

The Competency-Based Approach: The Concept of Group in Benin EFL Teaching

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Abstract

The role of the teacher within the Competency-Based Approach (henceforth CBA) tradition is essentially to conduct his/her class as a group through his/her skills, to serve as a role model for the learner. In order to manage his/her learners, the teacher is expected to organize learners in groups. Given his/her incapacity to obtain young or budding leaders from each group, the teacher needs to select within each group a representative or/and a facilitator. Thus, the concept of group in this sense perceived by the majority of teachers does not correspond to the CBA as established by those who designed the program. An important rule of the CBA is that each teacher should realize his/her group. So the structure of the classroom realized by the teacher is expected to be modified by the teacher of Mathematics because the leaders in an English class are not necessarily the same as those in a Mathematics class. In addition, the idea that the teacher of English should obtain at least one leader for a group is not all the time maintained when it comes to having another teacher, say, a mathematics teacher in the same class. The goal of this article is to draw the teacher's attention to the concept of group, to how sensible it is, and the major recommendation of this study is that the teacher should reconsider meaningful data and strategies while organizing his/her group in the classroom.

Keywords

Competency-Based Approach (CBA), group, concept

1. Introduction and Conceptual Framework

According to Gomleksiz (2007), working collaboratively requires that students putting themselves together to reach special objectives. In a classroom context, a group work is composed of a reduced or large number of students reflecting on a common issue or assignment. Schulman (1999) views the concept of group as a “mutual system” which considers how people may construct lives for their own. The method of forming a group sometimes may affect learning. A group work may depend on students' behavior. Hashemi (2005) confirms that an attitude towards something is the extent to which students accept the subject and their opinion towards it. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2005, p. 85), on the contrary, defines attitude as the way someone thinks and feels about somebody and something. The notion of group in the context of the Competency-Based Approach (henceforth CBA) can be viewed as students working together as a team.

The majority of teachers organize students to work in group just because they want to get learners involved actively in the classroom. A group work may also offer instructors the possibility of feeling free, more relaxed and less demanding for certain activities. Furthermore, a group work allows students to become more responsible.

Research has revealed that groupings in classrooms are not often formed on the basis of a strategic educational view of their purpose, and that teachers show little awareness of the social pedagogic potential of the various grouping arrangements. However, little attention has been paid to group size or composition when approaching tasks as diverse as cognitive problem-solving or repetitive practice. After reviewing the literature on group composition, the methodology of this research will provide a detail on participants' selection. More importantly, the researcher will explain how data are collected and the way they will be analyzed. The findings will be interpreted according to the students' attitudes. Drawing on the analysis, the discussion will relate the findings to prior studies. Lastly, the researcher will draw a brief conclusion. It is expected that this study will generate significant outcomes on the concept of group in Benin classroom situation, and specifically in the context of the CBA programs.

1.1 Definition of Competency-Based Approach

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2005), competency is the capability to apply or use a set of related abilities required to successfully perform "critical work functions" or tasks in a defined work setting. Competencies often serve as the basis for skill standards that specify the level of knowledge, skills and abilities required for success in the classroom. It is also considered as a system of conceptual and procedural parts of knowledge organized into operating schemes that help identify a problem-task and its solution through an efficient action within a set of situations (Piaget, 1959). The CBA recommends that the teacher put emphasis on what is essential in order to ensure the learner's academic success, his/her personal development and his/her integration in the society. It also recommends that the teacher develop the cultural dimension by facing the learner with fundamental and universal values. In addition, the teacher is entrusted with taking care of the learner; for that, it is necessary to specify the requirements the teacher must satisfy and propose a progression of the learning process. Another main feature of the program is that the teacher gives each learner an appropriate and personalized answer to each particular need. Finally, the teacher is expected to organize the teaching process, taking into account the development of the competencies that require long-lasting pedagogic operation and the rhythm of the student's learning with the aim of helping him/her avoid the risk of repeating the year.

1.2 Rationale and Objective

1.2.1 Rationale

The current researcher's approach of group in the classroom rests on the view that the composition of group depends on each subject and teacher. Each teacher is expected to organize his/her own group work in consonance with the context. Therefore, some factors need be considered. First, the setting and the classroom size, next the number of students in each group, and finally the sitting arrangement.

1.2.2 Objective

The aim of this article is to draw Benin EFL teacher's attention to the concept of group. The objective is to make all EFL teachers aware of the notion of group composition in relation to the CBA programs. Another objective of this article is to provide some guidelines for teachers on the productivity of group composition in a classroom.

