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## Competency-based approach assessment strategies: Theory versus practice in Cameroon

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### Abstract

The current trend in second language teaching in Cameroon is that of a shift from the Objective based approach also called the communicative approach to the competency-based approach (CBA). This alteration should normally trigger change in the objectives, material designing and above all, the assessment strategies to reflect the new method. In the light of the above, this paper investigates the assessment tactics of teachers of the junior secondary school levels in a bit to check if it is in line with the competency-based assessment principles. It thus juxtaposes the theory of the competency-based assessment versus the practice in Cameroon. This researcher opines that, the principles of a CBA assessment are not respected by most language teachers in Cameroon because of lack of knowledge and the difficulty in material designing and development. Through the use of a questionnaire administered to teachers of English, observation of past test and examination questions, observation of the logbook and interviews granted to some pedagogic inspectors, data has been elicited and analysed. Findings revealed that the assessment tactics used by teachers do not reflect that required of the competency-based assessment. Rather, the judgemental policy continues to follow that of the objective based approach and thus structuralism and linguistic input is prioritized over functionality and usage required of the current methods.

**Keywords:** Competency-based approach, assessment strategies, theory versus practice, objective-based approach, language teaching

### 1. Introduction

This paper titled "Competency-based approach assessment strategies: theory versus practice in Cameroon" has been divided into three main convenient parts: introduction, presentation and analysis of data and conclusion. The first section generally introduces the paper and contains the statement of the problem, objectives, research questions and hypothesis, methodology and literature review. The second portion illustrates and interprets the data elicited from informants and the third part summarises the findings and make recommendations.

The current trend in second language teaching in Cameroon is that of a gradual move from the Objective based approach also called the communicative approach (CA) to the competency-based approach (CBA). This move started in 2004 from form one in the secondary education circles and it is progressive as the years pass by. As we speak, it is being used in the lower secondary classes and will soon contaminate the whole first cycle of the secondary education in the country. During the era of the CA at the lower secondary levels in Cameroon, mastery of a language was often sorted out through the linguistic input of learners and material development was conceived and build through linguistic subfields (like lexicology, grammar, syntax and phonology) and communicative skills (like writing/reading and speaking/listening) which give no room for realistic usage and to the development of specific competencies needed to function in the real world. This current trend as language teaching method is concerned (the change from the CA to the CBA) should normally go alongside with an alteration of the syllabus approach, course objectives, material designing and more especially instructional material development which for many researchers like Henrichsen (1983) <sup>[11]</sup> and Treffgarne and Mbaye (1993) are recognised to be trivial and a problem area for teachers. Again, the change in methodology and objectives should equally trigger a follow-up alteration in the assessment strategy from that of judging linguistic knowledge to that of assessing usage and competencies prioritised by the CBA

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which this paper investigates.

In line with the above, this paper thus examines and illustrates literature on CBA assessment strategies versus the practical application in Cameroon with the junior secondary schools and language teachers being at the centre. By so doing the paper is geared towards the following objectives:

- To develop and stir-up teachers' awareness on CBA assessment strategy,
- To identify differences in CBA assessment existing literature and practice in Cameroon,
- To pinpoint the shortcomings of CBA assessment practice in Cameroon and make proposals to better the situation.

The big questions that are guiding this inquiry are as follows

- Are language teachers aware and armed with knowhow on the CBA assessment strategy?
- Are the assessment material and strategy used by the target population in consonant with that expected of the CBA assessment principles?
- If no, then what can be done to better the smooth transition of the assessment strategy from that of the CA to that of the CBA?

Following the above research questions, the paper is based on the assertion that, the principles of a CBA assessment are not respected by most language teachers in Cameroon during their classroom practices because of lack of knowledge and the difficulty in material designing and development.

### 1.1 Methodology

Given that the paper examines theory juxtaposing it with practice, the first step undertaken by the researcher was gathering of existing literature on CBA assessment strategies. It was closely followed by designing of a questionnaire to be administered to some language teachers of the junior secondary schools in GTHS Maroua and GHS Down Town Bamenda and interviews to pedagogic inspectors on CBA assessment practices. Observation of the teaching/learning process, logbook and test papers equally follow suit to complement data collected through the questionnaire to come up with valuable and reliable judgments about the CBA assessment practice in the junior secondary schools in Cameroon.

