The Construction of Transcurricular Competencies in Algerian EFL Course: A Textbook Analysis

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Abstract

This paper looks into the implementation of the interdisciplinary curriculum in Algerian EFL course from the perspectives of both broad areas of learning and learning process. It analyses two textbooks, Spotlight on English Book 3 and Getting Through, belonging respectively to the middle and secondary school levels. The analysis shows that the designers have adopted the Interpretation, Constructivist Design (ICON) Model (O'Mallet and Chamot 1990) and restricted its use to the strategy of generating and testing hypotheses. Our main findings underscore the constructivist orientation of the curriculum and underline three important flaws in the textbooks: one, the activities are not purposive in questioning for information and cooperation; two, the generating strategy serves as a learning strategy rather than as a learning process; three, the stages of multiple interpretations and manifestations are rarely attained, leaving little opportunity for knowledge transfer to real life contexts.

Introduction

This article inquires into Algerian English textbooks to see the extent to which they reflect the interdisciplinary orientation of the curriculum. The importance of Interdisciplinarity in education is asserted by Piaget, who writes: "the result for education is that an increasingly large place must be reserved for new points of view-interdisciplinary by nature-like those that are being developed today by psycholinguistics, decision theory, economy, psychology, sociology, etc" (1973:33). Piaget believes that developing cross-curricular competencies in learners, on the basis of "big concepts"/"broad areas of learning", helps them shift to a new profile of autonomous learners. For him, broad areas of learning, which are interdisciplinary in nature, result into an imperative drive which combines different areas of knowledge and skills, looks critically at personal, social, and cultural environments,

and promotes connections between social learning and community life outside school by building relationships between autonomous subjects.

Echoing Piaget's concern with interdisciplinarity, Algerian EFL syllabus designers have encouraged learners to relate different areas of knowledge so as to look critically at their social and cultural environment. For example, the national curriculum of the Ministry of education reads: "Il faut favoriser l'interdisciplinarité en abordant des thèmes étudiés dans d'autres disciplines scolaires en vue de l'intégration de tous les acquis de l'apprenant". (2005 a: 91). Concerning the teaching method, it is made clear that "Elle (the method) réduit l'écart entre la vie scolaire et la vie réelle. Elle permet à l'élève de faire appel à des connaissances pluridisciplinaires, de découvrir ses valeurs et de réfléchir sur ses attitudes. Ce type d'appropriation des savoirs dépasse le cadre fragmentaire des activités scolaires habituelles et ne peut exister que dans un cadre de tache globale". (2005b: 5)

Taking hold of the importance of interdiscilinarity in education and the orientation of the Algerian curriculum towards broad areas of learning, we will investigate two textbooks belonging to two different study-levels: Spotlight on English Book Three, (Middle School) and Getting Through, (Secondary School). Before then, a definition of the interdisciplinary curriculum is in order.

Method

Interdisciplinary curriculum falls under the scope of the Learner-Driven Approach and is grounded in Integrative Education and constructivism. Jacobs (1989: 8) defines it as: "a knowledge view of curriculum approach that consciously applies methodology and language from more than one discipline to examine theme, issue, problem, topic, or experience". Almost the same view is expressed by Everett (in K, Lake, 1994), who perceives interdisciplinary curriculum as an active project that combines several subjects into one; a project presented in the way a subject is encountered in the real world.

For Brooks and Brooks, broad areas of learning (1993) constitute the first element of an interdisciplinary curriculum and reflect various aspects of real life. With the use of broad areas of learning, learners find it easy to make connections between a diversity of subjects on the one hand, and between school and real life contexts, on the other. Big concepts embrace a large educational scope and can take various forms. It can be an issue, a problem, a time period, an institution, an idea, etc. In other words, a broad area of learning should raise a question that is too broad for any discipline alone to answer fully. It has various advantages. First, time and content are less fragmented as learning is tackled in larger blocks, and learners spend more time looking at topics in depth. Second, it promotes metacognitive awareness and

offers more opportunities for reflection and cognitive linkages. The alternatives in this respect become more obvious if we consider that "wholes" provide the needed patterns and connections for more complex reasoning by engaging knowledge, strategies, and competencies that transcend the boundaries of disciplines.

