Competency-based English Teaching and Learning: Investigating the Learning Experience of Islamic Azad University Teachers in Iran

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Abstract
The present investigation sought to explore the Iranian Azad University teachers’ attitudes towards competency-based language courses particularly in terms of course design and assessment. Moreover, the study aimed to examine the outcomes of learning under the implementation of competency based language courses in this university based on teachers’ viewpoints. In this study, 35 teachers of Iranian Azad University were invited and given questionnaires to express their views on CBLT. Only freshmen were asked to take part in the study. Their age ranged from 20 to 24. In order to minimize the role of gender, as an intervening variable, care was taken to invite a roughly equal number of male and female participants to take part in the study. A brief description was provided about the nature of the study and the purpose of data collection. Upon teachers’ agreement to participate in the study, a package containing a copy of the two questionnaires measuring their attitudes towards competency-based language course questionnaire and their conceptions towards the outcomes of the implementation of Competency based language course was distributed among them. The participants were invited to take their time and answer the items in each of the questionnaires carefully. During the process of data collection, care was taken to consider the ethical issues of the research. For example, the teachers’ participation in the research was voluntary. Moreover, they were assured of the confidentiality of the information they provided. Also, they were informed that the collected data would be used for research purposes only. Finally, each participant was interviewed twice. In the first interview, they were asked about their perceptions regarding learning English and its necessity. The second interview asked them about the skills they had learned as well as the application of the skills. The findings of this study showed that Azad University has been almost successful in implementation of CBLT. The fact that most respondents rated all the items in both questionnaires positively indicates that most of the goals associated with CBLT have been achieved to an acceptable level based on the participants’
viewpoints. However, some of respondents found the course not very useful due to the reasons such as some instructors use Persian as the medium of instruction and communication in the classrooms, and some instructors do not provide the learners with due feedback on their assignments.

Keywords: Competency Based Teaching, Competency Based Education, Teachers’ Attitudes, Competency Based Language Learning.
Introduction

Competency-based language teaching (CBLT) which is the focus of this study is an application of the tenets of competency-based education (CBE) to a language setting (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In its infancy CBLT was designed for teaching English to the immigrants in the United States. By the 1990s, the approach became so popular in the U.S. that refugees were required to enroll in competency based programs to learn the necessary life skills in order to be qualified for federal assistance (Auerbach, 1986; Grognet & Crandall, 1982). In CBLT the social contexts of language were important and isolated language was not acceptable. What mattered in CBLT was the ability of learners to be able to communicate effectively (Paul, 2008; Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Wong, 2008).

In CBLT, learners need to use the language in realistic situations likely to see out of classroom. For example, a student should be able to fill out various forms, talk about his health problems with a doctor, or provide instruction on how to do a particular task. Practicing and exercising were part of CBLT, but in actuality competencies were considered as common practice activities. Competencies were not treated as activities in order to make students skillful in doing tasks but they were instances of actual language use (Paul, 2008). Competency-based education received more and more popularity so that Findley and Nathan (1980) praised it as a "successful model for the delivery of educational services that allows for responsible and accountable teaching" (p, 222) and the Center for Applied Linguistics (1983) maintained that "the incorporation of insights from competency-based instruction into the ESL curriculum is perhaps the most important breakthrough in adult ESL" (p. 1).

Given the importance of competency language teaching and learning and the controversial nature it has (Auerbach, 1986) and considering the fact that teachers’ attitudes are crucial in this regard (Stern & Keislar, 1977), the present study sought to investigate the Learning Experience of Iranian Azad university teachers and their attitudes towards competency based language learning an detaching.

Competency Based Language Teaching

Following the ideology of CBE, Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) is considered as a powerful approach which can have a positive influence on teaching language, because through conceptualizing the standards, both teachers and students can have a direct map of desired goals be achieved at the end of a course (Marcellino, 2005).

According to the theory of language learning, the base of CBLT is interaction and realities of language. Language means the social context and the communication needs of students. It is also based on the behaviorist tradition, in that it includes the principle that learners can learn language form through language function, thus, CBLT designers know precisely the language element that can be found in various situations and they systematically put them in the different teaching units (Tollefson, 1986).
With respect to goals and the content structure that are going to be in a course, CBLT concentrates on competencies. It gives teachers the needed tools and guidelines to plan their syllabuses and its goals and direct learners to acquire the language and use it appropriately in a different parts of their lives. It must also be noted that teachers play a vital role, since they are going to provide students with the suitable activities and materials which are associated to their real lives, so that students would communicate effectively in real situations (Tollefson, 1986).