In terms of sampling techniques used in the field, snow ball and quota sampling techniques were used. The former was used to interview 04 resourceful pedagogic inspectors on CBA practice while the later was used to select some 17 language teachers from some secondary schools in Maroua and Bamenda-Cameroon. It is important to note that 09 teachers came from GTHS Maroua and 08 came from Bamenda and GHS Down Town Bamenda.

### 1.2 Literature review on the competency-based assessment

Gonczi, A., Hager, P, and Anthanasou, J. (1993) <sup>[9]</sup> define competency-based assessment as the assessment of a person's competence against prescribed standards of performance. It is thus the process of judging competence against pre-established performance standards. This view of assessment is supported by Tyler (1949) cited by Alkin and Ellet (1990) <sup>[3]</sup> and Alkin (2004) <sup>[2]</sup>. There are many issues that affect language assessment such as the type of syllabus, methodological objectives, theoretical principles, material

designing, assessment types and principles. All these are going to be reviewed with focus on CBA assessment.

The syllabus of a CBA follows an outcome-based approach to language learning. Auerbach (1986) <sup>[5]</sup> holds that, the CBA syllabus is based on social constructivism in that it regards learning as occurring through social interaction. Thus, learning is not concerned with the transmission of pre-determine knowledge to be produced *in vitro* but as a creative use of a newly constructive knowhow through the process of socialization. Richards (2006: 14) <sup>[16]</sup> in support of the idea of social constructivism sees a language class as the world in miniature, where classroom activities and tasks must be life-styled and community-oriented. Following the above, a CBA assessment should focus on real-life situation and the use of language acquired to solve real life problems. That is systematic real-world activities which may be related to any domain in life and more especially to survival-oriented and work related situations (cited in Richards and Rodgers p. 144) <sup>[17]</sup> are used in CBA.

CBA is not fashioned around the notion of subject knowledge but rather around the notion of competency. That is, CBA focuses on how students can use language as oppose to the learners knowledge about language. It is in line with the emphasis on usage that Schenck (1978 cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2001) <sup>[17]</sup> pinpoints that the teacher is expected to provide a list of competencies which the course is going to deal with. He further added that these competencies selected by the teacher should be ones typically required of students in real life role situations. Following the above objectives, the learning outcome of a CBA lesson is to perform realistic social interaction and instil behaviour and attitude change in learners. Schenck's move is supported by other linguistic researchers. According to Larsen and Matthew (2015) <sup>[12]</sup>, the purpose of the competency-based assessment is to test learners' competencies and to test usage in realistic situation. According to Agbor Tabe (2016) <sup>[1]</sup>, CBA focuses on how students can use language as oppose to the learners knowledge about the language. That is language teaching and learning always needs to be connected to the social context of usage. CBA is thus considered as the functional and interactional perspective on the nature of language (Cited Richards & Rodgers, op; cit: 143) <sup>[17]</sup>.

According to Docking (1994:16) <sup>[7]</sup>, CBA adopts a "criterion-base assessment" contrary to the "norm-referenced assessment". Agbor Tabe (2016:1) <sup>[1]</sup> points out that, "the competencies tested in CBA consist of description of the essential skills, knowledge attitudes and behaviours required for effective performance of a real-life activity which form the basis for assessment". Sadler (1987:192) notes that an important source of temptation in a CBA assessment is to use a narrow evidence base. This is supported by Gonczi, A., Hager, P, and Anthanasou, J. (op:cit) <sup>[9]</sup> who insist that performance on paper and pencil tests will probably be too narrow a base for assessing competence and thus recommends that a mix of methods such as direct observation of activities (Docking 1991: 14) <sup>[6]</sup>, skills sample tests, projects/assignments, evidence from prior learning and log books be used for providing evidence on which to infer competence.

