining characteristics. The first feature of the CBA is that it focuses on the learning product and not on the process (Auerbach, 1986; Marcellino, 2005; Wong, 2008; Stout and Smith, 1986). What counts is therefore the acquisition of the competency, no matter the strategies used. Furthermore, in the CBE, instruction should be constantly adapted to the “changing needs of students, teachers and the community” (Schneck, 1978, p. vi). That is the reason why Docking (1994) maintains that competency specifications must be continually revisited for



relevance and credibility. In addition, competencies must be clearly specified, made public, and serve as basis for curriculum development, teaching strategies and assessment (Docking, 1994; Tuxworth, 1989). Instances of competencies in language teaching are: “Can write short reports” (Hagan, 1994, p. 36); can “answer basic direct questions about pay, work availability, and hours...” (Tollefson, 1986, p. 658); “can prepare a job-application letter” (Richards, 2001, p. 130). In addition, decisions related to the instructional programme are negotiated between the teacher and the learners (Hagan, 1994; Tuxworth, 1989) even though Lanier (2000) cautions that this should be done only when it is possible.

Besides, the CBA focuses on life skills and as such, instruction is targeted to future language needs of students and for that reason, it is context-specific (Auerbach, 1986; Diang et al, 2010; Chyung et al, 2006). As suggested by Richards and Rogers (2001), the CBLT has “often been used as a framework for language teaching in situations where learners have specific needs ...” (p. 143). Furthermore, the CBA focuses on successful functioning in society and its goal is “to enable students to become autonomous individuals capable of coping with the problems of the world” (Auerbach, 1986, p. 414). Another feature is the individualization of instruction, which implies that the content, level, pace, and objectives of instruction are tailored to individual student needs and therefore instruction is not time-bound (Auerbach, 1986).

Apart from tailoring instruction to student specific needs, the CBLT is characterised by modularisation of instruction and as such, “language learning is broken down into manageable and immediately meaningful chunks” (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1983, p. 2). When it comes to teaching, The CBA does not favour any specific teaching methods or techniques (Diang et al, 2010; Weddel, 2006). With regard to assessment, the measures and standards to be used to evaluate competencies should be designed and made public before instruction begins (Tuxworth, 1989).

From a different angle, there are specific procedures for developing competency-based curricula as suggested by Mrowicki (1986) and



Weddel (2006). Mrowicki (1986) suggests a five-step process which includes the review of existing curricula and materials, needs analysis, survival curriculum topics identification, specification of competencies related to each topic, and grouping of competencies into instructional blocks. On the other hand, the framework suggested by Weddel (2006) includes four components: Participant needs assessment, selection of competencies, instruction targeting, and evaluation of attainment of competencies. However, it is the framework developed by Mrowicki (1986) that has been used in this study because it specifically suggests that curriculum developers should build on existing documentation.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned features, the competency-based language teaching has some important limitations that should be pointed out.

Limitations of the Competency-based Language Teaching

The limitations discussed derive from the very features of the CBLT. The product-oriented nature of CBA is the first problem insofar as what counts is the end result, not the process. In situation of strong accountability, teachers may resort to cramming or *high structure* classrooms that “emphasize the teacher’s role in organising learning with little learner involvement in decision-making about lessons” (Hall, 2011, p. 24), which conflicts with individualization of instruction. Furthermore, there are no agreed scientific procedures for the selection of competencies. Consequently, the process may be biased. Related to the competency specification is the idea of emphasis on life skills which can also give rise to bias in the sense that “The selection, organization, and evaluation of curriculum content are value-governed: What we choose to teach, how we teach it, and how we evaluate students reflect our view of the social order and our students’ place in it” (Auerbach, 1986, p. 417). For example, in the competency-based curriculum developed to train refugees in the United States, the type of language taught the refugees enabled them to “care for their apartments in order not to anger the landlord or other tenants, but not what to do when the landlord violates housing, safety or health regulations” (Tollefson, 1986, p. 657). Another limitation is related to the individualization of



instruction. While this is possible in small classes, it may be quite challenging in large ones found in developing countries. This is all the more true since individualization implies monitoring individual students in the classroom during the teaching and learning process and providing feedback on home assignment, among others.

