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WHAT WORKS TO PROVE THE STUDENTS' COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN ALGERIAN UNIVERSITIES? USING PICTURE-BASED ACTIVITIES

Abstract

The primary concern of the current study is to explore ways to promote the students' communicative competence through utilizing pictures-based activities. This paper tried to explore the influence of using an extensive picture based tasks to motivate students, get them engaged and most importantly, develop their communicative competence. We examined the influence of using picture based activities to improve the students' communicative competence through an action research that was conducted in the second semester at the University of Biskra, the sample was non-randomly assigned and exposed to an extensive picture based activities to improve their communication and interpersonal skills. The results of the study revealed that using picture –based activities in the classroom are an enjoyable, yet a valuable technique for improving the students' communication skills; it could be served as a motivating factor to improve their communicative competence.

Keywords: Communicative competence, Interpersonal skills, Picture-based activities.

1. Introduction

Be it overtly admitted or not in the language classroom, communication remains an unavoidable and prominent parcel of the foreign language learning process so that at any rate. It can be argued that the communicative approach is the most popular direction in ESL and EFL teaching settings. Improving the students' communicative competence is the primary concern of schools these days. Throughout this paper, we portrayed the notion of communicative competence with a brief description of Canal and Swain proposed model, then we moved to the question of how the implementation of picture-based activities can boost the students' communication skills. Finishing up with a concise report of how was the action research implemented throughout the four well-known steps (Plan, Act, Observe, and Reflect) in addition to providing some valuable suggestions and recommendations for teachers to start thinking of utilizing this technique.

2 .Review of Literature

2.1. Definitions and Components of Communicative Competence

The concept of communicative competence has been the object of considerable debate within the higher education community ever since it was first proposed by Hymes (1966-1968). Gumperz and Hymes (1964) published their article entitled "ethnography of communication "(1972) in which they holistically define communicative competence as "what the speaker needs to know to communicate effectively in a culturally significant setting" (Gumperz&Hymes, 1972: Vii). The typical language teacher, says Bratt, (1992), tends to view communicative competence as the ability to perform linguistic interaction in the target language, yet a knowledge of social rules is highly

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required. That is to say, knowledge of when and how and to whom the linguistic form of language is appropriate. Simply because "the same linguistic form varies from one culture to another". (Bratt, 1992.p.49). It is important to realize that "Competence" is "a knowledge, skill, ability, personal quality, experience, or other characteristics that are applicable to learning and success in school or in work" (Wheeler&Geneva, 1993, p.30)

Savignon (1978) defines communicative competence as " the ability to function in a truly communicative setting, that is, in a spontaneous transaction involving one or more other person"(p.12). Taking this definition into reflection, it can be argued that teachers have to create real communicative settings in his/her classroom, this, can be successfully achieved through the utilization of the different modes within the classroom environment. Due to the fact that " *Our students need practice in using the linguistic form for the social purpose of language"* (Bratt, 1992,p. 54), obviously, this can be easily realized by the implementation of the multimodality approach in the classroom where the instructor exposes his students to English songs,real videos and communicative games that foster their communication strategies and help them cope with potential communication problems .

To move into a deep elucidation, Canal and Swain (1980) propose three sub-components which make up communicative competence;grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic. Language users must be able to create free-mistakes' grammar utterance (linguistic competence) coupled with the ability to produce a socially appropriate utterance (sociolinguistic competence), not only that, but also, the ability to produce coherent and cohesive utterances (discourse competence) in addition to being able to solve communication problems (strategic competence).

2.2. Models of Communicative Competence

There have been many books and articles tackling the issue of testing the writing ability and proficiency comprehension, but unfortunately, only few tackle the issue of testing oral language proficiency. In every classroom, EFL teachers are in urgent need of a valid framework that helps them evaluate their learner's communicative competence; the latter refers to the learners' ability to perform competently in tasks that require fluency as well as accuracy. It is composed of four main competences; linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence and discourse competence. These four areas were maintained by Canal and Swain (1980). Applying a model while assessing students 'competence will arguably guarantee objectivity and fairness.