Teachers must be keen observers to the surroundings of students and their main needs for the syllabuses they need to design. The competency approach has also many benefits for learners as well. For example, competencies are precise, useful and to the point. In other words they are well delineated and truly connected to what students need and to what is appealing to them. Competencies can also be subject to criticism by students, since they can evaluate whether they are related and useful in their learning process. Students need to get fully familiarized with competencies, so that they can exactly know what they need to learn and how they are going to be tested. Consequently, students need to be aware of their learning process and the goals they need to reach. Finally, they can monitor their learning, so that students know what they have learned and what they still need to learn to achieve the competencies of the course (Madya, 2003).

It can be said that CBLT is an educational innovation that provides learners with the necessary means to communicate successfully in society, along with using their knowledge to solve different real life situations. It needs to be noted that CBLT involves teachers’ great awareness of student’s interests and needs and establishing different standards that improve the teaching-learning process, so that they are exactly aware of what they need to learn to be communicatively competent (Madya, 2003).

**Role of Teacher and Students in CBLT**

The role of the student needs to change in CBLT. Students are not supposed to rely only on the teacher and classroom is not the primary source of information. Their role will be to connect, produce, and extend knowledge (Jones et al., 1994). Students should contribute actively to their own learning and move toward an autonomous learners. They need to think critically and adjust and apply knowledge across various settings. Since expectations and standards have been articulated precisely and clearly, students are responsible to continue to work on competencies, mastering them, and then progressing to another (Richards & Rogers, 2001).

Students may react negatively to this approach at first, particularly if they have no immediate and real need for learning the language. Students need to participate actively for creating a fruitful interaction in the classroom. They need to find ways to integrate information to their own lives and be willing to challenge, to question in the CBLT classroom (Marcellino, 2005).

On the other hand, teachers will have to spend large amounts of time to developing activities related to the necessary skills to achieve the competencies. Significant time will also be
needed to evaluate students and provide appropriate feedback (Richards & Rogers, 2001). Role of the teacher also changes from being a knowledge-transmitter to that of being a facilitator (Sturgis & Patrick, 2010). It does not mean that teacher no longer gives information to the students but he needs to teach students the competencies through giving information in various ways. Teacher is the provider of materials, activities, and exercises opportunities to their students (Paul, 2008).

CBLT implementation comprises of several steps. First, each competency must be identified. Each competency must be further divided into the pertinent skills. Modules need to be devised which create the opportunity for students to learn and practice those specified skills. Teachers’ role is to indicate exactly what and how well students must act in order to master the competency (Auerbach, 1986; Richards & Rogers, 2001).

Criticisms and Empirical Studies on Competency Based Language Learning

Wong (2008) examined the effectiveness of the implementation of competency-based ESL teaching and the learning situation of a group of 70 pre-service teachers of Chinese in a Hong Kong tertiary institute. Two questionnaires were given to the freshmen teachers and 10 out of 70 students were interviewed to elicit further responses on what preferences they had for English learning and why. The findings of the study showed that students in fact held strong preference for learning English. Therefore, curriculum planners should take into account students’ need at certain point of time when implementing CBLT. Docking (1994) summarized what CBLT is:

It is designed not around the notion of subject knowledge but around the notion of competency. The focus moves from what students know about language to what they can do with it. The focus on competencies or learning outcomes underpins the curriculum framework and syllabus specification, teaching strategies, assessment and reporting. Instead of norm-referencing assessment, criterion-based assessment procedures are used in which learners are assessed according to how well they can perform on specific learning tasks (p.16).

Baartman et al (2006) discussed the quality criteria of competency based education. They argued that many assessment criteria of classical tests couldn’t be applied to competency based assessment. In their article they presented a framework containing 10 criteria to be applied to competency based assessment. Nine out of ten criteria were confirmed using an expert focus group. In their framework called Wheel of Competency Assessment, Fitness for Purpose was at the center of the wheel and was the basis for the development of all competency assessment programs. Fitness for Purpose was shown to be comparable to the idea of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996). The next and inner layer of quality criteria consisted of Comparability, Reproducibility of Decisions, Acceptability, and Transparency. The outer layer of criteria consisted of Fairness, Authenticity, Cognitive Complexity, Meaningfulness, and Fitness for Self-assessment.

As was mentioned in previous chapter there have been several criticisms against CBLT too. Proponents of CBAE often claim that CBLT is a process and a tool which can be employed for
any purpose specified by practitioners and that it thus doesn’t contain any sociopolitical bias or agenda. Critics of CBAE on the other hand, argue that the approach of curriculum itself contains underlying assumptions about reality and the social order which is a way to support the current socioeconomic condition. They further argue that CBAE does this first by the ways reality and knowledge are defined. Critics also, question the underlying assumption that norms can be defined objectively for success. Kozol (1980) argues that researchers impose their own norms for being a successful adult in society.