In addition to being 'big concepts', broad areas of learning involve also a process, or procedure, since they are conducive to the construction of the mind. They also imply learning strategies, such as those involved in O'Mallet's and Chamot's Interpretation, Constructivist Design (ICON) Model (1990: 138). These strategies are five in number: elaboration, cooperation, questioning for information, self-monitoring, self-evaluation. The two authors define them as follows:

1) *Elaboration* is a cognitive strategy. It is defined as "relating new information to prior knowledge, relating different parts of new information to each other; making meaningful personal associations to information presented". This strategy is used in the ICON second stage related to interpretation construction. O'Mallet and Chamot add that elaboration "may be a general category for other strategies such as imagery, summarisations, transfer and deduction".

(2) *Cooperation* is a social strategy which sets constructivist study support environment favourable for learners to work "together with one or more peers to solve a problem, pool information on oral or written performance, check a learning task, model language activity or get a feedback".

(3) *Questioning for information* is a "socio-affective strategy". Learners use it for eliciting from a teacher or peer additional explanations, rephrasing, examples or verifications. This strategy is used in the ICON fourth and sixth stages related respectively to cognitive apprenticeship and multiple interpretations.

 (4) *Self-monitoring* is a metacognitive strategy related to the checking of one's understanding during the performance of the activity. This strategy is used when learners access prior experience and a diversity of contextual materials to facilitate interpretation and argumentation.

(5) Self-evaluation relates to a metacognitive strategy which serves for "checking the outcomes of one's own language learning against a standard after it has been completed" (ibid). This strategy is used in the ICON fifth stage related to collaboration.

It is interesting at this point to describe how the ICON model is processed. At the outset, learners start encountering authentic situations in which authentic artefacts are observed for a given purpose. Then they begin to construct their arguments and propose interpretations. To refine their arguments and validate their interpretations, learners have access to their experience and a diversity of contextual materials. They are guided and tutored to master the processes of **observation**, **interpretation**, and **contextualisation**, and they need to collaborate in observation, interpretation, and contextualisation phases. By being exposed to **multiple interpretations**, **collaboration**, and **cognitive apprenticeship**, learners gain flexibility. **Multiple manifestations** of the same interpretation allow learners to gain transferability to other contexts and situations.

Materials

1- Middle School Textbook: <u>Spotlight on English Book three</u>

The textbook comprises four units. Every unit relates to a theme evolving around different linguistic and cultural aspects. Four major themes flesh out the textbook: **Communications** (mass media (radio, television internet), **Travel** (planning a visit: Travelling by plane, car, and bus), **Work and play** (life at school, sea life, community life), and **Around the world (**a country profile).The textbook evolves around these four socio-cultural themes to develop learners' personal and social competencies, particularly those dealing with the adoption of positive behaviours and attitudes towards people and the environment. Meantime, it is expected that the learning process that constructs learners' linguistic and communicative competencies reflects learners' socio-economic realities in the community at large.

2- Secondary School Textbook: <u>Getting Through</u>

<u>Getting Through</u> evolves around a variety of broad areas of learning. By including such several different types of broad areas of learning, the textbook designers' intention was to meet the interest of teenagers (learners between 15 to 17 years old) and to offer opportunities for learners to encounter problem-situations. These different strands have been distributed in the textbook as follows: (1) *Signs of the Time*, which relates to lifestyles; (2) *Make Peace*, which relates to peace, conflict resolutions and human rights; (3) *Waste Not, Want Not*, which is concerned with pollution, world resources and sustainable development; (4) *A Budding Scientist*, which describes scientific and technological advances; (5) *News and Tales*, which deals with the impact of mass media and literature; (6) *No Man is an Island*, which is interested in charity and solidarity and the role of youth and organisations in

disasters; (7) *Science or Fiction?* which relates to the world of fiction; and (8) *Business Is Business*, which highlights elements of life in Society.

What can be noted, from the above, is that the broad areas of study refer to a diversity of social concerns. They also provide opportunities for learners to engage as individuals or groups in a diversity of actions for the benefit of others. Areas such as the world of fiction and the impact of mass-media and literature are conducive to critical thought and involvement.

Results and Discussion

The following discussion is conducted within the frame of Brooks and Brooks' (1993) implementation of constructivist principles in the classroom. To achieve this objective, the two authors suggest five principles: (1) pose problems that are or will be relevant to the students; (2) structure learning around essential concepts; (3) be aware that students' points of view are windows into their reasoning; (4) adapt curriculum to address students' suppositions and development; (5) assess students' learning in the context of teaching.