To guarantee the objectivity of a language test, teachers have to break the language down into various elements and think of a way to testing one element at a time. This can be identified as "discrete point test" which is opposed to the «integrative point test" where the teachers are supposed to test the learners' abilities all at once. Nicuolo (1991) is among many researchers who spoke extensively about the betterment of measuring one aspect of a language to test the learners' performance "assessment of the underlying skills does not necessarily imply an assessment of the global performance" (p. 143). In the same line, Savignon (1991) seems to agree with the Nicholo'definition as he sees

communicative competence as the learners' ability to well perform on a "discrete point test". The healthy, balanced test view would be that one which encourages the use of both types of test to promote the learners' language proficiency.

Based on the assumption that communicative language teaching (CLT) should be by one way or another grounded in some models of communicative competence, Several communicative models have been established by authors in order to better clarify how language teaching and learning work (e.g. Canale& Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Bachman, 1990; Celce-Murcia et al. 1995) . The current study will be heavily grounded on Canale and Swain model because of its simplicity in the sphere of testing

The first model that was designed to serve instructional, as well as assessment purposes, is the one proposed by the North American Canale and Swain (1980)

▪ **Grammatical competence:** (structural competence) the knowledge of language inventory (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling). It is worth mentioning at this level that learners need a procedural knowledge (knowledge about how to use language) rather than a declarative one (knowledge about language).

▪ **Sociolinguistic competence:** The knowledge of social and cultural conventions of language use that governs communication in a specific culture, such as the appropriate use of vocabulary, register, politeness strategies in conversations. Those norms and conventions are not just related to the way messages should be expressed (form) but rather, to how appropriate they are expressed in a given cultural context.

▪ **Discourse competence:** The knowledge of language structure as being combined with cohesive texts.

▪ **Strategic competence:** The knowledge of communication strategies which manage to avoid misunderstanding and breakdown of conversations. Learners may compensate their lack of structural knowledge by using certain verbal and non- verbal strategies in order to communicate. Canal and Swain (1980) define strategic competence "how to cope in an authentic communicative situation and how to keep the communication channel open» (p .25).

As a trial to explore the interrelationship of language to culture and society, communicative competence has emerged in the early 1970's. This newly emerged concept had contributed significantly to the field of linguistics and language teaching. (Bern, 1990). Chomsky's view of language was restricted to the mere knowledge of grammatical rules. Having said that, Hymes proposed a totally different story at that time. Being accurate, is not enough for the child to be said competent. Hymes proposed another crucial criterion that he labeled "appropriateness" which goes hand in hand with correctness and lies under the big title of sociolinguistic rules. As a matter of fact, the language cannot be said to be complete without the intervention of performance features, simply because meaning is rarely clear without the contexts in which it appears. Supporting his claim, Hymes proposed "ethnography of communication" which is the study of communication as being related to social-cultural practices.

Very confident of his claim, Halliday purports that the notion of communicative competence is something which is unnecessary to speak about simply because communicative competence is what the speaker can do with language; the same definition can be given to competence. For him, nothing new has been established by Hymes; knowing how to use language is the same as knowing what to do with it. But, in spite of their conflicts, Hymes and Halliday share the view that language is crucial in social life (Bern, 1990). Keeping in mind that "context of situation" plays a major role in the understanding of communicative competence; Firth has established his own interpretation of the context of a situation which describes the individual communicative competence. In his book "context of competence", Bern (1990) states that «the cultural settings and personal history of each participant in a speech situation determines what is appropriate within that setting" (p. 32)

2.3. The Value and Importance of Using Pictures

At first place, it is useful to clarify what is meant by the pictures. Pictures can be (photos, drawings, paintings, illustrations, symbols, cartoons, flashcards Collages, picture stories, magazine ads, newspaper and website illustrations, stills from video, doodles....) (FluentU English Eduactor Blog, 2018)

It has been said that "a picture is worth a thousand words". Students can learn plenty of things through pictures; this latter can be enormously effective if properly implemented from the part of the teacher. First, it promotes students' vocabulary and communication skills specially the pictures and images that are used for speaking practice. Also, it increases the student's motivation for learning; it best fits visual learners who learn by visual materials. One might ask the question, why to use pictures to teach English, why not to use the traditional way of teaching which are highly secure and easily implemented. The answer can be recapitulated in the following elements:

1.   The current multimedia learning context of the 21 century are visually oriented

2.   Students learn differently,the use of pictures fosters their visual orientations

3.   Using pictures is highly attractive,it guarantees that everyone is paying attention , engaged and motivated

4.   Implementing pictures in the classroom bolstered vocabulary

5.   Pictures are usually open to a variety of interpretation which enables the students to be creative and invent new constructing to things

6.   They can be used as a talking point for shy students who are usually hesitant and anxious to speak

7.   The pictures are really fun and enjoyable, students find themselves anxiously speaking and expressing ideas and discussing topics.