Critics also state that CBAE is determinist in that it imposes social roles for students. In other words, form and content of instruction make students ready to fit into the status quo in particular ways. This criticism derives from the work of curriculum theorists (e.g. Apple, 1979; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983) who see education as a tool in transferring cultural norms and reproducing class relationship. Another problem is that not only the content but the teaching process in CBAE may prepare students for subordinate roles. The stress on behavior and performance rather than on the cognitive development is in line with the types of education which have traditionally been emphasized for working-class students. Another criticism is that CBAE may inhibit critical thinking is by chunking instructional objectives into separate units and subunits. Collins (1983), Raimes (1983) argue that this effort to decompose complex phenomena into separate, standardized concepts and skills lead to reductionism, in which the total of the units does not equal the whole.

Another the concern is the performance objectives which inhibit divergent thinking or discovery learning. If goals are determined before means are chosen, creativity and innovation may be blocked (Tumposky, 1984).The CBAE assessment process itself imposes concentration on lower order skills, since assessing critical thinking skills or creativity is more difficult and less amenable to quantification. These criticisms are not meant to ignore the merits and values of competency based language learning, but it must be taken into account that these shortcomings exist and need to be resolved in some way.

The purpose of the study is to shed more light on how competency based language teaching is conceptualized by Iranian ELT teachers and how effective it has been with Iranian foreign language learners. In line with theoretical and practical criticisms of competency based language teaching, the current study sought to explore the Iranian Azad University teachers’ attitudes towards competency-based language courses particularly in terms of course design and assessment. Moreover, the study aimed to examine the outcomes of learning under the implementation of competency based language courses in this university based on teachers’ viewpoints. In this way the status of competency based language teaching and its justifiability in Iranian context becomes clearer.

Research Questions

Based on the purpose of the study and its significance, this research aimed at investigating the following research questions:
Q1: What are Iranian Azad University teachers’ attitudes towards competency-based language courses particularly in terms of course design and assessment?

Q2: What are the outcomes of learning under the implementation of competency based language courses in Azad University based on teachers’ viewpoints?

Method

Design

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive design. According to Mackey and Gass (2005) the aim of a qualitative design is the provision of careful and detailed descriptions. They further maintain that qualitative researchers aim to study events in their natural settings. Therefore, it could be concluded that the current investigation is qualitative and descriptive in nature.

Participants

In this study, 35 teachers of Iranian Azad University were invited and given questionnaires to express their views on CBLT. Only freshmen of this teacher training institute were asked to take part in the study. Their age ranged from 20 to 24. In order to minimize the role of gender, as an intervening variable, care was taken to invite a roughly equal number of male and female participants to take part in the study. Convenient sampling was used for choosing the participants; that is, the participants were chosen on the basis of their availability at the time of data collection (of course, if they were willing to participate). Therefore, there were no random sampling or stratified random sampling.

Instruments

In the present study two types of instruments were utilized including questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

Questionnaires

Two questionnaires were employed in the current experiment. The first questionnaire aimed to investigate the teachers’ attitudes towards competency-based language courses particularly in terms of course design and assessment. The second one was used to explore the outcomes of learning under the implementation of competency based language courses in this university based on teachers’ viewpoints.

Attitudes towards competency-based language course questionnaire

This questionnaire consisted of items tapping the participants’ perceptions towards competency-based education as well as the studying skills they use during such programs. The questionnaire is based on four major issues of competency based language teaching including students’ preference for learning English, students’ needs for learning English as well as assignments and
assessment. These aspects were identified by reviewing the related literature. This questionnaire employs a 5-point scale for participants to indicate the participants’ answers (5-strongly agree, 4-agree, 3-neutral, 2-disagree and 1-strongly disagree). After developing the first draft of the questionnaire, in order to assure its appropriacy in the current research context, it was piloted twice. Once on five students with characteristics the same as participants of the study to gain insights in terms of the choice of vocabulary items and grammar used in the questionnaire and once to run Chronbach Alpha for the purposes of establishing the required internal consistency. After the first piloting phase of the study, the questionnaires were collected and analyzed. Two days after that, 20 minute sessions were held with the participants to gather their viewpoints in terms of the items. The sessions unfolded following these steps:

1) The respondents were given the questionnaire and asked to respond to the items again.

2) The questionnaire filled out in this session were compared with the previously filled out one and any differences were spotted.

3) The participant was asked to answer why there was a change in the answers provided. Most of the changes were found to be rooted in respondents’ misunderstanding in terms of grammar and vocabulary items used and the instructions.

4) The findings were used to make revisions to the questionnaire. In this regard, learners’ suggestions concerning vocabulary and grammar were taken into account as well.