However, since our concern in this paper is limited to the investigation of the use of broad areas of study (not the implementation of a whole constructivist curriculum), our discussion will revolve around two aspects of the textbooks (**content** and **procedure**), with reference to Brooks and Brooks first two principles, namely (1) pose problems that are or will be relevant to the students, and (2) structure learning around essential concepts. These two principles highlight the necessity to design textbooks around learners' interests and concerns, with a focus on the interdisciplinary aspect of broad areas of learning from which emanate problem situations leading to the construction of competencies.

1- Spotlight on English Book Three

a- Broad Areas of Learning

Regarding Brooks and Brook's second constructivist orientation specific to posing problems that are or will be relevant to students' interests and preoccupations, a good illustration can be provided by Unit Three in which community issues such as school life, and social community life are given much attention . These two societal issues are of peculiar appeal to young people in general and Algerian youth in particular, because Algeria is a Mediterranean country where traditions of community life are well established. The designers' choice is motivated by the necessity to help learners make connections between school knowledge and everyday life competencies.

Concerning learners' respect to the environment, a good illustration can be found in the socio-cultural theme related to sea-life in Unit Three (3: 94-95) in which students are helped to adopt behaviours and attitudes towards the protection of sea life in particular and animal

life and environment in general. The belief is that teaching students through classroom practice how their actions may affect the environment at large contributes to awareness rising.

Another significant "big idea" which is given prominence in the aforementioned unit is community life (school life, school project on the environment, nomadic life in and outside the learners' country,) with the diversity of traditions (through clothing and monuments), beliefs, values and ideologies. Sea-life and community life can be considered as types of broad areas of learning which, in Brooks and Brooks view pose problems that are or will be relevant to students.

b- The Cross-Curricular Intellectual Competency

The reference to the ICON model in <u>Spotlight on English Book Three</u> seems to be kept within the limits of the three first phases: observation, interpretation construction, and contextualisation. This limitation in the learning process does not provide grounds for transfer to real life contexts. One of the missing phases that could have been of real support is **collaboration.** In this regard, we wish to emphasize the point that "cooperate instructions", which set forth the two fundamental aspects of collaboration (namely "cooperate with others" and "managing interactions"), have not been given much consideration in the textbook. The reason seems to be that the textbook designers have not borrowed the constructivist principle of generating and testing hypotheses as a **process**; instead, they have put it within the limits of a **learning strategy.**

The lack of instruction referring to collaborative learning does not facilitate learners' interactions in the use of learning strategies. Designers could have appealed to **collaboration** which is a very important aspect of social constructivist learning characteristic of Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development".

It is, now, widely acknowledged that teamwork contributes to the development of knowledge by creating opportunities to compare views and procedures for the sake of negotiating ways of doing things. A constructivist classroom fosters cooperation to face the complexity of tasks which need subject-specific knowledge and cross-curricular competencies. Cooperating with others demands establishing work rules, collaborating action, mutual support, sharing resources, and sharing responsibilities. It is, therefore, the school's responsibility to construct learners' socialization which is conducive to the acquisition of the social competency based on values as important as learners' self-affirmation respectful of specificities and differences, consideration for other people's opinions, openness to diversity, non-violence. In short, the school's responsibility within a constructivist perspective goes beyond the boundaries of the classroom as it has become a powerful agent of socialization.

Being itself a community which fights exclusion, a constructivist school should act as agents of social cohesion by helping learners to learn living in groups so as to foster the feeling of being a member of a community.

The examination of the learning process implemented in <u>Spotlight on English Book Three</u> reveals the designers' orientation as regards the adaptation of the ICON model. There is some evidence that emphasis is put on hypothesis making on the basis of inferences. The latter have been widely used in the oral, writing, and grammar skills. The sharp distinction between the original ICON Model and the adapted model is that the former is overarched by process whereas the latter is under the banner of strategy.

To conclude, one may say that, by escaping the ICON Model as a whole entity, and by focussing exclusively on the first three phases, the textbook designers ignored the impact of the phases related to multiple interpretations and collaboration. It would not be surprising, therefore, that, because they are deprived of the multiple manifestations of the same interpretation phase, learners will remain incapable of gaining competencies that lead to knowledge and skills transferability to other contexts and situations.

To achieve autonomy, the Algerian school must, therefore, help learners to develop the ability to transfer classroom learning to real life contexts for the purpose of equipping them with learning to learn processes. The development of cross-curricular competencies (more specifically the intellectual competency) is the key to the construction of autonomy, which remains the fundamental goal of a constructivist school as far as the interdisciplinary dimension of curricular and textbooks is concerned.