Continuous and ongoing assessment with performance-centred orientation has been identified as some of the key essential features of the CBA propounded by Auerbach (OP:CIT) <sup>[5]</sup>. Following the procedures of a CBA

programme at the beginning of a CBA course the students have to go through an initial assessment that facilitates the grouping of students on the basis of their current language proficiency level, their learning pace, their needs, and their social goals for learning English (Agbor Tabe 2016) [1]. Furthermore, looking at the stages of a CBA lesson, it is clear that a CBA course take into consideration several types of assessments (Initial, formative and summative assessment). CBA assessment follows certain principles which must be considered when judging learners. They are: communicative principle, task-based principle, functional principle, behaviourist principle, integrative principle and team principle. CBA encourages group evaluation because it favours peer learning and interaction. This interaction is also encouraged by Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory as it lays emphasis on a collaborative learning where less competent learners develop with the help of more skilful peers.

The above literature on a CBA assessment guided the designing of the questionnaire administered to teachers and the interview of some pedagogic inspectors in Maroua and Bamenda. This review takes us to data presentation and analysis, the focus of the next section.

**2. Results and Discussions**

This section presents the results from the questionnaire and generates discussions from the results. As earlier stated, the data collected through the questionnaire administered to teachers form the main instrument of the presentation of results and discussions while the classroom observation of

the test papers, logbooks and interview of pedagogic inspectors serve as complementary instruments. This portion of this paper is divided into subheadings suitable for analysis such as the purpose of a CBA assessment, learning outcome of a CBA lesson, stages in a CBA assessment, principle of a CBA assessment and CBA feedback strategies.

**2.1 The purpose of a competency-based assessment**

According to Larsen and Matthew (2015) [12], the purpose of the competency-based assessment is to test learners’ competencies and to test usage in realistic situation. Question one of the questionnaire was based on the purpose of assessment. The following statistics revealed that 58.82% of teachers test language knowledge at various levels (vocabulary, grammar, skills) while 41.18% of the teachers claim to test usage in realistic situation. The result above reveals that teachers do not judge learners’ competencies and the fact that a huge number of teachers focus their judgment of students on language knowledge mean that their assessments do not reflect the CBA. Classroom observation of tests given to students shows a dominant priority given to language knowledge while usage is sacrificed.

Further question was meant to find out if the assessment tasks given to students tie in with real world competencies. CBA evaluation focuses on real-life situation that is how learners can use the language acquired in order to solve real life problems. The findings of the above worry are presented on a table below.

**Table 1:** Assessment and its relation to realistic world competencies

Question 2	Responses	Number of teachers per response	Percentage (%)
Does the assessment tasks given to students ties in with their realistic language competencies?	a) Yes	8	47,06%
	b) No	9	52,94%
Total		17	100%

Statistical results reveal that 47.06% of teachers consider their assessment to be in relation with students’ realistic language competencies while 52, 94% of teachers said that the assessment they give to students do not tie in with their realistic language competencies. The fact that a high percentage of the teachers do not judge students based on real life needs means that their assessment practice does not tie in with the literature on CBA assessment. Since the objective of a CBA course is for functionality and interaction, any judgment of learners that fails to do justice to the earlier stated intentions is going out of CBA practice. No wonder why Nkwetisama (2012) [14] contents that high school graduates do not use English effectively in their daily

living because their real communicative needs are ignored.

**2.2 Learning outcome of CBA lesson**

The learning outcome of a CBA lesson is to perform realistic social interaction. Based on the above outcome, the competencies tested in CBA should consist of description of the essential skills, knowledge attitudes and behaviours required for effective performance of a real-life activity supported by Agbor Tabe (OP:CIT) [1]. One of the questions from the questionnaire was to find out from teachers, the learning outcome of their lessons. The results obtained are tabulated below.

**Table 2:** Learning outcome of lessons

Question 3	Responses	Number of teachers per response	Percentage (%)
What is the learning Outcome of your lessons?	a)To improve on language knowledge	06	47,05%
	b) To function in society	08	35,30%
	c) To instill behaviour and attitude change	3	17,65%
Total		17	100%

This table shows clearly that majority of the teachers 47.05% attested that the outcome is to improve on language knowledge. 35.30% testified that the learning outcome of their lesson is to function in society and 17.65% think that the learning outcome of their lesson is to instil behaviour and attitude change in learners. The findings show that a

multitude of teachers do not reflect CBA in their learning outcomes thereby creating disconnect between theory and practice of CBA.