Some of the items were found to be rather difficult by the learners due to grammar and content. After the revisions were carried out the questionnaire was piloted again on 20 learners with the same characteristics of the participants.

The data gathered in this pilot study underwent Cronbach s Alpha to assure the internal consistency of the questionnaire. The first version of the questionnaire contained twenty items. Through the procedure of Cronbach Alpha four questions which were found to affect this index negatively were deleted in a stepwise manner. Table 1 displays the amount of Cronbach Alpha with all the items (20) included.

Table 1. Cronbach’s Alpha with all the 20 questions considered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha Based on Standardized Items</th>
<th>N of Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.569</td>
<td>.578</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the next step, those items whose deletion impacted the reliability index of Cronbach’s Alpha positively were deleted one at time until the index reached an acceptable level of .720. Tables 2 illustrates the results of Cronbach’s Alpha after deletion of four items.

Table 2. Results of Cronbach’s Alpha after deleting five of the items
Cronbach’s Alpha Based on Standardized Items | N of Items
---|---
.720 | .727 | 16

**Questionnaire on evaluating the outcomes of the implementation of Competency based language course**

The second questionnaire was devised to examine what studying skills learners employed and if they believed they had successfully obtained the required skills. The questionnaire was devised by drawing on Benson’s (2001) study. The skills included were Reading with efficiency, Scanning and skimming, Evaluating evidence, Understanding data, Note-making, Paraphrasing, Reading index and content pages effectively, Finding information quickly, Collecting information prior to do a task, Writing drafts and using relevant evidence to support claims in writing as well as different learning strategies in general.

The same steps taken for assuring the first questionnaire were adopted to make sure that this questionnaire enjoys the required reliability. To this end, the questionnaire was first piloted on five participants with the same characteristics of the participants of the study and the required revisions were carried out. Next, the questionnaire was piloted again on 20 learners with the same characteristics of the participants.

The data gathered in this pilot study underwent Cronbach’s Alpha to assure the internal consistency of this questionnaire. The first version of the questionnaire consisted of twenty five items. Through administering Cronbach’s Alpha five questions which were found to affect this index negatively were deleted in a stepwise manner. Table 3 displays the amount of Cronbach’s Alpha when all the items (25) were considered. Table 4 illustrates the index of Chronbach’s Alpha after deleting five of the items.

**Table 3. Results of Chronbach’s Alpha with all the 25 questions considered**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cronbach's Alpha</th>
<th>Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items</th>
<th>N of Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.623</td>
<td>.672</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4. Results of Chronbach’s Alpha after deleting five of the items**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cronbach's Alpha</th>
<th>Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items</th>
<th>N of Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.790</td>
<td>.799</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This questionnaire the same as the first one, uses a 5-point scale for participants to indicate the participants’ answers (5-strongly agree, 4-agree, 3-neutral, 2-disagree and 1- strongly disagree).

Semi-structured interviews

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted for the purposes of this study. A set of semi-structured interview questions were prepared regarding participants attitudes towards course design and assessment in a CBLT environment. Another set of questions was devised to address the conceptions of participants towards the outcomes of the implementation of competency based language course.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted to verify the results obtained by the questionnaires employed in this study. The main purpose of using semi-structured interviews in this study was the triangulation possibilities that they offered the researcher. Triangulation according to Richards and Schmidt (2002, p.565) is:

The process of collecting data from several different sources or in different ways in order to provide a fuller understanding of a phenomenon. Obtaining data from more than one source (e.g. interviews, observations and documents) is the most commonly used triangulation. Triangulation may also involve using multiple methods (e.g. from interviews, questionnaire, observation, schedules, test scores, etc.) Multiple researchers (i.e. the use of more than one researcher in a study), or multiple theories for the interpretation of data.

To report the results of the interviews, the content analysis approach recommended by Auerback and Silverstein (2003) was used. According to them content analysis is the most common form of analysis when dealing with qualitative data. They further enumerate six stages which the analyzer needs to go through to come up with established, meaningful patterns. These phases are namely: getting familiar with data, coming up with initial codes, looking for themes among codes, reviewing the themes, defining and labeling the themes, and producing the final report. The six stages proposed above were taken into consideration to report the interview contents.

Procedure

The individuals who met the criteria mentioned in the Participants section were contacted by the researcher. A brief description was provided about the nature of the study and the purpose of data collection. Upon teachers’ agreement to participate in the study, a package containing a copy of the two questionnaires measuring their attitudes towards competency-based language course questionnaire and their conceptions towards the outcomes of the implementation of Competency based language course was distributed among them. The participants were invited to take their time and answer the items in each of the questionnaires carefully. During the process of data collection, care was taken to consider the ethical issues of the research.
example, the teachers’ participation in the research was voluntary. Moreover, they were assured of the confidentiality of the information they provided. Also, they were informed that the collected data would be used for research purposes only.