The Secondary School Textbook: <u>Getting Through</u>

a- The Broad Areas of Learning

<u>Getting Through</u> displays a diversity of "broad areas of study" related to society in general and learners' interest in particular. By and large, the textbook shows "big ideas" in every unit, what denotes quite accurately the effectiveness of the designers' claim that the interdisciplinary orientation of the syllabus will be transposed in the textbook.

The broad area of learning that runs through Unit One entitled *Signs of the Time* relates to a diversity of lifestyles. Regarding the personal and social competency, Unit One has the objective of developing an attitude of openness to the world via the diversity in lifestyles (eating habits, clothes). Equally important is the evidence that encourages learners to develop an active relationship with a diversity of ways of life for the sake of gaining an attitude of understanding of the Other.

Unit Two, entitled *Make peace*, is related to peace, conflict resolutions and human rights. Learners are taught to be open to compromise. Obviously, writing a class charter and demonstrating community membership are inseparable.

The main goal of Unit Three is to construct learners' awareness to their environmental and consumer rights and responsibilities. Unit Four focuses mainly on scientific and technological achievements. Its purpose is to develop an attitude of critical appreciation and curiosity as regard scientific and technological progress in relation to oneself, to family, and to community at large.

Unit Five, which deals with "News and tales", shows the impact of the mass media and literature on people's lives. Unit Six, sketched in a similar way, attempts to equip learners with an attitude of empathy. It evolves around the role of youth and organizations in periods of disasters and urgent needs. The notions of charity and solidarity are the best manifestations of the texts inserted in the unit.

Unit Seven, "Science or Fiction?" shows that a positive attitude towards technological knowledge, products and processes, and the understanding of science and technology have positive impacts on the natural world. This broad area of learning leads to a better understanding of the advances, limitations, and risks of science and technology.

The last significant "whole" which is given prominence in the textbook is life in society. Entitled "Business is Business", its most fundamental focus is the development of citizenship and community life. This Unit develops an attitude of openness to the world and respect for diversity in addition to the development of ethical competence.

Other strands, such as life styles and fashion, eating habits, modern ways of communication (mobile phones, internet) meet the interest of learners whose life concerns are taken in charge by the school textbooks. These specific broad areas of learning are meant to ensure that students develop a sense of responsibility for adopting good living habits with respect to health, safety and effectiveness. The objective is to make students aware of the impact of their choices on their health and well-being.

The second type of areas of learning resides in controversial issues which entail diverse perceptions and opinions. In this perspective, "pollution" (Unit 3 p.54), "rights of children (Unit 2 p.56), "conservation of water and energy" (Unit 3 p. 68), seek to raise the critical awareness of learners through problem-solution processing. As regards "pollution" and "conservation of water and energy" students are made aware of the interdependence between the environment in general and human activity which can endanger biodiversity. To this end, students are taught the effects of the use of technology and the habits and attitudes

that ensure the protection of environment. By setting interdependence between school and society, syllabi and textbooks respond to the constructivist trend whose objective is to develop a responsible citizen.

When tackled from a constructivist vision of education, the above issues are likely to encourage learners to face controversy and to enhance their ability to make judgements when dealing with contrary to fact opinions. Unlike themes, broad areas of learning entail diverse perceptions and opinions on the part of learners. They seek to increase their understanding and tolerance, as well as to raise their critical awareness. It is worth noting however that apart from competency development in the core discipline, (here, English as the subject area), an interdisciplinary unit serves for complex reasoning by engaging students in knowledge acquisition, low and high-order skill construction, from a variety of disciplines. Through the broad area of learning related to the mass media and art, the educational aim of Unit Five, for example, is to enable students to master the different modes of communication, helping them to develop the critical judgement necessary to take full advantage of the possibilities offered by different media. In short, the main goal is not only the use of media-related materials and communication codes, but the exercise of critical judgment as well.

b- The Cross-Curricular Intellectual Competency

Through the process of guidance and gradation illustrated by the language practice section, the textbook designers made it clear from the start that their choice sticks to the BIG constructivist version of the ICON Model. Based on the premise that learners need to possess pre-requisites before being autonomized, they resolved to develop linguistic and communicative competencies as necessary conditions for learning to learn.