It is certainly because of the limitations and constraints that the CBLT has not achieved great currency as language teaching approach. That is the reason why Richards and Rogers (2001) classify it as an alternative language teaching method. Hirtt (2009) goes further to tag it as a pedagogical mystification. Its application in primary and secondary schools in Indonesia is confronted with serious difficulties such as cultural inappropriateness, lack of teachers' motivation, large class sizes and teachers' low proficiency levels (Marcellino, 2008).

In spite of its limitations, the competency-based language teaching is used in many countries. It is the implementation of the CBA in the Beninese context that has been explored in the remaining part of the paper.

Methods and procedures

In order to address the aforementioned question, an extended review of the available literature on the competency-based approach was conducted so as to provide a clear picture of the key features of the approach. After this step, four members of the curricula design team were interviewed in order to get insights into the procedures followed to develop the curricula and their perceptions about the competency-based approach. An informal interview was also conducted with the national mastermind of the reform. All five interviews were recorded using a Sony digital recorder. Field notes were equally taken during the interviews. The textbooks developed as part of the reform were reviewed to explore the authenticity of the language used.

After the field work, all the interviews were transcribed. The transcribed interview data were analyzed using the coding procedure suggested by Dörnyei (2007) which consist in highlighting some parts of the data to facilitate their identification and grouping. As Ambrose et al (2005) put



it, the “coding is solidly grounded in the data” (p. 809) in a bid to rearranging the data on the basis of the categories that emerged from the analysis. In the process, the two-stage analytical framework by Dey (1993) which involves reading and annotating, and relating the data to previous knowledge was also used insofar as the data were analyzed against the backdrop of the main features of the competency-based approach.

Findings of the Study

This study has enabled to conduct an analysis of the innovated curricula development procedures, an analysis of the innovated English curricula in light of some defining features of the CBLT, and the perceptions of the curricula development team members about the competency-based approach.

Analysis of the Innovated Curricula Development Procedures

The framework used for this analysis is that of Mrowicki (1986) which includes the review of existing curricula and materials, needs analysis, survival curriculum topics identification, specification of competencies related to each topic, and grouping of competencies into instructional blocks.

Concerning the review of existing curricula and materials, the first point to be made is that there was no mention of examining former curricula during the interviews. The curricula development team members interviewed were not clear about whether or not a literature review was conducted. In response to the question on literature review, this is what one of them stated:

Inspectors were leading all the teams. So, I think that there is a minimum to be communicated to the other team members because not only inspectors belonged to the team, many teachers also belonged to the team. In fact, they were there before inspectors came in...

The assumption behind this statement is that because the people leading the team were inspectors, then, there is no need for a literature review. And no literature review was carried out because the probe questions



asked to get a book title were of no avail. No book or article titles were provided. When the same question was asked to another member, this is what he responded:

No, no, they will be talking about them [books]. Even we didn't get from them any books as such. It was just handouts. It was when Mr. Lanier came from Canada that he brought a book in which they used to give us some handouts and Mrs. Jones³ made a copy of the most important parts of the book for us. The book referred to is in French and its title is *Réussir la formation par les compétences*. In fact, the respondent produced a copy of the handout during the interview. In this statement, the respondent also made it clear that only one book was brought. It is also worth noting the dichotomy between both answers to the same question, which may mean that not all the team members attended the training during which the book was discussed. With regard to the needs analysis, it was not conducted either because team members ideas differed considerably on the rationale for selecting the topics of the *learning situations*. One interviewee stated that the "topics were chosen as an answer to common life concerns, to everyday life concerns". According to another interviewee, the trend of life and globalisation influenced the choice of the topics:

What guides us to choose those themes is the trend of life, what are the possible themes that can guide, that can enlighten, that inform the students as far as they are concerned in life confronted with the globalization, what is the actual themes that we can develop with them so that they should not be behind what is happening in the world.