2. Experimental Research of Group Formation

It is important to understand how groups are or can be formed in a class. Researchers confirm that there are two ways of forming groups: by friendship and by ability. Students in the first category work cooperatively instead of competitively. With the second type, intelligent students are mixed with weak ones. The objective is to provide an opportunity to weak students to be trained by those who achieve well and which may probably better learners' achievements (Nihalani et al., 2010).

A number of researchers suggest different ways of grouping students. Hassannien (2007) suggests three types of group formation: randomly, self-selection, by gender, and alphabetically, or by birth. Badache (2011) proposes grouping students based on their attitude: quite, shy, and talkative.

Ramirez (2005) suggests that one affect a number to each student. Another technique suggested by the same scholar is to select pictures and cut them into pieces to form a puzzle. The number of the pieces has to match the number of students in a group. A student has to pick a piece, look for the remaining categories and give them to other students.

In psychology, scholars such as Baldwin (1897), Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1959) have discussed the role of interaction between social, affective and cognitive states in development and learning. These scholars have provided a theoretical rationale for the use of grouping students. Their view is that children's thinking is a function of prior knowledge and the individual's capacity to learn with help from peers (Rogoff, 1990; Wood, 1998) and consequently, this leads to an emphasis on the benefits of collaborative learning for cognitive development (Damon & Phelps, 1989; Light & Perret-Clermont, 1991).

In addition, research has shown positive impacts on the learner's performance, positive attitudes and good setting (Pepitone, 1980; Slavin, 1990). Again, research has shown positive effects on student achievement, better attitudes (particularly in multi-cultural settings) and improved social climate within classrooms (Pepitone, 1980; Slavin, 1990). Most research on grouping examines formation rather than size (Webb, Baxter, & Thompson, 1997), but Lou et al.'s (1996) review suggests that the latter variable may be an important factor for effective learning. They emphasize on the fact that the size of groups need be appropriate to the age and experience of students. Other studies confirm that authorizing learners to belong to the group they desire may lead to social conflicts.

2.1 Advantages of Group Work

Group work may increase the Student Talking Time (STT). In addition, it may increase the chance for learners to communicate. Group work is more dynamic for the simple fact that it makes the learner feel more responsible for the task accomplished. Learners do not always have the same level and ability.

Organizing them in group may help the instructor think about the notion of mixed ability and help him/her determine how to direct the task well.

3. Instruments and Data Collection

3.1 Instruments

The instruments used here are class observation and interview. The researcher observed her own classes. A comparison was established with different subjects (English, Mathematics, French, History and Geography, Physics, Biology and Spanish). The classes involved are the first and second cycles of a specific secondary school called Lycée Toffa 1er, a girls' boarding school in the Department of Ouémé-Plateau (BENIN). The researcher also drew on interview to elicit some information from some teachers of the school wherein the research was carried out.

3.2 Criteria for Class Observation

As a full time EFL teacher in Lycée Toffa 1er, the researcher had an overall of 18 hours per week, including two hours for pedagogic activities. She worked with students both in the first and second cycles. Her own classes were considered in this research as the main group. The main group, that is, students in the researcher's own class (group I) was compared to (group II). In the first group, students were organized according to their ability, performance, with weak students. In the second group, students were grouped randomly. Later, the researcher observed students' attitudes with those of other teachers' students but in different subjects. For the other subjects, attention was paid to the formation of each group, the role of the learners, the number of students per group, students' interaction and participation, etc. The other aspect while observing the class was about the teacher's attitudes toward the group. Was s/he closer to help the group function, was she/he providing an assistance? Did she/he care about the number of girls who were really participating in each activity?

3.3 The Sample of the Study

The sample of the study comprised two main groups with their sitting arrangements. Attention was paid to five classes. Two hundred and forty five students were involved in the study. A total number of thirteen teachers were interviewed. Among them, six were English as a Foreign Language (henceforth EFL) teachers and seven were specialized in other subjects.

3.4 Data Collection, Procedure, and Analysis

Data collection operations took seven weeks (first and second semesters included). Permission was taken to carry out a classroom observation with other teachers who were not specialized in EFL teaching. Observation was made for fifty five minutes. For the classroom observation, data were analyzed regarding the situation in each class and on the ground. The data were also analyzed in terms of percentages for the interview.

