



Competence based learning

1. Origin

In the educational context, the concept of competence started in languages with the competence of communication defined by Hymes to include beyond verbal communication, several dimensions of the human behaviour and the knowledge of psychological, cultural and social rules. In vocational training, the development of the competency-based approach comes from the organisation of work in companies. Indeed, during the 1970 s, the notion of competence began to take precedence over qualification (D'Iribane, 2001 ; Zarifian, 2004) : the idea is to empower employees so that they are more autonomous, capable of innovation and therefore more productive. This approach has then logically taken root in the field of vocational training so that it can produce workers who are directly operational. In many countries, it has subsequently spread to the whole education system, from universities to primary schools, where its implementation is obviously more problematic.

2. How to define competences?

A competence integrates heterogeneous components such as knowledge, know-how, attitudes and behaviours. It can also be considered as an ability to act because it aims at carrying out a task and this is how the competence can be measured. Finally, a competence is contextualized, it does not exist as such but in given conditions (environment, resources, time frame).

Even if competencies remain difficult to define, formalise and evaluate, the concept is spreading because it is plastic, and the numerous definitions allow everyone to find their way around.

3. How to build a pedagogical sequence to produce the competence?

The competence-based approach emphasizes what the subject must master rather than what is to be taught. It gives meaning to learning by allowing knowledge, know-how and behaviours to be reinvested in real-life situations. But there are no functional cognitive models of how a competence can be learned. The training will therefore have to act on the different components of the competence that is supposed to be built during the formative process and through the evaluation.

In practice, it seems that the implementation of competence-based modules still largely follows the previous principles of teaching on the basis of performance objectives, articulated around the concepts of activities, observable behaviour, general objective and specific objectives. Cross-disciplinary and the holistic view required by the competence-based approach face the resistance of the existing teaching environments.

4. How to evaluate competences?

The evaluation of learning that leads to a competence, from a diagnostic perspective, includes the following steps:

- Translate competence definition into tasks or problem situations that will allow learners to practice and demonstrate their skills.
- Analyse each task or a problem situation in terms of resources that learners must master (knowledge, know-how, attitudes and external resources).
- Create a pedagogical progression.
- Identify evaluation criteria and develop tools to facilitate the judgement (checklists, evaluation grids, evaluation scale).

Here again, in practice, it is difficult for teacher to focus on results and performance because it is not part of their own education: from a learning perspective, the analysis made by the candidate, the method, and the thinking developed are of course more important than the result.

5. Validation of prior learning

Basing the reference framework of professional qualification upon blocks of competences, together with the modularisation of courses contributes to the transparency of qualifications. This allows the validation of prior learning, including partial validations: a block of competence or a module constitutes a coherent unit that has a meaning for an employer, that can be validated outside a formal educational context and that can also belong to several qualifications. Professional mobility and international comparisons are facilitated.

6. A variety of competence frameworks

A European reference framework for languages

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages - Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR), published by the Council of Europe in 2001, defines levels of proficiency in a foreign language based on know-how in different fields of competence. The communication competence takes into account several hierarchical components organised in six levels (from A1 to C2):

- The linguistic component, which relates to knowledge and skills connected to the vocabulary, syntax and phonology.
- The socio-linguistic component with the use of language (markers of social relations, rules of politeness, expressions of popular wisdom, dialects and accents).
- The pragmatic component that refers to the action-oriented approach by making the link between the speaker and the situation.

Competence descriptors provide a common basis for the mutual recognition of language qualifications.

Key competences for lifelong learning

In 2006 the European Parliament and the Council adopted the Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning. The framework based on 8 key competence areas that individuals must master at the end of their schooling and throughout life has been used by most of the countries to guide their education and training policies. A new recommendation has been adopted in 2018, updating the previous one around eight areas of competence:

- Literacy competence,
- Multilingual competence,
- Mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering,
- Digital competence,
- Personal, social and learning to learn competence,

- Citizenship competence,
- Entrepreneurship competence,
- Cultural awareness and expression competence.

Transversal skills

According to the French government, transversal competencies are generic (and so called by the OECD), and directly related to basic knowledge, behavioural competencies, and cognitive and organisational competencies. They do not depend on a specific work context and are becoming increasingly important because workers need them to change jobs or to find a job. However, transversal skills are not only linked to the worker, they also depend on the work context which can help to put them into effect. For example, the type of management influences the capacity to take initiatives. Competence is therefore based on the means provided by the individual but also by the employer.

Transferable skills

Transversal skills are transferable to other contexts, transferability being in itself a transversal skill that requires a reflective approach and the recognition of structural similarities between situations. But specific job-related skills, linked to a profession, a sector or a productive organisation can also be implemented in another professional context. When working with newcomers, the determination of these skills is of particular importance so that they can consider other jobs than the one occupied in the country of origin.

Ressources

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