In our view, the solution is to combine the series of exercises and activities with the *questioning for information* strategy to pave the way to interaction among peers and between learners and the teacher for the purpose of getting additional assistance to construct arguments. Under these conditions, the Discovering Language section would show characteristics of the **cognitive apprenticeship** element of the ICON Model.

The choice made by the textbook designers is radically different because the collaboration phase has been completely ignored. The procedure set forth in the textbook shows features that resemble more the structural situational model of teaching whose view of language practice is deprived of the communicative dimension and cooperative learning.

To sum up, in Discovering Language section, the textbook designers adapted the ICON Model by using it for eliciting right answers to questions of comprehension and grammar.

They used it as a paradigm for the acquisition of linguistic and communicative competencies exclusively.

Known as a model which embraces inquiry learning and propositions about problem situations and issues, in other words "big concepts", rather than discrete points of grammar, this model needs to be given an imperative drive towards the construction of autonomous learning. In the Practice section, it defeats the spirit of the ICON Model, because it does not serve as cognitive apprenticeship that helps learners to *question for information*. The procedure applied in the practice section espouses the Structural-Situational approach whose objective is to teach grammar in context in order to add meaning to the grammatical items. The main objective of the designers is obviously to open opportunities for learners to acquire the linguistic and the communicative competencies which are seen as prerequisites for the construction of broader competencies such as the intellectual competency.

The choice of such a model by the textbook designers can be explained by the specificity of the Algerian educational field which was immersed in the structural trend and subsequently in the weak version of the Communicative Approach. Moved by the need to accompany both learners and teachers in their shift to constructivist learning, the textbook designers seem to have opted for a transitional phase. They have probably felt the need for teachers' large backing for the purpose of fostering a smooth change, on the one hand, and giving time for the shift from teacher-centred teaching to learner-centred learning, on the other. Hence, the BIG version of the ICON Model is followed with some modifications: hypothesis making is used as a strategy more than once in a unit, and cognitive apprenticeship and contextualisation are used for linguistic and communicative practice. The point to emphasize again is that cognitive apprenticeship and contextualisation are more profitable if combined with **collaboration** and the **cooperation** strategy.

As a consequence, important problems are left unanswered. For how are the skills and the thinking process transferred from school to real life environment? And what places do metacognition and reflection (in a word critical thinking) hold in this process? As already noted, the process of critical thinking is restricted to hypothesis making and checking via inference, deduction, and prediction strategies. Accordingly, the *Discovering Language* section is enclosed within the limits of hypothesis making and linguistic competence acquisition. This limitation reflects the traditional orientation of the old curriculum towards the Transmissionist Teaching Model and its corollary the teacher-centred teaching approach. It also raises important issues related to the measures that should accompany the reform, mainly those linked to the teacher's profile.

In sum, by restricting the ICON Model to a strategy, the textbook designers missed two important stages of the ICON Model, namely the **multiple interpretations**, and the **multiple manifestations** which give the lion share to the process of transferability to real life contexts.

Conclusion

The conclusion to which we are led with regard to the interdisciplinary dimension of the Algerian English Language textbooks is that a diversity of broad areas of learning has been designed in line with the constructivist orientation. As regards the process, our investigation has shown that the designers have adapted the ICON model and restricted its use to "generating and testing hypotheses", what drives us to say that it serves as a learning strategy rather than as a learning process.

This pedagogical option in English Language Learning in the Algerian textbooks can be explained by the difficult shift that should be made from a traditional subject-specific curriculum which had been in use in the Algerian Schools for a long time, to an integrated curriculum. According to Kathy Lake's (1994) point of view, the textbook designers' procedure is still valid, since: "Rather than move from a traditional, subject-specific curriculum to an integrated curriculum in one sudden sweep, schools find more success when they make gradual changes, making sure that everyone involved feels a sense of ownship of and commitment to the change". In other words, when adopting such a view, learners and teachers prevent themselves from following unproductive paths.

Some remarks deserve, however, much attention in terms of course objectives and methodology. In this respect, both Spotlight on English Book Three and Getting Through adapted the ICON Model for the sake of equipping learners with the linguistic competence, neglecting, thus, the field of critical thinking attitudes which construct autonomy. A good illustration of this flaw is the learning environment provided in the textbooks activities which are not purposive in questioning for information and cooperation. Besides, the stages of multiple interpretations and manifestations are rarely attained, leaving little opportunity for knowledge transfer to real life contexts.

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