Table 1. Groups I and II and the Sitting Arrangement of Students

Groups	Subject	Sitting Arrangement
Group I	English	Categorized and grouped after diagnostic evaluation
Group II	English	Randomly

Table 2. Number of Classes, Hours, Students per Group, and Number of Groups

Classes Involved	Number of Hour/Week	Number of Students	Number of Students per Group	Number of Group
5ème M5	4	48	6	8
Seconde AB	4	59	7	8
Seconde C	2	21	4	5
Terminale C	3	26	5	5
Terminale D1	3	48	6	8
Total	16	245	34	41

Note. Six students remained and were managed by each teacher.

4. Results from the Classroom Observation

The results from the class observation were at three levels.

Level 1: Students who were categorized and grouped after diagnostic evaluation.

Group composition affects learning outcomes. The findings revealed that when weak students collaborated with intelligent ones, the learning outcomes could be greatly enhanced. The analysis of the class observation in the main group, that is, the researcher's classroom showed that students in groups were more likely to be productive. In general, four members in a group of six students understood instructions and checked the difficult words in their dictionary when it came to working on vocabulary (matching exercises). Moreover, students were motivated to be part of the first group to finish the task given. Specifically, in the second form, (5ème) girls were excited working collaboratively. Assistance was provided by the researcher in each group to make sure that the progression was at its zenith.

Level 2: Students who were arranged randomly.

Girls who were arranged randomly reacted differently. They sat by affinity. There was a systematic distinction between the newcomers and those who repeated the class. The researcher noticed an environment of friendship relationship within the group. When instructed, girls were talkative. She also noticed that the right answer was provided in a relatively short time by the leader of the group. A copybook or notebook of the previous year, as suspected, was provided by a group member. This exuded that students in reality did not work cooperatively; they discussed other topics, subjects.

Level 3: Students with other teachers.

The analysis of the class observation shows that little attention was paid to the concept of group composition. In the majority of classes, the group remained the same. There were no criteria for forming

a group. The sitting arrangements were realized in such a way that the learner could not understand and follow what was going on in the class. The size of students in the classroom did not facilitate the teaching learning process. Also, the number of students in each group generated other issues in large size classrooms. Those issues were especially quarrel, domination, and competition which ultimately led to a mess-up within the classroom.

Regarding quarrel for example, this is common in all the classes observed. A girl would inexplicably dislike her fellow student(s) and be reluctant to work with her/them. This attitude was actually a serious obstacle to group work in that it brought the teacher to repeatedly reshuffle the group. As for group domination, there was always a member or two who tended to dominate the other members. Another issue within the group was competition. If a student suggested a good idea on a topic or an assignment and the idea happened not to be well-accepted, the other members would react negatively.

4.1 Interview Questions

- 1) What type of sitting arrangement do your students adopt in your classroom?*
- 2) How many students are in each group and how do you manage the group?*
- 3) What are the criteria that determine a group?*
- 4) Do all members participate effectively during activities?*
- 5) What are your expectations from each group and the difficulties you face?*

4.2 Results from the Interview

For question one, 79% of respondent teachers complained about the sitting arrangement of girls. The majority of EFL teachers would like their girl students to adopt the traditional way; unfortunately, this generates the issue of management of space in the classroom. Teachers use the sitting arrangement prescribed by the CBA programs, which is a face-to-face sitting arrangement. In some cases, the place of the board and the teacher's desk are not appropriate. A lot of learners strived to read what was written on the board. Secondly, the number of girls in each group depended on the size of the classroom. EFL teachers organized students in a group of eight and six in general. In some rare cases, they obtained a group of four students. Seven teachers out of thirteen; that is 53% of EFL teachers confessed that they do not use group work when the teaching strategies and techniques do not allow them to do so. They added that there are activities that require individual and pair work. So if the instructions and the strategies in the teacher's guide are not compulsory for group work, they leave it.

For question 3, the researcher wanted to know if there are criteria that determine a group. The answer is summarized into two categories. Six out of the EFL teachers in the first group in classes other than the researcher's provided different answers. Four of them confessed that the groups were just set up by the students the very first day of the school year. Five teachers out of seven teachers in other subjects also provided similar answers. Only four teachers- two EFL teachers and two other teachers- confessed that they had great criteria for group composition and determination. This means that among the thirteen teachers, only four teachers really formed their group; that is approximately 30% and nine teachers were not knowledgeable about the notion of group; that is 69%.