Finally, each participant was interviewed twice. In the first interview, they were asked about their perceptions regarding learning English and its necessity. The second interview asked them about the skills they had learned as well as the application of the skills.

Results

Investigating the First Research Question

To examine the first research question initially a questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire is based on four major issues of competency based language teaching including students’ preference for learning English, students’ needs for learning English as well as assignments and assessment. These aspects were identified by reviewing the related literature. This questionnaire employs a 5-point scale for participants to indicate their answers (5-strongly agree, 4-agree, 3-neutral, 2-disagree and 1-strongly disagree).

In order to report the data, Likert scale calculation procedures were drawn on. To this end, all the respondents’ answers to an item were added up and multiplied by the respective number belonging to that scale. As stated earlier the numerical values for the strongly agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree and Strongly Disagree were 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1, respectively. As an example for the first item in Table 5 ten participants have chosen the strongly agree option, two have selected agree, eight neutral, ten disagree and five strongly disagree. The overall numerical value is calculated as follows:

\[(10 \times 5) + (2 \times 4) + (8 \times 3) + (10 \times 2) + (5 \times 1) = 107\]

It is noteworthy that the hypothetical maximum overall numbers for each item given that all the respondents choose strongly agree for that item is:

\[35 \times 5 = 175\]

And the maximum hypothetical total numerical value for each one of the Tables 5, 6, 7 and 8 would be:

\[4 \times 175 = 700\]

Table 5 displays the items related to participants’ preference for learning English as well as the Overall Numerical Value for each item calculated based on the Likert scale procedures. It should be noted at the outset that there were 35 participants all together and some of them had decided not to respond to some of the items.

Table 5. Items Related to Participants’ Preference for Learning English and the Overall Numerical Value
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Overall Numerical Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Even if I were not required to take an English language course, I would still want to take one.</td>
<td>10*(5)</td>
<td>2*(4)</td>
<td>8*(3)</td>
<td>10*(2)</td>
<td>5*(1)</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I had a choice to take a language course, I would rather choose English than another language.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whenever I write a diary, I do write it in English.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer to speak English with my classmates at university than Persian.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total Numerical Value**: 411

As it can be seen the preference of the participants towards learning English has been moderately positive. As Table 5 shows the highest overall numerical value belongs to the choice of English as a language to be learnt. Conversely, the lowest number is for diary writing.

Table 6 displays the items related to students’ needs for learning English as well as the Overall Numerical Value for each item calculated based on the Likert scale procedures.

**Table 6. Items Related to Participants’ Needs for learning English and their Overall Numerical Value**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Overall Numerical Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I want to take English courses to improve my English proficiency to achieve my academic</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
goals.
I think all university students should take English language courses since it helps them accomplish their real life goals.

| I can see the need for using English to give presentations at university or future academic conferences. | 3  | 6  | 6  | 6  | 10  | 89 |
| As an English teacher, I can clearly see the reasons for learning English. | 4  | 4  | 5  | 17 | 3   | 88 |

**Total Numerical Value** 417

As it is noticed the Participants’ Needs for learning English has also been rated moderately positive by the participants. Based on Table 6 the highest overall numerical value belongs to learning English to achieve academic goals and the lowest numerical value is for noticing the reasons for learning English.

Table 7 displays the items related to participants’ attitudes towards assignments in a competency-based language course as well as the Overall Numerical Value for each item calculated based on the Likert scale procedures.

**Table 7.** Items Related to Participants’ Attitudes towards Assignments in a Competency-based language Course and their Overall Numerical Value

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Overall Numerical value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I can see reasons for learning how to write different types of writing e.g. descriptive essays, argumentative essays etc.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Even if I am not required to do</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
assignments, I am still willing to do them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The assignments required in the course can help me improve my professional development.</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>109</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is clear to me what I need to do as assignments in the English courses I take at university.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Numerical Value 396

Based on Table 7 the Participants’ Attitudes towards Assignments is also moderately positive. As Table 7 illustrates the highest overall numerical value belongs to the item indicating the usefulness of the assignments for achieving academic goals and the lowest numerical value is for the clarity of the set assignments.

Table 8 displays the items related to participants’ attitudes towards assessment as well as the Overall Numerical Value for each item calculated based on the Likert scale procedures.

Table 8. Items Related to Participants’ Attitudes towards Assessment in a Competency-based language Course and their Overall Numerical Value

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Overall Numerical Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am well aware of what learning goals I need to achieve in the English course to get good marks.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The assessment descriptors of the course can help me focus on what learning outcomes I need to achieve.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The assessment criteria give me a</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
good idea of how much effort I need to put in order to get the grade I would like to get.

