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The Implementation of the Competency-Based Approach through Project-Based Pedagogy in Arabic Language Teaching: The Case of First-Year Secondary Education

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Abstract

The Algerian education system adopted the competency-based approach in its recent reforms after identifying shortcomings and limitations in previous approaches that hindered learners' effective adaptation to contemporary educational realities and their ability to integrate and apply what they had learned. Project-based pedagogy is one of the integrative approaches adopted to put competencies into practice.

This paper examines the practical implementation of project-based pedagogy in Arabic language teaching at secondary-school level. It addresses two central questions: Is project-based pedagogy actively used in secondary education? And is its implementation consistent with the objectives and requirements of the competency-based approach? To achieve the study's objectives, we designed a questionnaire for twenty (20) secondary-school Arabic language teachers to establish the extent to which the competency-based approach is implemented through project activities.

Keywords: Competence; Integration; Pedagogy; Project; Educational Reform.

Introduction

The Algerian education system has undergone major transformations, bringing educational and pedagogical developments that reflect changes across different areas of life. Among the most significant has been the adoption of the competency-based approach as an important reform option. This orientation is principally concerned with enabling learners to construct their own knowledge within a new educational vision and to acquire competencies that allow them to adapt to the emerging challenges of a rapidly changing world.

Project-based teaching represents a practical step towards implementing the new approach. Project-based pedagogy has been incorporated into the curriculum as an integrative educational activity in which learners take part in collaborative work. This reinforces integration across different activities and even subjects and increases pupils' responsibility for their learning in pursuit of tangible outcomes and targeted competencies.

In this paper, entitled "The Implementation of the Competency-Based Approach through Project-Based Pedagogy in the Arabic Language Curriculum: Secondary Education as a Case Study", we seek to establish the current state of this educational approach among secondary-school teachers, taking the first-year common-core Science and Technology stream as the focus of the study. Our main question is: To what extent is project-based pedagogy implemented in secondary education, particularly in the first-year common-core Science and Technology stream?

The distinctive aim of this research is to offer theoretical insights and field data on the application of project-based pedagogy, clarify uncertainties surrounding the mechanisms of its implementation, and encourage teachers to adopt it by highlighting its effectiveness in integrating different learning methods.

We adopted a descriptive-analytical approach, targeting a sample of teachers of first-year pupils in secondary schools in Djelfa Province. A questionnaire was used as the research instrument to examine the actual implementation of project-based pedagogy in educational practice.

1. Why the Competency-Based Approach?

The competency-based approach emerged as a new option for enriching learning, improving its quality and responding to changes in different areas of life. It became necessary to link schools and their outcomes to social life and to give learning value and meaning by transforming it into practical competencies that learners could use in daily life. This approach marked an important shift from rote instruction to actual practice by placing learners in a pedagogical problem situation in which they must mobilise and integrate prior learning to solve the problem. Teaching methods were also diversified to avoid routine, through educational projects, collaborative group work and immediate assessment of work situations (Ahmed Ibrahim Ahmed, 2006, p. 63).

2. Project-Based Pedagogy

Rachida Aït Abdessalam considers project-based learning an attempt to transfer school knowledge into social life. A project gives learning meaning and is completed through stages (idea, planning, use of

resources, completion of tasks, achievement of a competency, etc.). It also encourages collaboration with classmates. In this way, projects overcome the opposition between school and life and seek to fulfil the school's aims (Aït Abdessalam, Rachida, p. 29).

According to Philippe Perrenoud, a project involves a set of tasks in which learners participate actively, with roles differing from one individual to another according to the distribution of tasks (Perrenoud, Philippe, 2002). A project is therefore a collaborative group activity through which learners carry out meaningful tasks by integrating learning across subject boundaries.

3. Characteristics of Project-Based Pedagogy

What distinguishes projects from other activities is their practical and collective nature, which enables learners to be creative and innovative and to choose classmates with whom to work collaboratively. This strengthens social relationships and affection among learners and enables them to learn from one another, so that a pupil can become a teacher and guide to classmates. Projects also open opportunities for initiative, drawing upon different subjects and mobilising a variety of resources across areas of knowledge. In addition, they foster cognitive development and self-reliance through practical activities (Zaid Al-Huwaidi, 2006, p. 217).