For question 4, the respondent teachers agreed that girl students are more likely to participate when they notice that they are motivated by the teacher. They also claimed that some of them rely strongly on their

classmates and will not participate at all. Others may be distracted and busy in working on another subject, or copying the previous course they missed. In this vein, eight teachers; that is 61% of teachers said that there was an absence of participation from girls within the groups.

Regarding question 5 related to teachers' expectations, the teachers who did not form groups did not provide answers to it. Teachers, who have worked on group composition, expected girls to work effectively so that they could play a leadership role in groups. Eight teachers; that is 62% of EFL teachers complained that they had difficulties regarding classroom management. Generally, there was too much noise in their classes. It should be noted that noise is considered as a "competence" in the context of the CBA. Another issue was that there was a leadership conflict among the girls. Six teachers; that is 47% of EFL teachers confirmed that two or three members tended to dominate their fellows' ideas, that situation ultimately led to difficulties in terms of coordination.

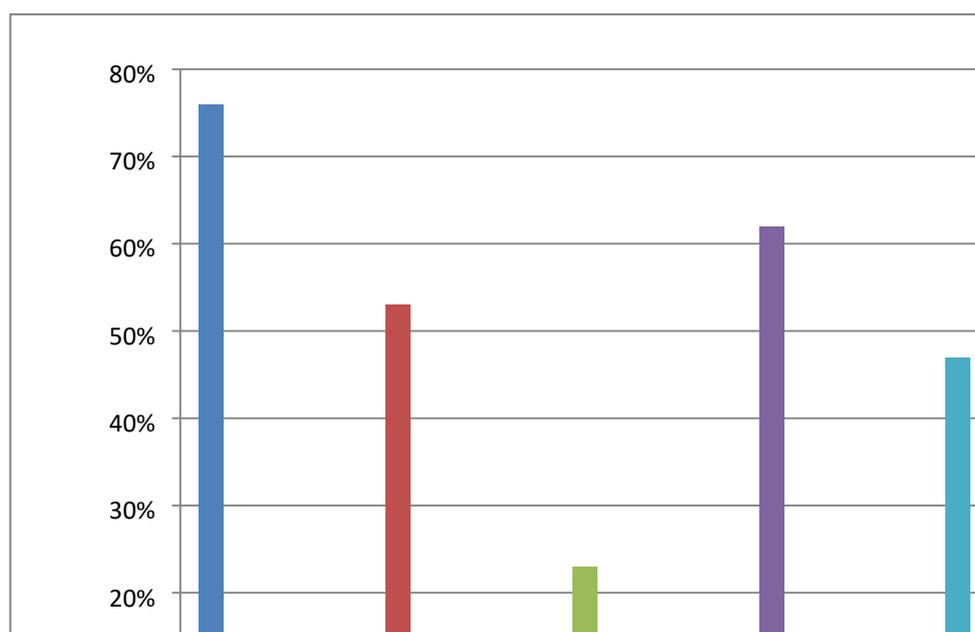


Figure 1. Summary from the Interview

5. Discussion and Suggestions

The results of girls' attitudes from/in Lycée Toffa 1er confirm what some researchers' argument; they argue that information is limited to group and class management. Furthermore, the results of the classroom observation strongly correlate with some of the concepts and ideas put forth by Piaget Vigotsky. The automatic idea of putting girls into group according to their ability has ultimately a positive aspect on "Lycée Toffa 1er" girls' achievement. The teachers in these classes organized learners properly, the impression was that the group was composed and designed naturally, maybe because the girls needed a special group composition.

However, there is also a slight advantage for forming group at random. In fact, most (not to say all) of the girls perceived the composition as fair and all the members agreed to work cooperatively. The results from the classroom observation clearly indicate that there are variables in the determination of group composition. In the researcher's classes, group work is more effective than individual work and pair work.

In the upper sixth grade (Terminale), girls strived to understand vocabulary during French classes. Later, the researcher noticed the reason why instructions were difficult for girls during Mathematics classes. Mother tongue is strongly used during Mathematics and Physics classes. Equations were easily transcribed and formulated by girls via their mother tongue. The language is also of great and particular importance while working in a group because it increases the Student Talking Time (STT). It also lays a particular emphasis on students' ability to communicate effectively with each other or one another, which will not be possible if the teacher acts as a controller. It was unbelievable to observe students who were shy in the researcher's class taking part effectively in History and Geography classes.