8.   They are good for promoting the student sub-skills (prediction,discussion, explaining , recognizing the ideas ..)

The utilization of pictures in the classroom is highly significant for the students and the teacher, because it fosters the students' motivation and creates a meaningful context, it gives the student information about various topics also, and they are faster than words. Before using pictures in the classroom, the teacher has to guarantee certain criteria such as the large size of the picture, it

also should not be complicated, so why to use pictures in the classroom, the answer of this would be the following:

- Introducing new vocabulary and grammar
- Providing a good opportunity for writing
- Expanding the students' motivation
- Offering the chance to use language in real life situation

Pictures can take a variety of forms (flashcards, large wall pictures, cue cards, sliders...) and despite of the richness of picture based tasks, the use of the latter can lead to various problems specially if the pictures are small and distant or not obvious, this may lead to the students' misunderstanding , also , some students fail to interpret the pictures but , the disadvantageous of using pictures are more than the drawbacks , *"pictures are ; easy to prepare , easy to organize, interesting , meaningful and authentic and holds a sufficient amount of language" (Zahara, 2014, p.28)*

In accordance with the benefits of using pictures in the classroom, Pirrozzolo and Wittrock (1981, p. 212) have proposed the following:

- Pictures are very useful for presenting new grammatical and vocabulary items. They help to provide the situations and contexts which light up the meaning of words or utterances, and help the teachers to avoid resorting to translation or to lengthy explanation of meaning.
- Pictures can be used for revision from one lesson to another as well as for long-term revision of vocabulary and structures.
- Pictures can be used as the basic of written work, for instance, question writing.
- Pictures increase students' motivation and provide useful practice material as well as test material
- Pictures can be used to give students an opportunity to practice the language in real contexts or in situations in which they can use it to communicate their ideas.

2.4. Sample of Picture-based Activities

There are plenty of creative ideas for using pictures in the classroom to develop the students' communicative competence .The following are some ((McLoughlin, 2016):

1. Dialogue Bubbles:
The teacher might expose the students to a picture of two people chatting and ask them to add a dialogue bubble; this will be a real delectation for students with implicit focus on grammar and vocabulary

2. Storyboards:
This technique is highly implemented in ESL classrooms where the teacher sources a series of pictures and asks the students to use their imagination to tell the story
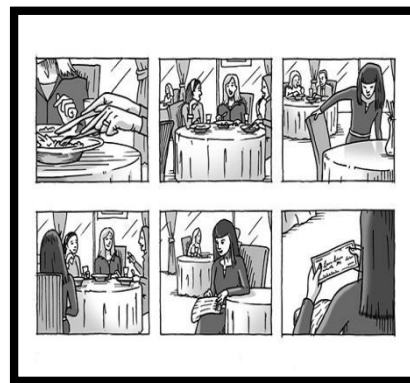
3. Picture profile:
The teacher displays a profile picture of a famous person and asks them to describe him/her .This would be a good way to teach the present simple and adjectives

The list is limitless; the creative teacher is the one who invents his own manners and accommodate them in a way that fits his students 'needs.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Action Research

Action research means that "practitioners themselves investigate their own practice as they find ways of living more fully in the direction of their educational values" (Niff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2003, p. 8)and that's what makes action research different than the other types of research , because the teacher is part of the situation and his mission is to improve it , regardless of how much he/she knows "Anyone and everyone can do action research. You do not need any specialized equipment or knowledge. All you need is curiosity, creativity, and a willingness to engage". (Ibid, 2006. p. 16) , and that was the imperative reason behind conducting this type of research

3.2. The Tests

One group pre-test and post-test (before–after) design" were conducted before and after the intervention to track the student's progress and to determine whether improvement has occurred. In addition to using classroom documents (lesson plans), During the second semester of the academic year (2017-2018) , the researcher implemented the action research at the university of Biskra to teach the intervention course , the action research was carried out into Three phases :

The pre-test was distributed to the targeted group made up of 35 students .The test is comprised of Four tasks, each is designed to assess one of the four competences (linguistics , sociolinguistics , strategic and discourse) .It is worth mentioning at this level that this study is a part of an action research implementation where the teacher implement the multimodality approach as being related to speaking tasks (use of songs, videos, games, picture, role plays) to improve the students communicative competence. This paper is a part of the whole work which is in the preparation stage. The picture- based pre-test was

exposing the students to pictures asking them to entitle it and to speak about it for ten minutes.