4. Objectives of Project-Based Learning

Project-based pedagogy aims to increase learning motivation through tasks and questions that learners attempt to address beyond the confines of the educational institution. It develops their abilities independently of the teacher and raises their attainment to higher levels of thinking as they apply knowledge and skills to find solutions, propose explanations and hypotheses, draw conclusions and make judgements.

It also seeks to establish integration and connections among school subjects, on the one hand, and between learners' knowledge and social life, on the other. Furthermore, it promotes forms of assessment beyond pen-and-paper exercises. Teachers become closer to their pupils and get to know them better. Pupils have greater freedom while undertaking a project than when providing short written answers, which may cause anxiety because of the fear of making mistakes. Another objective is to enable learners to teach others by presenting their projects to classmates and answering their questions. This increases their self-confidence and their classmates' confidence in them, while also deepening their own understanding of the project (Saidi, Abdullah, and Al-Balushi, Suleiman, 2009, p. 161).

5. Project-Based Learning Activity Plan

A project is an integrative activity planned within Arabic language learning activities and a specified timeframe. The following table sets out its stages and the activities of teachers and pupils:

Stage	Teacher	Pupil	Duration
Introduction and presentation of the project	Invites observation; introduces and contextualises the project; encourages expression and checks comprehension; identifies context, instructions and outputs.	Observes and analyses the project; understands the context; answers questions; speaks, discusses and collaborates.	One hour
Carrying out the project (task)	Allows pupils to complete the task; monitors, supports and guides; records difficulties and proposes assistance.	Works individually and in groups; shares roles; produces the required work.	According to the project
Evaluation and follow-up	Assesses and corrects errors; makes judgements and proposes improvements.	Assembles work; evaluates and completes the tasks.	According to the project

6. Field Study

Sample by gender

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Female	7	35%
Male	13	65%

The selected sample comprises 13 male teachers (65%) and seven female teachers (35%).

Sample by academic qualification

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Higher Teachers' College	3	15%
Licence degree	15	75%
Master's degree	2	10%

The table shows that 75% of the sample hold a licence degree, 15% graduated from the Higher Teachers' College (secondary-school teachers), and the remaining 10% hold a master's degree.

Presentation and analysis of results

Theme One: Training for Teaching through Project-Based Pedagogy

Are you convinced of the value of project-based pedagogy as a teaching method?

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	17	85%
No	3	15%

Eighty-five per cent of teachers expressed acceptance of and confidence in teaching through this pedagogy, whereas the remaining 15% were unconvinced and did not state their reasons.

Have you received training in project-based pedagogy?

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	10	50%
No	10	50%

Responses show that half the sample (50%) had not received training in project-based teaching. This is attributed to the nature of their initial education, since most held a licence degree and had not benefited from specialised training in teaching Arabic language activities.

Do teachers need continuing training in this pedagogy?

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	20	100%
No	0	0%

All respondents (100%) believed that they needed continuing training in project-based pedagogy and the competency-based approach, which remain difficult to implement in actual educational practice.

Results and analysis

The responses to the first questionnaire theme show that, although half the sample (50%) had not received training in project-based pedagogy, they did not wish to undertake such training. Eighty-five per cent expressed acceptance of and confidence in this teaching approach, while 15% did not give reasons for their lack of conviction. Nevertheless, everyone (100%) considered continuing training in project-based pedagogy and the competency-based approach necessary.

These responses reveal a contradiction in teachers' views. Although they recognise the need for training in this area, teachers, particularly those without previous training, do not wish to undertake it. Perhaps field experience and practice have led them to regard training as unnecessary; some may be unconvinced by the results of this pedagogy, or may believe that training alone is insufficient for teachers to fulfil their role and that other needs must also be met.

Theme Two: Working Conditions

Do projects require suitable working conditions for their implementation?

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	20	100%
No	0	0%

All teachers (100%) affirmed that a range of conditions contribute to the success of project-based teaching and make the teacher's role easier.