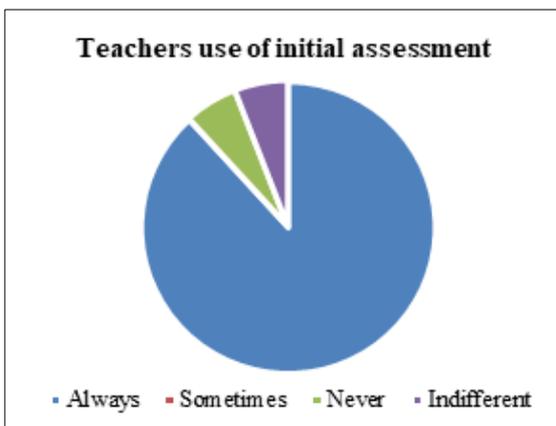
One of the objectives of the CBA evaluation is functionality and it is one of the theories that CBA backs up. Question four investigated if teachers’ evaluations reflect the way

learners can use language to function in society. Results show that 54.11% of the teachers answered no while 45.89% of the teachers answered yes. According to Agbor Tabe (op:cit) [1], CBA focuses on how students can use language as oppose to the learners knowledge about the language. That is language teaching and learning always needs to be connected to the social context of usage. CBA is thus considered as the functional and interactional perspective on the nature of language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001:143) [17]. However, the answer given by the majority of teachers was more realistic because the examination question papers collected from the target teachers and interviews with pedagogic inspectors reveal that the focus of their evaluation is not on usage but rather on the linguistic input learners. The researchers can therefore pinpoint that the way teachers evaluate learners does not reflect literature on CBA assessment and thus will not help them to function in society.

**2.3 Stages in CBA assessment**

Before the start of a CBA course, there is an initial assessment of students to facilitate students’ grouping on the basis of their current English proficiency level, their learning pace, their needs, and their social goals for learning English. One of the questions was to find out if teachers usually do an initial assessment before the start of classes. Findings indicate that no initial assessment is done by the teachers about their students before the start of classes for the above purposes. Rather, the teachers are imposed a course programme by the ministry without a pre knowhow of the proficiency level of their learners, learning pace, needs and their goal for learning English. It is noted that teachers meet their learners only at the start of classes with a readymade skim from the ministry of secondary education. Students are not grouped in classes based on their level of proficiency nor learning pace. They are placed based on their promotion to specific forms which does not reflect equity in their language proficiency level. This is in contrast with CBA assessment practices.

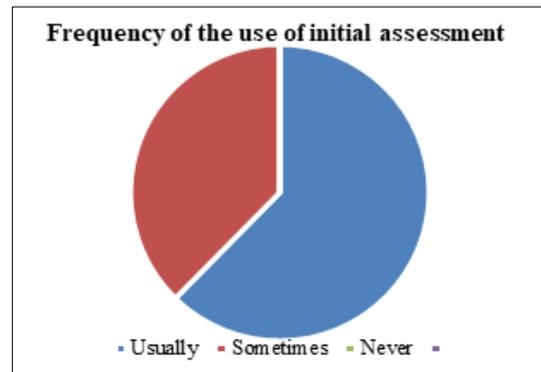
At the start of a CBA lesson, an initial assessment of learners is expected to test previously acquired competence through discovery and research which helps teachers to know the level of their students, to identify their weaknesses and strengths as the new input is concerned. One of the questions from our questionnaire was intended to know if teachers carry out initial assessment at the beginning of their lessons for the above objectives. The results obtained are presented in the chart below:



**Chart 1:** Teachers’ use of initial assessment

The above reveals that 88.23% usually do an initial assessment while 5.88% of them never do it while 5.88% were indifferent. The above findings is an indication that there are some teachers who do not even know that at the beginning of a lesson they have to start with an initial assessment thus rendering an imbalance between CBA theory versus practice by the target teachers.

A follow-up question was to find out the frequency at which teachers carry out an initial evaluation of students at the start of their lessons. Chart two below presents the results.



**Chart 2:** The frequency of the use of initial assessment

The results obtained shows that 62.35% of the teachers always evaluate their learners at the start of their lesson while 37.65% of them do it sometimes. Through these results obtained, one realizes that most teachers carryout an initial evaluation before introducing a new lesson.

**2.4 Competency-based assessment principles**

CBA assessment is based on communicative principle, task-based principle, functional principle, behaviourist principle, integrative principle and team principle. Docking (OP: CIT) [7], opines that CBA adopts a “criterion-base assessment” contrary to the “norm-referenced assessment” These are issues that this section handles.