The intervention stage includes an extensive use of a multiplicity of mode to develop the learners' communicative competence (pictures, videos, games, songs, role plays ..) . Throughout this stage the teacher plays a variety of roles: (a course designer, a researcher, a feedback provider, an assessor, a motivator, a learner, a decision maker and a reflective practitioner)

Students were exposed to another test that resembles the Pre-test in form and focus, the test measures the students' four competences (linguistics, sociolinguistics, strategic and discourse). The picture -based activity was a simple task, each learner was given an expressive picture and was asked to give a title and to describe it orally, the teacher used an observation checklist to track the students 'progress and to grade them based on this checklist (see appendix 2)

3.3. The Research Participants

The current study is composed of (N: 35) participants (Third year LMD students) at the department of foreign languages at Biskra University. The informants were non-randomly chosen and were exposed to extensive picture based activities.

3.4. The Research Problem

The overall problem of our paper is the noticeable imbalance between teaching the communicative and linguistic competence in Algerian universities. Among the 12 courses taught at the university of Biskra (pragmatics, psycho-pedagogy, language acquisition, didactics, linguistics, written expression, oral expression, methodology, French, statistics), Third year students are required to speak only in "oral expression"! , which might be the reason behind their noticeable lack of fluency, the solution, we assume, is the extensive implementation of picture-based activities to hopefully compensate their speaking deficiencies and promotes their communicative competence.

3.5. The Research Questions

This study is undertaken in an effort to answer the following leading question: Does the utilization of extensive picture-based activities improve the students' communicative competence?

3.6. The Research Hypothesis

In setting out to answer these questions, we have proposed that the implementation of picture-based activities, learners will be able to boost their communicative competence.

3 .7. Data Collection

The data were collected from Third Year-University students enrolled at the University of Biskra. The participants were one group made up of 35 students. They were 26 females and 9 males, ranging from 20-40 years old. For the quantitative data analysis, pre and post –oral test was taken by the participants at the beginning and the end of the semester. The two tests were designed to describe a picture.

4. Results

The findings show that there is a significant difference in the students' fluency and communication skills between the pre-test and posttest. The difference can be further clarified in the following figure
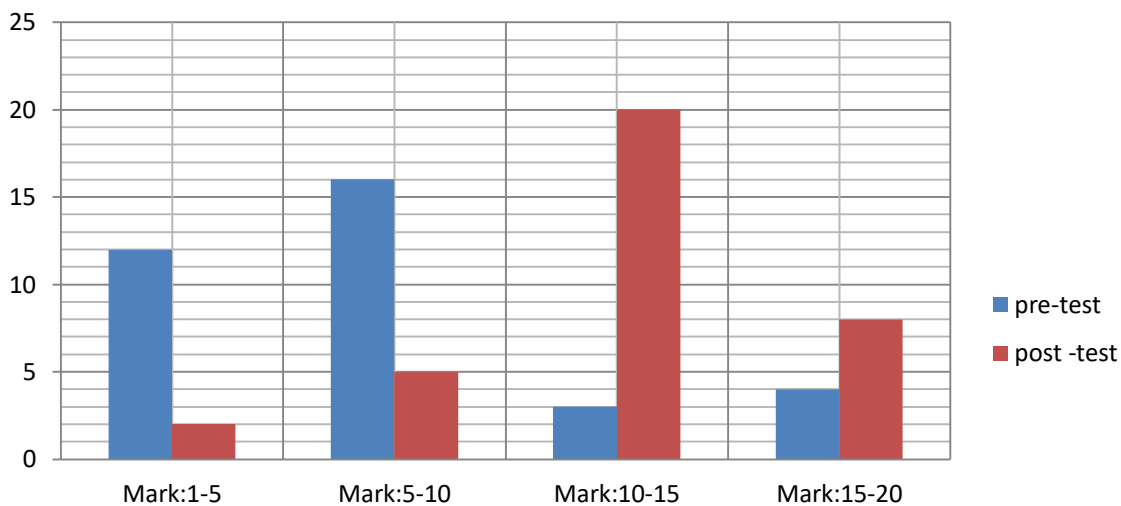