Do teaching resources play an important role in the success of project-based teaching?

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Always	18	90%
Sometimes	2	10%

The table shows that 90% of teachers believe teaching resources always play an important role in the success of project-based pedagogy, while 10% believe that they sometimes play this important role.

Does school administration play an important role in the success of teachers' educational work?

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	18	90%
No	2	10%

Ninety per cent of teachers considered the administration important in facilitating projects in practice, providing the following examples and proposals:

Provision of appropriate teaching materials and equipment.

Organisation of academic meetings.

Organisation of exploratory field visits.

Provision of the necessary books and publications.

Results and analysis

Responses to the second questionnaire theme confirm that several factors contribute to implementing project-based pedagogy. First are teaching resources: 90% of respondents believe that these always play an important role in successful teaching through projects, whereas 10% believe that they sometimes do.

All teachers considered the administration important in facilitating the practical implementation of projects. Their main proposals were as follows:

Provide suitable teaching resources and equipment, organise academic meetings and exploratory field visits, and make the necessary books and publications available.

These are all feasible activities that school administrators can organise to facilitate teachers' use of this pedagogy. They reflect teachers' needs in achieving acceptable results and indicate the importance of collective efforts to make this collaborative, integrative pedagogy successful.

Theme Three: Pupils' Level

Is project-based teaching an ambitious but difficult programme?

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	18	90%
No	2	10%

Teachers' responses show that 90% endorsed the view that project-based teaching is ambitious but difficult, while the remaining 10% did not attach value to project-based teaching.

Do you think pupils are incapable of undertaking this role?

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	20	100%
No	0	0%

All teachers (100%) agreed that pupils were unable to assume this active role or manage a project without the teacher's intervention.

Have pupils become more engaged in activities than under previous approaches?

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	18	90%
No	2	10%

Ninety per cent of teachers confirmed that pupils had become more engaged in learning activities than under previous approaches, while 10% held the opposite view.

Can pupils now solve their learning problems easily?

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	3	15%
No	17	85%

Eighty-five per cent of teachers considered pupils unable to solve their learning problems easily; the remaining 15% believed that they could.

Have pupils become active participants in constructing their own learning?

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	1	5%
No	19	95%

Most teachers (95%) denied that pupils were able to construct their own learning, whereas 5% considered them capable of doing so.

Results and analysis

Responses to the third questionnaire theme, concerning pupils' level, show that teachers endorsed the view that project-based teaching is ambitious but difficult to implement because pupils are, in their opinion, not yet able to take responsibility for constructing their learning.

A majority (90%) confirmed that pupils had become more engaged in activities than under previous approaches. Eighty-five per cent believed pupils could not readily solve learning problems, while the remaining 15% believed that they could. An overwhelming majority (95%) denied that pupils could construct their own learning.

These responses suggest that pupils have not adapted to project-based pedagogy because, in the teachers' view, their level does not equip them to construct their own learning and participate

successfully in the learning process. This adds to the teacher's task, requiring continual intervention and assistance.

Theme Four: Evaluation of the Project-Based Teaching Process

I consider project-based pedagogy an effective teaching method.

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	12	60%
No	8	40%

Teachers differed in their assessment of project-based teaching compared with other educational methods: 60% regarded it as effective and beneficial, while 40% held the opposite view.

I believe that providing a suitable learning environment increases the effectiveness of this pedagogy.

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	20	100%
No	0	0%

All teachers believed that a suitable learning environment improves the effectiveness of implementing this pedagogy.

I believe that implementing project-based pedagogy improves teaching and learning.

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	20	100%
No	0	0%

All teachers considered that implementing this pedagogy would develop and improve teaching and learning.

Results and analysis

Teachers differed in their views on the effectiveness of project-based teaching compared with other methods: 60% regarded it as effective and beneficial, whereas 40% disagreed. All believed that a suitable learning environment would increase its effectiveness and that teachers' implementation of it would improve teaching and learning. Concerning the conditions considered necessary for successful project-based teaching, we recorded a list of four elements, ordered by frequency of mention, as follows:

Reduce class sizes: an ideal class should have no more than 15 pupils.