**2.4.1 Team principle**

The task-based, team and behaviourist principles of CBA assessment encourages pair/group measurement tasks. It thus favours peer learning and cooperative behaviour needed in real world interaction and equally needed in solving real world problems. This type of interaction is also encouraged by Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory which emphasizes collaborative learning where less competent learners develop with the help of more skilful peers. Teachers where asked if they administer group assessment to learners. 12 (70.59%) said no while 5 (29.41%) said yes. During classroom observation very few use of group tasks were given to learners based on their seating positions without any logic of mix ability grouping, no monitoring was done of the different groups to make sure the less competent learners develop with the help of more skilful. Also, the feedback strategy was randomly done without respecting the groupings. During interviews with some four language pedagogic inspectors, I was made to understand that group assessment is not done during formal assessment. They said it can be used during the lesson but not for the purpose of grading students.

Another question had to do with the frequency at which teachers administer pair/group exercises. The table below shows the different options chosen by informants.

**Table 3:** Frequency of teachers' use of group task

Question	Responses	Number of teachers per response	Percentage
How often do you do group tasks with your learners?	a-always	1	5.88%
	b-sometimes	4	23.53%
	c-rarely	12	70.59%
	d-never	0	0%
Total		17	100%

The table above shows that only 5.88% and 23.53% of teachers always and sometimes respectively do group evaluation while 70.59% rarely do group evaluation. This weak percentage of teachers who do group evaluation shows that some orientation of teachers on the cooperative and behaviourist aspects of a CBA assessment is needed to be done for awareness raising and to instil change in their use of task to match practice with existing literature on CBA assessment.

#### 2.4.2 Communicative principle

Investigation of the communicative assessment principles of CBA was seen through the question that seeks to know the type of assessment done by teachers. Three options were given to respondents to choose (Oral, written and both). Only 10.76% of the target population claim to evaluate learners using oral evaluations whereas 83.36% use written evaluation and 5.88% said both. From this, one can see that written evaluation is the most used in classrooms. This type of evaluation brings us back to the traditional pen and pencil evaluation which was frequently used to evaluate students during the traditional era. Pedagogic inspectors equally attest to the fact that formal assessment is done through pen and paper writing in class. This question made the researchers to conclude that most teachers have not yet adjusted their assessment strategy to meet the expectations of CBA evaluation principles. Thus, teachers' assessment favours writing skills while oral communicative and functional skills are sacrificed. Consequently, at the end of the programme students will not have acquired enough communicative skills practice although this is the purpose of CBA.

There was a follow up question related to the frequency of the use of oral assessment of teachers. Responses by teachers confirms the idea that oral assessment is always used only by few teachers 10.65% when evaluating students in class while 21.17% of teachers sometimes and 71.19% rarely use oral assessment. The observation made here is that most teachers do not take interest in oral evaluation thus making their strategy imbalance. Whereas, for a good assessment to be conducted oral assessment strategies should be integrated because the purpose of second/foreign language teaching enshrined in the CBA is for interaction and functionality.

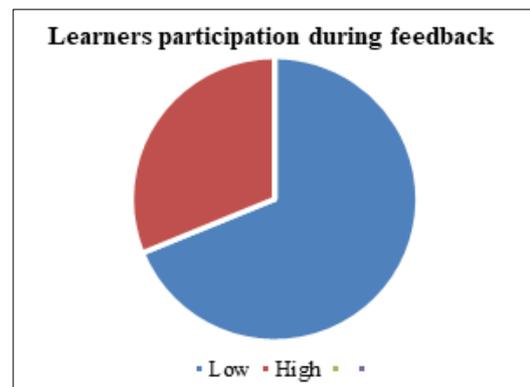
#### 2.4.3 Functional principle

The functional assessment principle of the CBA assessment was looked at through questionnaire and observation of the formal test questions given to the learners. Another question on the teachers' questionnaire was to find out the judgmental methods they use during their formative and summative assessments. The outcome of this question attests that all (100%) teachers still follow a language knowledge pattern of assessment similar to that of structuralism. It was noted that the questions had no