The use of descriptors of assessment removes teacher’s bias towards certain students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>8</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>117</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Total Numerical Value** 487

According to Table 8 the Participants’ Attitudes towards Assessment has also been moderately positive. As Table 8 demonstrates the highest overall numerical value belongs to the item indicating the time and energy requirements for the assessment criteria. The lowest numerical value is for the participants’ awareness in terms of the goals they are supposed to achieve during the course.

Figure 1 shows the participants’ total scores on each one of the four sections of the questionnaire along with the maximum overall hypothetical number on each section i.e. 700.

![Figure 1](image_url)

**Figure 1.** Participants’ Total scores on each one of the four sections of the questionnaire

As stated earlier in an attempt to triangulate the results gained by the questionnaire and probe further into participants’ attitudes towards competency based language learning semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview questions were as follows:
1) What is your main aim for learning English?

2) What role do the learning outcomes can play in your profession?

3) What is your idea about the importance of skills included in your English courses?

4) Do the assignments set by course instructors help you improve the kind of English you will need in the future?

5) Do you find the assessment criteria set for your courses clear and useful?

The results of content analysis run on the interview content revealed the following themes:

As for question one most of the participants mentioned career purposes as their main aim for learning English. However, a few commented that they had purposes of immigration to English speaking countries to follow.

Regarding the second question most participants mentioned that English had an important role in their profession and their professional success depended on knowing English.

Concerning the importance of the skills almost all the participant believed that the skills covered were crucially important. However, they had concerns about the way these skills were taught in the classes. Two of the participants mentioned that some of the instructors speak Persian in their classes which is a hindrance towards improving the speaking skill.

With respect to the appropriateness of the assignments set by course instructors most participants believed that the set assignments were quite appropriate. However, some participants mentioned that they find some of the assignments very difficult. Moreover, two participants held that some of the instructors do not provide the learners with due feedback on the assignments.

Regarding the clarity of the assessment criteria most participants believed that the criteria were really clear. However, three participants commented that the criteria set was way above the standards and they had to strain themselves to meet those criteria.

Investigating the Second Research Question

To explore the second research question a questionnaire was developed as well to examine what studying skills learners employed and if they believed they had successfully obtained the required skills. The questionnaire was devised by drawing on Benson’s (2001) study. The skills included were Reading with efficiency as well as Scanning and skimming, Evaluating evidence, Understanding data, Note-making, Paraphrasing, Reading index and content pages effectively, Finding information quickly, Collecting information prior to do a task, Writing drafts and using relevant evidence to support claims in writing as well as different learning strategies in general. Table 9 displays the items related to aforesaid elements as well as the corresponding numbers and percentages. For manageability purposes in presenting the data, since there are a lot of
elements, all the data was tabulated in a single table. Table 9 demonstrates the respondents’ choices as well as the corresponding overall numerical values.

**Table 9.** Respondents’ Answers to Questionnaire on evaluating the outcomes of the implementation of Competency based language course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Overall Numerical value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 During the courses I have learnt that I need to write different drafts and revise them several times before submitting my assignments</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 In the University courses I have learnt how to use a dictionary efficiently and effectively.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 In this course I have learnt tips which can help me to have better presentations e.g. how to maintain eye contact with the audience during my presentations.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 I have also learnt how to use scanning and skimming in reading to spot the information I need in a text without having to read it from the beginning to the end.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 During the English course I developed appropriate attitudes when speaking e.g. how to speak using</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
suitable words and listening to others patiently during discussions.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I have learnt how to paraphrase different texts while maintaining the main message of the text.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>During the course I learned how to take notes effectively e.g. using keywords while following the main points.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Now I can describe details of different events in simple language.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I can use content and index pages appropriately to find what I am looking for in an academic book.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>During the course I learned how to organize ideas so that they are easy to follow for the readers or listeners.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Now I can easily use the catalogues in the library to find the books I need.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Before doing a task from the things I have learnt I know that I need to collect some relevant information and then set off doing it.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>When I want to use an</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
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http://www.ijhcs.com/index.php/ijhcs/index
established fact in my writing or speaking I have now learnt how to support it using appropriate and relevant quotations.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>I have learnt that there are always different means to cross-check the information I am given e.g. other books, the Internet, classmates, other professors, the Internet, journals and magazines.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>During the course I have learnt how to find the relevant information on different topics through different means e.g. books, dictionaries, encyclopedias, the internet, etc.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>I have learnt how to screen information and materials which are useful for my academic success now and in the future.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>During the course I have learnt different strategies I can use to improve my reading.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>During the course I have learnt different strategies I can use to improve my pronunciation.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>During the course I</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
have learnt different strategies I can use to improve my grammar in an effective way.