Reduce the teaching and learning workload of pupils and teachers so that they can fulfil their tasks comfortably and completely.

Provide continuing training for teachers to improve their abilities. Since the world is changing rapidly, we must keep pace with educational developments and train the teachers who prepare the future generation.

It can be concluded that although project-based teaching is still at an experimental stage and most teachers do not implement it, some have judged it ineffective relative to previous methods. This does not mean, however, that it is inherently unsuccessful or ineffective, particularly as a comparable proportion endorse its benefits. A suitable learning environment and teachers' conviction in this active, collaborative pedagogy remain essential for its proper implementation.

Theme Five: The Actual Implementation of Project-Based Pedagogy

Have you completed all the projects scheduled for the first-year common-core Science and Technology stream?

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	5	25%
No	15	75%

Teachers' responses varied regarding the number of projects scheduled for the first-year Science and Technology stream. Some did not know how many were required, indicating that they had not completed them. Seventy-five per cent had not completed all projects, while only 15% had completed them.

Do you find it difficult to implement project-based pedagogy?

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	17	85%
No	3	15%

Most teachers (85%) reported difficulty implementing project-based pedagogy and attributed this to several obstacles, notably:

Class sizes exceeding 40 pupils.

Working conditions and the time allocated to project activity (the final 15 minutes of the written-expression correction lesson).

Uncertainty about how to implement it, since they had received no training in the new pedagogical approaches.

Does the density of the syllabus lead you to dispense with project activity?

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	19	95%
No	1	5%

Most teachers (95%) considered that the crowded syllabus forced them to forgo project activity, while the remaining 5% believed the syllabus was compatible with the available time and that completing projects posed no problem.

During your initial training or educational seminars, did you receive guidance on project-based teaching?

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	3	15%
No	17	85%

Eighty-five per cent of teachers had received no guidance on project-based teaching, while 15% had received initial training during educational seminars.

Do you consider the time allocated to project activity sufficient to achieve the intended competencies?

Response / category	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	3	15%
No	17	85%

Eighty-five per cent of teachers considered the time allocated to project activity insufficient to achieve its intended competencies, while the remaining 15% regarded it as sufficient.

Results and analysis

Teachers' responses varied concerning the number of projects scheduled for the first-year Science and Technology stream. Some did not even know the number, which indicates that they had not completed them. Seventy-five per cent had not completed all the projects, for several reasons, most importantly:

The difficulty of implementation under existing conditions. Some teachers see no benefit in projects and regard them as a waste of time, while others believe that they are inappropriate to the nature of a literary subject, arguing that projects are better suited to scientific and technical subjects.

Most teachers (85%) also reported difficulties in implementing project-based pedagogy, attributing them mainly to:

Class sizes exceeding 40 pupils, alongside working conditions and the time allocated to project activities.

Uncertainty about how to implement this approach, since they had not received training in the new pedagogical methods.

The responses to the fifth theme suggest that most teachers do not complete projects with their pupils. Indeed, many do not even know how many projects are scheduled during the year. They find implementation difficult because they lack training in project-based teaching and because of working conditions. It cannot be implemented in classes exceeding 40 pupils, and the allocated time is wholly insufficient: one hour every three weeks does not allow a project to be completed.

8. Conclusion

Our examination of school realities suggests that before introducing any educational innovation, whether in curricula or teaching methods, the conditions and resources needed for its effective implementation must be provided. There is a substantial gap between what exists and what ought to exist.

The Ministry of National Education should therefore reconsider educational infrastructure and philosophy and provide a suitable environment for applying the competency-based approach in its various forms. The most prominent obstacles include:

Overcrowded classrooms, with more than 40 pupils.

Weak coordination between different subjects.

Inadequate initial training for some teachers, as the education sector in Algeria has become a means of absorbing unemployment. Today, we urgently need creative teachers who can respond to changes and new developments, incorporate them into teaching and learning, and perform their evolving role imaginatively and creatively in accordance with contemporary educational orientations.

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