For this respondent, they chose topics that will enable students to understand what is going on around them as well as what is going on in the world. In short, curricula were built around topical themes likely to keep students abreast of world events and progress.

Concerning the specification of the competencies related to each topic, only three competencies were developed and they are not related to any specific topic. In addition, the competencies were worded in French. Here is the list of the three competencies:

³ Mrs. Jones is just a fake name



- *Communiquer oralement en anglais*” (oral communication in English)
- *Réaction à des messages lus ou entendus*” (reaction to oral or written messages)
- *Ecrire des textes de types et de fonction variés*” (Production of texts of varied types and functions) (DIP, 2007).

More elaborated comments have been provided in the next section.

As far as the last step is concerned, grouping competencies into instructional blocks, the curricula designers did things the other way round. They developed instructional blocks called *learning situations* for each grade level and tried to refer to the competencies in such blocks. From the foregoing, the curricula development process is not consistent with the frameworks suggested by Mrowocki (1986). A closer analysis also suggests that the process does not fall within the framework developed by Weddel (2006). Following this partial conclusion, the focus is now on the comparison of the curricula with some features of the competency-based language teaching.

Review of the Innovated English Curricula in Light of Some Defining Features of CBLT

This analysis starts with the specifications of the competencies. In fact, the first competency is nothing but speaking. The second one combines reading and listening and the last one is writing. The so-called competencies here are nothing but the four language skills either taken in isolation or in combination. However, the language skills are too broad to be considered as competencies. This feature or characteristic is all the more important since each competency must be mastered by a learner before he or she starts work on the next competency. The next feature is the design and publication of assessment criteria of the competencies before the beginning of instruction. In the case of Benin, even the teachers did not know the assessment criteria before the beginning of the implementation of the CBA curricula in the country, let alone the learners. It was only in 2005 that teachers were trained for the first time on assessment. Before that, assessments were developed in



Porto-Novo and sent to the schools to be administered to students. This is what transpires through the following lengthy comments made by one of the curricula development team members during the interview:

We went there in 2003 we decided to enter the reform process with an initiative because before that people would design evaluation items from offices in Porto Novo to be sent to schools and they would say teachers are not well equipped to design evaluations items. And we said what? They teach. How can you evaluate their students from your offices? We have to train them in evaluation and there was more or less a conflict between the former leading team and the new inspectors that we were...

As it appears, the training on assessment was organised when a new team took the leadership of the curricula development process. It should also be noted that the actual training took place in 2005 a few months before the first experimental national examination. This means that no assessment procedures were built into the structures of the curricula. Furthermore, so far, there is no final agreement on assessment. With regard to the grading of examination papers for example, there is what is called "*critère de perfectionnement*" which requires that a student should receive a grade of 12 out of 18 before being entitled to part or all the 2 marks for that criterion. In June 2012, the minister of secondary education issued a ministerial order stipulating that henceforth, a student who gets 10 out of 18 should be entitled to the partial or total benefit of that criterion. So, 14 years after the launching of the CBA, the assessment criteria are still not well-defined, which means that there is no strict way of certifying that a competency has been mastered.

The next feature targeted is the involvement of learners in decision-making about instructional design or curriculum development. From the above development on needs assessment, it appears that the learners were not involved in the curricula development process. The curricula developers chose what they believed the learners need. Anyway, given that Benin operates national curricula, it would virtually have been impossible to involve the learners. The other important feature discussed is the focus on life skills.