20 During the course I have learnt different strategies I can use to improve my listening.

21 3 5 3 2 140

As Table 9 illustrates in participants’ viewpoints the goals of Reading with efficiency as well as Scanning and skimming, Evaluating evidence, Understanding data, Note-making, Paraphrasing, Reading index and content pages effectively, Finding information quickly, Collecting information prior to do a task, Writing drafts and using relevant evidence to support claims in writing as well as different learning strategies have all been moderately achieved in the course. The items rated the highest and the lowest by participants are displayed in Tables 10 and 11, respectively.

Table 10. The highest rated items on the Questionnaire on evaluating the outcomes of the implementation of Competency based language course

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>I have learnt that there are always different means to cross-check the information I am given e.g. other books, the Internet, classmates, other professors, the Internet, journals and magazines.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>143</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>During the course I have learnt different strategies I can use to improve my listening.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>140</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>During the course I have learnt different strategies I can use to improve my reading.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>126</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 11. The lowest rated items on the Questionnaire on evaluating the outcomes of the implementation of Competency based language course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Rating 1</th>
<th>Rating 2</th>
<th>Rating 3</th>
<th>Rating 4</th>
<th>Rating 5</th>
<th>Rating 6</th>
<th>Rating 7</th>
<th>Rating 8</th>
<th>Rating 9</th>
<th>Rating 10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>In the University courses I have learnt how to use a dictionary efficiently and effectively.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>79</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I can use content and index pages appropriately to find what I am looking for in an academic book.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>During the course I learned how to organize ideas so that they are easy to follow for the readers or listeners.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As mentioned earlier in an effort to triangulate the results gained by the questionnaire and delve further into outcomes of learning under the implementation of competency based language courses in Azad University based on teachers’ viewpoints semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview questions were as follows:

1) Do you find different techniques of learning (studying skills) you are being taught at this university useful?
2) Can you name some of these techniques that you frequently use?
3) Which one of these techniques do you use most frequently? Why?
4) Can you name some of the strategies you have been taught relevant to improving your language skills? Do you find them useful and practical?
5) Are there any other techniques or materials which you would like to be included in the English courses at this university other than the present ones?

The results of content analysis run on the interview content revealed the following themes:

As for the first question most of the respondents pointed out that they found the techniques really useful. Some, however, indicted that the way these techniques were presented were at times not very clear.

Concerning the second question the most frequently used techniques were using dictionaries and cross checking the data drawing on different sources. They also mentioned scanning and skimming as two techniques that they used widely while reading.
Regarding question number three the most frequent technique mentioned was the use of dictionaries appropriately to find information which was useful for all the in class tasks and set assignments.

Concerning question number four most of the participants talked about language learning strategies as being covered by the books and course instructors. Most participants also found these strategies helpful. Reading strategies were among the most useful strategies based on participants’ viewpoints.

Respecting the fifth question the participants’ answers covered the following items:

1) Free discussion sessions
2) Vocabulary learning strategies
3) Writing classes with interesting tasks
4) Teaching practice classes
5) Book clubs

Discussion

The findings of this study show that Azad University has been almost successful in implementation of CBLT. The fact that most respondents rated all the items in both questionnaires indicates that most of the goals associated with CBLT has been achieved to an acceptable level based on the participants’ viewpoints. However, some of respondents as mentioned earlier found the course not very useful due to the following reasons 1- Some instructors use Persian as the medium of instruction and communication in the classrooms. 2- Some instructors do not provide the learners with due feedback on their assignments. One of the reasons that instructors use Persian might be because of the fact that learners have already studied different fields in different schools and are different in terms of academic training and consequently their language proficiency levels vary from one learner to another. Thus, the extent to which class is successful depends by large on the learners’ active contributions to class discussions. Another barrier in the way of CBLT implementation could be is the dominant cultural views and beliefs held by the learners. In other words, in the Iranian culture mostly learners look upon the teacher as provider of the feedback.

One more reason for the possible negative attitudes of some of the participants might be the big size of the class and the inappropriate allotment of class time as the latter will influence the class interactions negatively. The implementation of teaching, using a lockstep style will make it difficult for the teacher to individually supervise the learners. In this regard, one more problem faced by L2 teachers involves time allocation in class. In fact the lack of usefulness in the viewpoints of some of the participants is due to many linguistic as well as non-linguistic variables. Yet, this problem is a global one as many countries experience the same difficulties when it comes to teaching a foreign language.
Concerning feedback, it should be noted that within the context of a competency-based class, the successful performance of tasks by the learners will result in rewards. At the outset, the learners will be assessed and their proficiency level will be determined. Then, they will participate in class tasks at their own speed. Meanwhile, they will receive many feedbacks from their teachers. Therefore, the provision of feedback as sought by some of the respondents is in line with the principles of CBLT. In this context, L2 learners know what stage they are in as well as what it takes for them to meet the competency criteria.