relevance to functionality. No question appeal to the imagination of the learners in relation to the use of language in real life situation. The questions structures followed the grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and skill based pattern. A close observation of the examination question papers administered to students at the end of the term shows clearly that it constitutes four sections namely: Section A- Grammar, Section B- Vocabulary, Section C- Reading and Section D- Writing. A deep appraisal of the examination question papers portrays that it does not reflect what is expected of the CBA because the test is based on language input and not on usage, real life situation and functionality. This methods of assessment is too narrow for assessing competence (Gonczi, A., Hager, P, and Anthanasou, J. (OP: CIT) <sup>[9]</sup> and thus recommend that a mix of methods such as direct observation of activities (Docking 1991) <sup>[6]</sup>, skills sample tests, projects/assignments, evidence from prior learning and log books be used for providing evidence on which to infer competence in a CBA assessment. This is another indication that the method of judging students does not meet the expectations of CBA.

#### 2.5 Feedback strategies by teachers

Feedback is the outcome that teachers get from learners after a particular lesson. Having effective feedback from learners during assessments is paramount to appraising learning outcome. As such, learners' participation during the feedback phase is revealing because it helps teachers to know the progression of the lesson and whether the objectives stated at the start of the course is attained. An appropriate feedback strategy should be done in ways that reflect the preferable evaluation strategy of a wide range of learners in class that thus push a majority of the learners to participate. Learners' levels of participation during the feedback phase of lessons were investigated. Chart 3 below better depicts the score.

**Chart 3:** Learners' participation during feedback

Results indicate that 68.82% of the teachers think that there is low participation of their learners during the feedback phase while 31.18% of them claim that there is a high level of participation of their students during the feedback phase. The more learners participate during feedback stage helps the teacher to better verify if the learning outcome is attained and vice versa. Thus, the low participation exercised by learners above is an indication that it is not done appropriately and thus, the teachers cannot know if all the learners have acquired the new input. Thus, a mix method of getting feedback is recommended in CBA. Mix method entails varying tasks from which you will use in

getting appropriate feedback. Both written and oral assessment methods should be used. Observation of learners' behaviour and usage in society and projects tasks are also paramount. Varying assessment tasks to suit various categories of learners such as visual, oral and kinaesthetic angles are relevant to get effective feedback.

The above results and discussions indicate that the CBA assessment practices in the lower secondary schools in Cameroon falls short of the expectation of the CBA. Thus, theory and practice are not in consonance because teachers are not aware of the principle guiding the CBA assessment depicted through the inappropriate assessment method and inapt material designed and used. There are many advantages when teachers design their own materials highlighted by researchers like Altan (1995) <sup>[4]</sup>, Block (1991) <sup>[6]</sup>, Harmer (2001) <sup>[10]</sup>, Thornburg & Medding (2002) <sup>[18]</sup> and Podromou (2002) <sup>[15]</sup> which teachers can consult for further readings on how to design material and the pros of teachers' designed material used in language classes.

### 3. Conclusion

The above findings reveal that most language teachers do not match CBA assessment principles to their classroom practices. There is a broad difference between the theory and the practice of CBA in Cameroon lower secondary school levels as the former is not fully represented in the latter. Thus, there is a mismatch between theory versus practice because judgement of students are still being made following structuralism and proficiency approach instead of the functional interactional principles such as communicative principle, task-based principle, functional principle, behaviourist principle, integrative principle and team principle expected to be used in a CBA programme. While Mahamat (2011) and Agbor Tabe (2016) <sup>[1]</sup> recommends that, for a better practice of the CBA, teachers should receive continuous training, Nforbi & Siéwoué (2015), suggests that seminars constantly organized should be intensive enough to reflect the urgent need to understand and maximize the new method. In addition to the above, many reasons such as the lack of knowledge and skills by teachers in CBA assessment principles, material designing and material development are blamed for this situation. Lack of teacher training workshops on materials development and unsuitability of available language textbooks imposed by the ministry of secondary education for teachers to use as reference books in classes are also responsible for the above differences. Until the above recommendations are met, the assessment strategy used by language teachers in the target population and Cameroon secondary schools in general will continuously be geared towards mastery of language sorted out through the linguistic input of learners. Such approach gives little room to realistic usage and to the development of specific competencies needed to function in the real world required of a competency based education.

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