The focus on life skills means that learners are taught only the language forms that they will need to communicate effectively in the situations in which they will function later and such language forms are determined through empirical assessment of the required language. The problem here is that the curricula under analysis are intended for general education. Therefore, it is not possible to know the type of language students will need in the future. That is probably the reason why one of the assessment questions found in the third form book is “How are you going to use what you have learnt?” (DIP, 2007, p. 22). This question is echoed in a slightly different way in the fourth form book: “When will you use the new language acquired?” (DIP, 2008, p. 33). This is a clear indication that the instruction given does not target any specific language and it is up to the learners to decide how and when to use what they have learnt. Besides, if students are to be taught the language to function adequately in real life situations, the materials used should be authentic. All the same, most of the materials found in the textbooks from the first form to the fourth form are contrived in as much as they were written by the curricula development team members as stated by one of the interviewees: “Then we found it necessary to started writing something so that [the teachers] can teach the language, the *documents d’accompagnement*. So we wrote, apart from the program, we wrote the *documents d’accompagnement* from 6^e to 3^e.” The textbooks were, therefore, written to by the curricula developers whose first language is French. In addition, there is no mention of the fact that they received training in textbook development. As a consequence, the language in the documents is quite artificial. A typical example is the numerous dialogues in which the characters are alphabetical letters such as the following one from the form 2 book:

A- Where were you last time?

B- I was in Parakou.

A- How long did you stay there?

B-I stayed there for three weeks. (DIP, 2008, p. 8).

The second example taken from the first form book is as follows:

A: How do you feel?

B: I am sad. What about you?



A: I am not sad. I am excited. (DIP, 2007, p. 66)

In addition to the choice of characters, there are language use problems in the documents as illustrated in the following dialogue from the first form book:

- Femi: Do you have a Christmas tree?
- Eva: Yes, we do. We have a nice tree. I always decorate it with coloured lights, stars, balloons, and flowers. What about you? What do you do at Christmas?
- Femi: We usually organize a “Caleta carnival” in the streets. We often choose a good dancer, dress him up and we put a “Caleta mask” on his face. Then we go from compound to compound singing, beating drums and dancing. People give us money or Christmas presents.
- Eva: That’s interesting!
- Femi: Yes. We all like Christmas time. We are happy.
- Eva: Merry Christmas, Femi!
- Femi: Merry Christmas to you too, Eva. (DIP, 2007, p. 64).

The first problem with this dialogue is the combination of the questions “What about you?” and “What do you do at Christmas?” Normally, the question “what about you?” is asked to request the person to talk about the same thing as the first person and it should stand alone. By asking the question “What do you do at Christmas?” immediately after, Eva is requesting two different pieces of information at the same time, which is not often the case in dialogues. As a consequence, Femi has chosen to answer the second question only. Moreover, the combination of the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘we’ does not seem to be appropriate because the dialogue two students, Eva and Femi. As such, each of them should speak on his own behalf.

From another perspective, the dialogue is a story about how Christmas is celebrated. The use of the adverb ‘usually’ suggests that Femi and Eva are talking about the way Christmas is celebrated and nothing in the text indicates that the discussion took place on Christmas day. Therefore the fact that the children started wishing each other merry Christmas shows lack of coherence in the ideas expressed in the dialogue. All in all, the



procedures followed to develop the curricula do not fall within the framework suggested by Weddel (2006) or by Mrowicki (1986). In addition, the curricula as they stand, lack many features of the CBLT. Is this due to the wrong perceptions of the curricula development team members about the CBA?

Perceptions of the Curricula Development Team Members about the Competency-based Approach. During the informal interview with the mastermind of the reform both at primary and secondary school levels, he said that in the competency-based approach,

Le processus me préoccupait beaucoup or l'approche par les objectifs ne permet pas de comprendre le processus. C'est là l'une des faiblesses de l'approche par les objectifs. L'approche par les objectifs met l'accent sur les résultats. L'élève doit être capable de tracer un triangle isocèle. Mais comment il va le faire, l'approche par les objectifs ne le dit pas. La procédure, l'approche par les objectifs n'en parle pas. IL n'y a que l'approche par les compétences qui en parle (I was much concerned about the process while the objectives-based approach does not enable to understand the process and that is one of the weaknesses of the objectives-based approach. The objectives-based approach focuses on outcomes. The learner should be able to draw an isosceles triangle. But how does he go about it, the objectives-based approach does not specify it. The process is not the focus of the objectives-based approach. It is only the competency-based approach that focuses on it [My own translation]).

This construction of the competency-based approach is in contradiction with one of the key features of the competency-based approach because it stipulates in the CBA, the process prevails over the outcome. In fact, as it was mentioned earlier, the competency-based approach rather focuses on the outcomes or product and not on the process and that is the reason why it favours eclecticism as teaching method. The driving force here is the achievement of the result. That is even the reason why it is said that the competency-based approach focuses on outputs and not on inputs. Wong (2008) indicates that “the approach sees outputs very important rather than the learning process” (p. 181). So, if the concern



was to focus on the learning process rather than the outcomes, on the inputs rather than on the outputs as mentioned in the statement, the curricula being implemented are objectives-based, not competency-based.

Although the following interviewee did not dwell on the process-product dichotomy, her comments give some insights into her understanding of the concept of competency in language teaching:

If from example, from all that you have been taught in class, you are able once out of classroom, you are able to put it into practice in another situation, all that you have been taught in class, we can say that you are competent. If you have the capacity or the ability in other circumstances, to put into practice, for example, you are taught English in class, and it is related to some themes, and you are given, maybe some pieces of advice, and out of the classroom, you are able to put into practice all that you have been taught...

What transpires from this statement is that a learner is deemed to have acquired a competency when such a learner is able to put into practice what has been learnt in the classroom. Being competent does not mean possessing some knowledge and being able to apply it in any situation as is suggested in the statement. In the CBLT, to be competent means being able to use language targeted to a specific situation in that situation. In general, the curricula development team members' perceptions about the CBLT are in contradiction with most aspects of the approach found in the literature. What do the findings in general inspire?

Discussion of the findings

With regard to the nature of the innovated curricula, one of the key findings is that the design of the curricula did not follow frameworks established by Weddel (2006) and Mrowicki (1986) for developing competency-based curricula. Apart from these two frameworks, Brown (1995) and Richards (2001) have described in their respective books procedures to follow for curriculum development. In addition, Iwikotan (2002) conducted research on students' performance on the BEPC and identified students' most frequent errors through the analysis of their



examination papers. The findings of this research endeavour and others could have informed the selection of items to include in the syllabi even if the curricula development team was not in a position to conduct consultations.

Concerning the very features of the competency-based approach, the competencies on which the curricula are based are very broad and there are even no clear-cut indicators for measuring their achievement (Auerbach, 1986; Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Furthermore, Nkwetisama (2012) suggests that “Competencies are stated in specific and measurable behavioural terms” (p. 520). The competencies mentioned earlier start with the word ‘reaction’, which is difficult to assess. In fact, the study reveals that at the beginning of the implementation of the innovated curricula, even teachers did not know how to assess their learners, which should not have been the case because the assessment criteria should be defined and made known to all stakeholders before the beginning of instruction (Tuxworth, 1989). How can all these problems be accounted for?

The major underlying factor of the problems is the absence of literature review during the process. As a consequence of this, the curricula development team members were conversant neither with curriculum development procedures nor with the notion of competency-based approach. Competencies were likened with language skills and the CBA was treated as a process-oriented approach while it is a product-oriented (Richards, 2001), which is a clear example of the gap between intentions and the reality. This misconception further illustrates the divide between educational research and education policy making as expressed in the following statement: “In the world of education policy making, research findings often do not seem to matter much” (Orland, 2009, p. 113). In the case under study, research findings have not mattered at all.

Conclusions and Further Research

The principal goal of this paper was to determine if the English curricula currently implemented in junior secondary schools in Benin are truly



competency-based. This goal has been pursued through the exploration of the documents and the curricula development team members' background on the competency-based language teaching. Three aspects of the findings deserve to be flagged. First, the curricula development procedures are not in conformity with best practices in the area. Secondly, the competencies around which the curricula were built are too broad to be easily measured. Thirdly, the team tasked with developing the curricula failed to consult the literature, which accounts for their misconceptions about the competency-based language teaching and curriculum development processes. As a consequence, it would be interesting to investigate the circumstances in which the team was set up the backgrounds of its respective members.

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