Prior research has exuded that group size can be problematic. This is so when the members in a group exceed six in number. Participation in such a group is expected to decrease and the cohesion therein is expected to be dislocated. This was the contrary of what the researcher observed. In *Seconde AB*, for example, girls were seven in each group, but their participation was total. This may depend on the type of the activity or individual personality. In fact, few teachers were really equipped to make reasoned judgments about exactly how to handle such situations.

Based on the results of the study, the researcher suggests:

- Laying more emphasis on organizing students in groups.
- While organizing a group work, teachers should follow some guidelines.
- Ideally all teachers should undergo training in psychology, including a lot of work on group dynamics because commonsense and a degree of sensitivity are essential.

In fact, the teacher's accountability regarding group organization is sensible and compulsory. The organization of each group should require a consideration of the student's personality, the learning competence and the speech ability of the learner. Expectations should be established and should call on the collaboration of each member in the group. The teacher should use the techniques of scaffolding, and motivation when necessary. Another way to make the group more effective is to motivate students and make the classroom fun. Moreover, Pedagogic Advisors and Inspectors should train teachers on the use of the right substantive teacher time. The teacher's guidance and his/her role as a facilitator while getting students involved in their critical analysis are of great importance in the formation of instructional groups. When it comes to prompting students so that they use mime, role-play, this becomes one of the most difficult periods of time management for the teacher within the group. Forming groups appropriately is the foundation of/for effective teaching.

Beninese EFL teachers are then urged to read more on group composition, especially in the context of the CBA program. There is need to train teachers on how to compose a group in a classroom where the size remains an issue. Pedagogic Advisors should draw teachers' attention to the importance of group composition. First, it is established to facilitate the balance among the participants. Next, when the group is heterogeneous, it is more beneficial for the teacher to manage the classroom. Being trained on how to compose groups, on the use of substantive teacher time without a preview on the dimensions of group is a waste of time. It is then compulsory that EFL teachers learn more about group dimensions. The interaction and relationship between the two variables: teachers and learners, and among students themselves, when they work collaboratively become the group process of the classroom.

Learning more about the dimensions of group requires that teachers be aware of:

- Group interaction which is in reality how students participate and impact each other.
- Task instruction which can be perceived as involving “all group behavior that is focused principally on the group’s work, projects, plans, and goals’ (Forsyth, 2006, p. 10).
- Group Norms which are basically rules of conduct that indicate what attitudes and behavior might be expected or demanded in particular social situations and contexts. They are shared expectations of behavior that set up what is desirable and appropriate in a particular setting or in a group.

5.1 Strategies for Teachers

One of the efficient strategies for teachers to make the group work effectively is to watch carefully students and to follow them from one group to the other. The teacher should tell them what they have to do right away. It will be useful to draw teachers’ attention to the fact that they should not step in any of the group or spend too much time with a specific group for it will impact the group negatively.

Teachers should discourage students sitting by affinity. Each teacher should compose his/her own group at the very first day during the first contact. To make this happen, they should proceed on a diagnostic evaluation. This kind of evaluation may help the teacher discover talented or gifted students, intermediate and low students.

Some teachers may avoid categorizing students. Sometimes, students who are strong in a group work on the activity, whereas the less strong ones will be disturbing the group and will not stay on the task. To avoid such a situation, the teacher may categorize students accordingly and take into account their level, their ability, and their area of concern. Later on, she/he may provide an individual assistance.

In Beninese English class, it is common for students to use their mother tongue. This is often due to miscomprehension of instructions. This should not bother teachers. If the activity is well-planned and the participation is positive, the instructor should encourage learners to make noise because this is also considered as a “competence” in the context of the CBA. Nevertheless, using their mother tongue should not be a great concern for teachers. Sometimes, when directions for assignment are interpreted in learners’ mother tongue, it facilitates comprehension. Teachers should simply motivate learners so that they use English during the different tasks in class. Teachers should show and demonstrate how the use of English language is crucial for problem-solving. By assisting learners, for example, this may become natural and a reality.

6. Conclusion

Grouping students is beneficial because as Kurt Lewin (2003) argues, the goal of group members is in interdependence. To get something done, it is often necessary to cooperate with others. This paper has presented the benefits and the rationale of composing a group in a classroom, specifically in the context of the CBA programs. The current researcher usually organizes her students in groups according to their personality, skills, level and availability to cooperate in her classes. It will be preferable for all teachers and especially for EFL teachers to work on the formation of groups and to learn on how to manage the groups when it comes to dealing with large classes. Also, due to the number of students, organizing students in groups will depend on the kind of activity and other contextual variables.

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