However, this approach has been criticized by some researchers (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Tollefson, 1986) who argue that it is beyond the practicality to identify the competencies needed for each particular situation. In contrast, proponents say that learners will be more likely to use the language in practical circumstance if they participate in clearly specified tasks and receive useful feedbacks (Docking, 1994; Rylatt&Lohan, 1997).

Regardless of different views, obviously CBLT enjoys a good status among the educators and language teachers. The successful of such a method requires both teachers and students to distance themselves from their traditional roles and take on more constructive roles. As a result of this novelty and unfamiliarity, learners may feel a climate of uncertainty in the short term. But, by the passage of the time and class progress, the benefits will surface. Of course, it should be noted that adoption of CBLT requires changes in behaviors and activities. Otherwise, the class activities will result in failure. Moreover, taking on new roles on by teachers and learners will result in more useful outcomes.

Conclusion

The present investigation sought to explore the Iranian Azad University teachers’ attitudes towards competency-based language courses particularly in terms of course design and assessment. Moreover, the study aimed to examine the outcomes of learning under the implementation of competency based language courses in this university based on teachers’ viewpoints. The results indicated that Azad University has been almost successful in implementation of CBLT. The fact that most respondents rated all the items in both questionnaires quite positively indicated that most of the goals associated with CBLT have been achieved to an acceptable level based on the participants’ viewpoints. However, as mentioned earlier some of the respondents voiced concerns in terms of the lack of appropriateness of some parts of the program. The fact that these respondents were not fully satisfied with the course materials and the components associated with it may have its roots in the attention which is to be paid to the needs of the learners.

Hyland (2006, p. 73) defines needs analysis as “the techniques for collecting and assessing information relevant to course design. It is the means of establishing the how and what of a course”. According to him:

These techniques can involve surveying students about their goals and backgrounds; consulting faculty about course requirements and academic tasks;
collecting and analyzing students’ assignments as well as authentic target texts; or observing students in their lectures and noting the linguistic and behavioral demands (Hyland, 2006, p. 78).

In this regard, Widdowson (1983) quotes Palmer’s significant remarks regarding the attention which must be paid to learners needs: “We cannot design a language course until we know something about the students for whom the course is intended, for a program of study depends on the aim or aims of the students” (p.14).

As it evident CBLT emerged partially to address the specific needs of the learners in the context of academic settings, an issue which was previously overlooked by other dominant perspectives dating back to 1970s and before. As mentioned in the above sections needs analysis is the main underlying principle in terms of designing courses for CBLT. The importance of an awareness regarding learners’ needs makes a CBLT approach based on learner and learning needs (Hutchins on and Waters, 1987) completely essential. Based on the forgoing discussions the idea of tailoring the instruction to the specifics needs of the learners given the situation and context became clear. Thus, if the learners’ needs are addressed in CBLT courses there is evidently a chance that goals of the course will be achieved more effectively and efficiently.

Another concern raised by the respondents of the present study was that course instructors failed to provide the students with due feedback on their writing assignments. In this regard instructors should pay more attention to providing feedback on the learners’ assignments and know that when feedback is specific and relevant to the task, it can improve the recipient’s attitude about the task and the feedback source (Kluger&DeNisi, 1996). However, recipients often misperceive corrective feedback, which is likely to harm the recipient’s attitude about the feedback source (Baron, 1988; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979). Thus, providing negative (or corrective) feedback is especially challenging (Fisher, 1979). Those providing corrective feedback must do so in such a way that it does not harm the recipient’s attitude. Perhaps, one of the reasons that course instructors have not provided feedback in the course investigated in the present study might have had its root in the sensitivity attached to feedback.

In fact lack of feedback provision might have its roots in the required level of awareness and expertise to carry out efficient feedback sessions. This highlights the importance of teacher evaluation and assessment programs for course instructors. In the words of Shinkfield (1994) one of the most important of all the responsibilities of educational administrators or leaders is that of assessing teacher performance. Shinkfield recommended that an administrator who is usually evaluating teachers is also responsible for presenting constructive feedback to teachers. Feedback in teacher evaluation is considered as essential in formative evaluation and has as its aim improvement in terms of teaching effectiveness and professional growth (Feeney, 2007; Shinkfield, 1994). London (1997) also stated the advantages of feedback, positing that it guides behavior, influences future work goals, and improves employees’ abilities to become conscious of their own performance deficiencies. Therefore, it is concluded that since in a CBLT program the set goals are really important teachers should receive evaluation and feedback which can consequently culminate in better outcomes for the course.
References