Figure 1 :

      The thirty five students' scores of the pre and post test in the picture based activities

As shown in the table above, the students did not obtain high results in the pre-test, (N: 28) students score between (1-10). This means that students find difficulty expressing themselves at the level of their fluency. In the post-test, the students' scores have shown a considerable improvement which indicates that student's development in term of fluency was significant. This confirms our assumption that the implementation of picture based activities would bring positive results in terms of the students' communicative competence

4. Conclusion

This study has shown that picture based activities are capable of stimulating the learners' interest in the English classroom by asking them to describe the given picture, learners will find the space to express themselves extensively, gain new vocabulary from each other, feel motivated and highly engaged in the given tasks and, most importantly, develop their communicative competence and fluency in English.

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Appendix 1: The picture based activity (samples)

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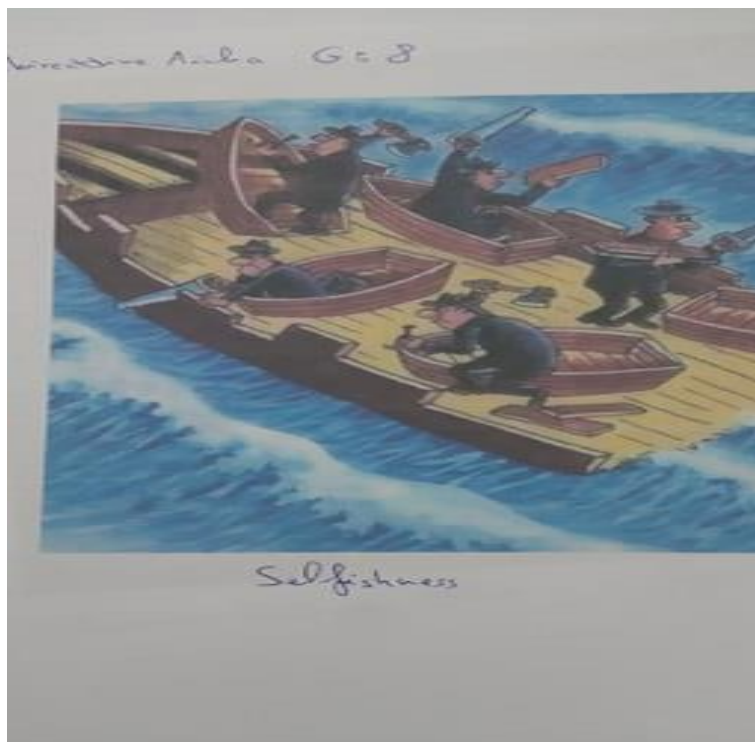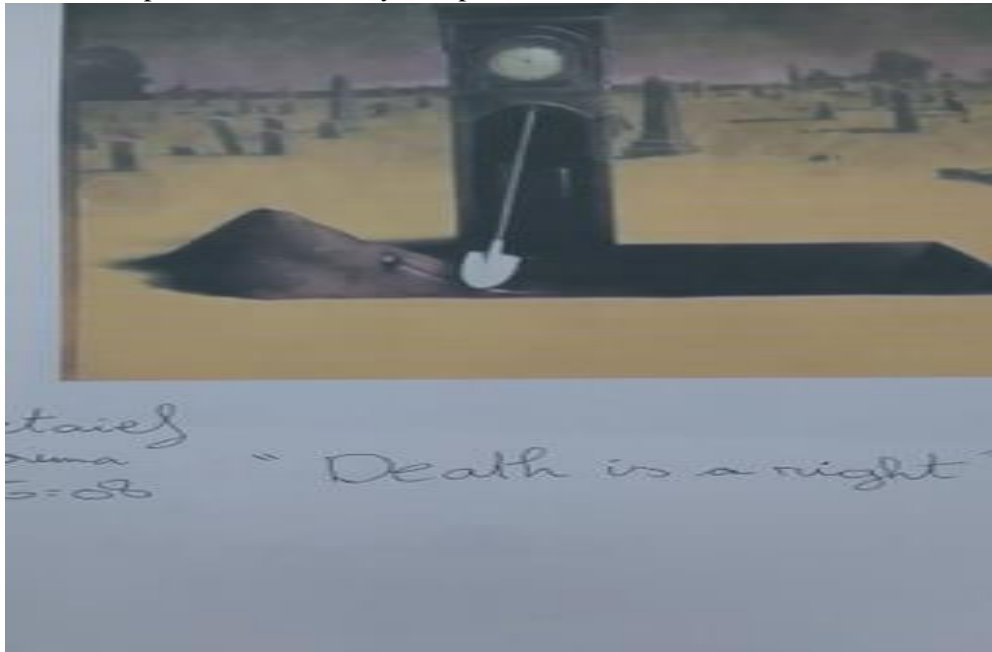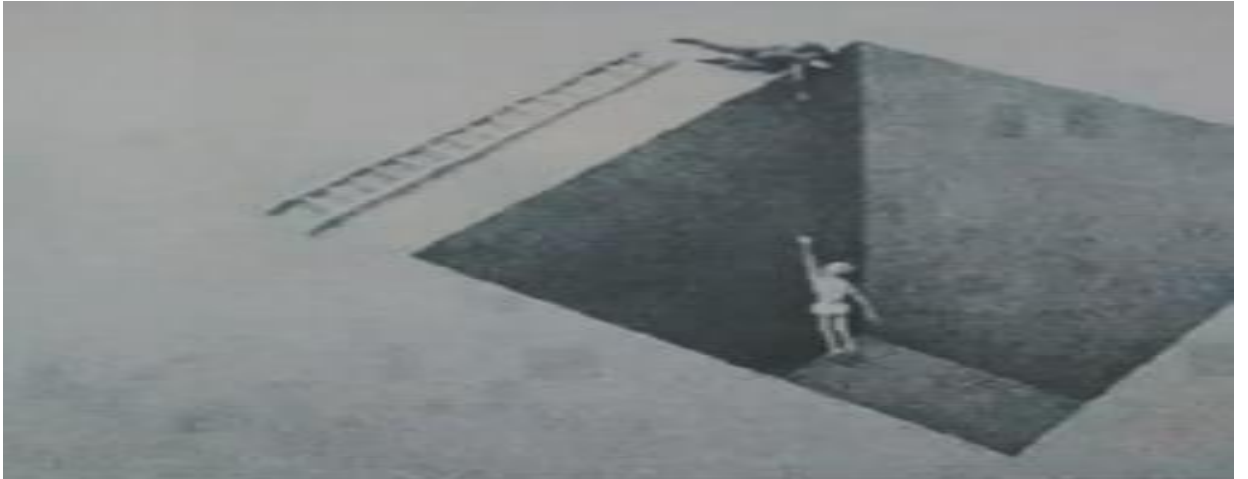
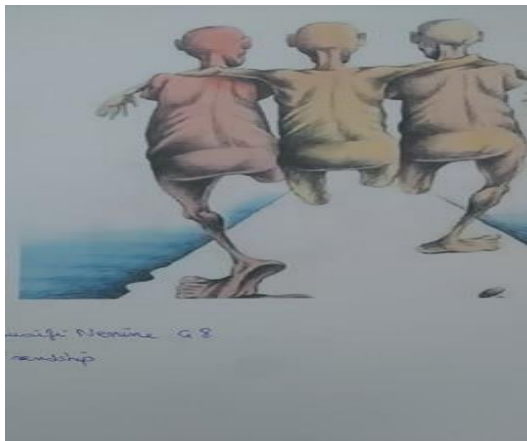. Wolf in sheep clothing

Lazrague Lynda. 08

...agination according to Rhodesine.

Yassin Kherbouche   G8

Knowledge is the fuel of our minds.

Boudina Jiya Hibat Allah   G08

Re: My father is my hero.

Youcif Nesrine   G8

Friendship

Appendix 2: The observation checklist used to assess the students' four competences

Level / Third year   Teacher:

   Student's Name:................................Date of Presentation ....

   Title of Topic:...   Type of presentation:

....

	Rubric						
Grammatical C	Pronunciation/orthography						
	Semantic appropriacy of lexis						
	Vocabulary						
	Morphology						
	Syntax						
Discourse C	Cohesion						
	Coherence						
Sociolinguistic C	Register						
	Performance						
Strategic C	Fluency						
	Density of information transfer						
	Hesitation phenomena						
	Non-verbal compensation						
	Verbal compensation						
	Confidence/neatness						
	Overall strategic success						

Total score: