



Behavioral Objectives and Standards Movement Revisited

Nima Shakouri (corresponding author)
Roudbar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Iran
E-mail: shakouri.ni@gmail.com

Sepideh Mirzaee
Department of English, Mashhad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Mashhad, Iran
E-mail: spdmirzaee@gmail.com

Doi:10.7575/aiac.all.v.5n.1p.89

Received: 03/01/2014

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.5n.1p.89>

Accepted: 28/02/2014

Abstract

The present paper sparks a complementary argument that the development of standards movement must not be at the expense of sacrificing the achievement of behavioral objectives. Furthermore, due to the systemic and dynamic nature of standards, standards need to be revised off and on. Besides, the present writers taking a more or less relativist stance maintains that if and only if the goal of education is to change one's behavior, the behavioral objectives seem to be plausible; however, it is less than a realistic wish because classroom as a dynamic setting cannot be accomplished within the framework of feed-forward planning, where ends are classified before means are selected.

Keywords: descriptors, standards, competencies, behavioral objectives

1. Introduction

Due to the dynamic nature of education, much of the dialogue concerning the strengths and weaknesses of behavioral objectives and standards movement seems to be useful simply in opening new debates in language learning and teaching fields. Nevertheless, claiming that the objectives of a curriculum can be specified implies that the behavior of organisms is absolutely predictable and measureable. However, objectives can also be developed from purposes, wants, and philosophies, not only from the accuracy or accessibility of measures to access them. The present writers maintain that if and only if changing ones behavior is the goal of education, the behavioral objectives seem to be plausible; however, the goals of education are more than this. In fact, some goals of education are difficult to be specified in behavioral terms. Besides, standards movement as an alternative to behavioral objectives should be taken into consideration from a complementary perspective rather than from a contradictory one. That explaining about what students should know and can do has become the corner stone of standards movement is plausible, but due to the systemic and dynamic nature of standards, we should not overhear that even these standards are the product of an era inspired by a given philosophy. Thus, they need to be revisited. The present paper attempting to investigate the behavioral objectives in contrast with standards movement suggests that for the fulfillment of standards movement, it is time to bear in mind that since the beliefs hidden in standards reflect a specific time and place, standards call on a necessity to be reviewed.

2. Review of related literature

2.1 Behavioral objectives movement

The use of behavioral objectives in instruction is the characteristics of a culture which sets a high value on *efficiency* and *productivity* (Kneller, 1972). In fact, the use of behavioral objectives as we know them today was popularized by Taylor (1911), and the roots of the movement go back to the scientific management movement in education and to early behaviorist psychology. As Taylor holds the principle objective of management should be to secure the utmost success of employers coupled with the maximum prosperity of the employees. In effect, success is the result of maximum productivity.

Along the same line, Mayo (1927, cited in Montana, 1991) through a series of experiments known as the Hawthorne Studies concluded that worker productivity is related to social and psychological factors as well as the work itself and the physical movement. In other words, when workers know that they will be observed as part of an experiment, their productivity will increase. What's more, the origin of behavioral objectives is also rooted in behavioral psychology which has its root within positivism (Williams & Burden, 1997). The term positivism as a version of empiricism, according to Richards and Schmidt (2002), was first coined by the French Philosopher, Auguste Comte who believes reality can be observed. In other words, as to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007), positivists define knowledge solely based on observable facts and does not give any credence to non-observable entities such as feeling and values. Among psychologists who trace a link between scientific management movement and behaviorist psychology, we can name Edward Thorndike. In this regard, Tumposky (1984) puts forth, "Thorndike was among those who link the burgeoning

psychological school to the scientific management movement of education and argued that educational practices should be regulated according to the refined outcome of specific activities" (p. 295).

2.2 The major issue

At the core of the behavioral objectives movement resides the emphasis on operational definitions and observable behaviors (Simons, 1973). Since researchers are unable to directly observe what is going on in people's minds, there is only their behavior to look at. Since behavior is often an indirect expression of knowledge, and the crucial distinction between knowledge and behavior is often ignored, the problem is so much that there is generally no simple and easily definable relationship between behavior and knowledge. Henceforth, as Kneller (1972) asserts, "to use behavioral objectives in individualized instruction is to overlook the essential differences between individual learning, knowing, and behaving" (p. 398). Nevertheless, by looking at behavior alone without considering its relationship to knowledge, the setting of instructional objectives often becomes an arbitrary, unprincipled, and unscientific process. The solution to this type of problem, according to Mager (1962), is to write a set of objectives for each class of skill or knowledge that you want the students to acquire. In fact, the objectives must be specified in advance in order to control the process of education. In the same line, the advocates of behavioral objectives contend that the use of behavioral objectives has a liberating effect on the students and the teacher by permitting students to opt alternate ways of mastering expertises (Van Ek, 1976). But this seems less than a realistic wish.

What's more, as Tumposky (1984) holds, objectives are derived from aims, wants, and philosophies, not from the accuracy or accessibility of measures used to assess them. In a sense, if the primary purpose of education was to change one's behavior, the behavioral objectives would seem to be as a reasonable means for operating the process of human engineering. However, specifying some goals of education in behavioral terms is difficult. Changes in attitudes and feelings are considered reliable and legitimate educational aims, but are difficult to state in behavioral terms or means. Moreover, behavioral objectives are incompatible with different styles of learning and teaching. Classrooms as voyages of explorations cannot be accomplished within the framework of feed-forward planning, where ends are classified before means are selected.

2.3 Behavioral objectives and systems approach

It is worth highlighting that one of the important features of behavioral objectives is its dynamic feature. Put simply Behavioral objectives cannot exist in isolation. They are inseparable part of a system. Therefore, lack of them might cause disorder in the system. In other words, advocating behavioral objectives is tantamount to advocating the systems approach. Systems approach encompasses the perspectives of reductionism. Systems approach was first proposed by Bertalanffy (1950). To Bertalanffy, systems might be either open or closed. He claims that all systems studied by physicists are closed: they do not interact with the outside world, that is, when a model of the solar system of an atom is made by a physicist, it is assumed that particles affect the whole system, and they do not have an interaction from the outside world. However, when we talk about practical phenomena including human beings, such assumptions are far-fetched. Consider separating an organism from surrounding; it will die in a while because of the lack of food, oxygen, and water. He continues organisms are open systems since they have interaction with surroundings. The peculiar feature of an open system is that it is in contact with outside world. In order to explain the inside and outside system, we need to know the system itself and the environment. The system, i.e., the organism, is not like a tube, it is a processor when receives an input and gives out an output. Accordingly, it is a truism that the behavior of an organism is predictable and measurable. Nevertheless, *Eisner (1967) holds that behavioral objectives used as standards fail to measure achievement. In support of his claim, Eisner outlines three limitations of behavioral objectives:*

- 1) *Due to complexity and dynamicity of language instruction, behavior of students is hardly predictable (e.g., there is no reason that the one who performs well in algebra can write a sonnet well); the amount, and quality of learning that takes place in a classroom context, particularly when there is some interaction among learners, are only in small part predictable.*
- 2) *The constraints that various subject matters place on objectives make it difficult to specify the behavior of the student. For example, uniformity in response in courses such as mathematics and languages are desirable, while in other courses especially arts, such a specification is frequently impossible. In arts, where creativity is required, the particular behavior to be developed cannot simply be recognized.*
- 3) *Those activities which are qualitative are less amenable to quantitative assessment. For example, the extent to which a student is able to create an artistic object is determined by judgment. Here standards are inapplicable; that is, a particular product is judged with respect to the unique features it shows. Employing judgment, not standards, implies that valued qualities are not merely socially defined and are arbitrary in character.*

Moreover, Tumposky (1984) holds that there is also little empirical data on the effects of behavioral objectives on learning. As learning is a complex phenomenon, no simple conclusion can be drawn that behavioral objectives facilitate the process of learning in an absolute sense. What makes us concerned about behavioral objectives is that many view it as a bandwagon which many jump on hoping to cure all the educational ills (Tumposky, 1984). Richards (2001), similarly, puts the major criticisms of behavioral objectives as follows:

- 1) Objectives turn teaching into technology. It is argued that objectives are linked to an efficiency view of education; that is, the most efficient means to an end is justified. But to ensure that the curriculum

addresses educationally important goals, objectives should address meaningful experiences. One way to do it is to include both language outcomes and non-language outcomes.

- 2) Objectives trivialize teaching and are product-oriented. It is assumed that every purpose in teaching has an objective; the only worthwhile goal results in changes in student behavior. But, objectives need not be limited to observable outcomes. They can also describe processes and experiences, as well. In a nutshell, since objectives are limited to change in behavior; they cannot explain processes and experiences since they are not observable.
- 3) Objectives are unsuited to many aspects of language use. Objectives might be suitable for describing the mastery of skills, but less suited to such things as critical thinking, literary appreciation, or negotiation of meaning (pp. 127-128).

Ironically, behavioral objectives as Mager (1962) defines, covers three elements: (a) a performance or task statement; i.e., what learners have to do, (b) conditions statement; i.e., the conditions under which learners are to perform the task; and a standard or criterion statement; i.e., how well the task is going to be performed. A careful note should be made of conditions that could have considerable effects on learning and teaching. To put it in a nutshell, Reginald (1978) suggests a number of conditions under which behavioral objectives might be ineffective. These conditions are summarized as follows:

- 1) If students ignore the objectives provided, either because they are unaware of them, or because prior experience suggests that it is not important to take note of them;
- 2) If the objectives are too general, or too ambiguous, to be of particular assistance;
- 3) If the objectives are of extreme facility or difficulty;
- 4) If the objectives of particular interest are only a small proportion of those provided to students; and
- 5) If students are so conscientious, or so highly motivated, that they achieve the objectives regardless of whether or not they are specified (p. 294).

2.4 Towards the loss of popularity

During 1980s, behavioral objectives movement lost its popularity. The main reason behind this loss of popularity might be related to the year 1972 in which, Combs identified some other limitations and inadequacies of behavioral objectives approach. In fact, Combs's unwillingness towards behavioral objectives appears to spark an argument in favor of competencies movement as an alternative to the use of behavioral objectives in program planning. According to Combs, (1) "behavioral objectives are of limited use and must be confined to the acquisition of precisely defined skills" (pp. 1, 6); (2) "behavioral objectives represent a symptomatic approach to changing behavior" (p. 7); (3) "behavioral objectives stifle the creativity of the classroom teacher" (p. 8); (4) "behavioral objectives cause the teacher to lose sight of the general goals of education" (p. 9); (5) "behavioral objectives are undemocratic" (p. 8); and (6) "behavioral objectives demoralize teachers" (p. 10). Though several of these criticisms might not seem warranted, battalions of educators who should have known better rolled up their sleeves and started to rewrite curriculum in terms of competencies.

It is vital to note that like behavioral objectives, competencies movement employs a mosaic approach to language learning in that the whole (e.g., communicative competence) is constructed from the parts. In other words, the parts can be taught and tested incrementally to make the whole. However, the use of competencies in language learning is not without its critics. As Tollefson (1986, cited in Richards, 2001) claims, no valid procedures are available to develop competency specifications. Typically competencies are described based on intuition and experience (Richards, 2001).

Since the present paper is not in charge of explaining competencies movement, it suffices to state that competencies movement calls on a necessity to integrate all the knowledge, know-how, and attitudes required for the solution of real life problems or situations. This syllabus seems to bridge the wall between school and everyday real life (NKwetsama, 2012). Richards and Rodgers (2001) also contend that this approach focuses on the outcomes of learning. It addresses on what students are expected to do rather than what they are expected to learn about. In sum, a competency-based model is concerned with the ability to perform a task. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that acquiring and developing competence is more than learning a set of skills.

2.5 A path to standards movement

In our daily life, there are lots of standards. Generally, standards are to be defined as a point of reference. The entry for 'standard' in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010)* is implicitly linked to the concept of reference: an authoritative or recognized exemplar of correctness, perfection, or some definite degree of any quality. According to International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English (1996), we are motivated by three core beliefs in defining standards for the English language arts. Standards are needed (1) to prepare students for the literacy requirements of the future and the present; (2) to articulate a shared vision of what the teachers, researchers, parents, and others expect students to attain; and (3) to promote high educational expectations for all students and to bridge the documented disparities that exist in educational opportunities.

Diana Ravitch, Former Assistant Secretary of Education of USA, is commonly held as the chief architect of the modern standards movement. She puts it in straightforward manner that standards are created because they improve the activity of life. Everyone expects strict standards while building a house; shoddy work would put lives at risk. Even if you wish to drink a glass of water, you have some standards for the water to be drunk. Following this, many educators

see the publication of the now famous report, 'A Nation at Risk', as the initiating event of modern standards movement (Marzano & Kendall, 1996).

2.6 Standards movement

As a matter of fact, Education standards are the starting point for defining what students should know and be able to do in order to live and work in the 21st century. If there is no clarity or consensus about what students are supposed to know and be able to do, expectations for learning will be defined by the textbooks and traditional tests, and many students leave school without ever being challenged to their full potential. Thus, the lack of clear standards for what and how well students should learn has become a drawback in efforts to improve student achievement.

Seen in this light, regarding the importance of standards, Lachat (1999) holds:

Defining clear standards for student learning is thus an important first step in the process of educating children to be effective thinkers, problem-solvers, and communicators so they can reap the rewards of full participation in a technology-driven information age (p.4).

He asserts that there are two types of standards: *content standards* and *performance standards*. The former describes the knowledge, skills, and understandings that students should have in order to attain proficiency in a subject area. In the same line, Marzano and Kendall (1996) have identified three categories of content standards: procedural, declarative, and contextual:

- **Procedural standards** are based on "procedural knowledge, the skills, and processes important to a given content area" (p. 12). Editing an essay can be considered as an example of procedural standards.
- **Declarative standards** are based on "declarative knowledge, [which] can be thought of as 'information' and usually involves component parts. For example, knowledge of the concept of 'democracy' includes understanding that decisions are made by the people, each person has a single vote, votes are weighted equally, and so on" (p. 12).
- **Contextual standards** are based on contextual knowledge—"knowledge in context, information, and/or skills that have particular meaning because of the conditions that form part of their description" (p. 12). Examples of contextual knowledge include: "modeling numbers using number line and classifying organisms" (p. 12).

Nunan (2007) also defines content standards as what students should know and be able to do as a result of instruction. To him, standards are fleshed out in terms of: (1) descriptors which are broad categories of discrete, representative behaviors; (2) progress indicators which are the assessable, observable activities that students may perform to show progress towards meeting the designated standard; and (3) classroom vignettes which are drawn from a wide range of classroom contexts and describe instructional sequences so that a clear idea of what the standards might look like is at hand.

Nunan believes Performance standards, in contrast, spell out what students must demonstrate to be considered proficient in the subject matter defined in the content standards. Borthwick and Nolan (1996) describe the three components of performance standards as:

- **Performance descriptions.** Performance descriptions distill the content standards to identify what is essential and what is able to be assessed.
- **Samples of student work.** The performance descriptions are matched with samples of student work that have been judged to illustrate the quality of work expected to meet the standard at a given grade level.
- **Commentaries on student work.** The student work samples are accompanied by commentary that explains how the student work illustrates the quality required to meet the expectations set out in the performance descriptions.

2.7 Standards and equity

The vision that inspires us to the employment of these standards is the truism that all students must have the opportunities, resources, time, and support needed to achieve mastery. From an equity perspective, education standards will not improve student achievement unless they are accompanied by policies and practices that directly address inequities in the resources available to schools (Lachat, 1999). Henceforth, opportunity-to-learn standards were proposed. He argues that what the opportunity-to-learn standards challenge us is to confront inequities that exist in our school system. In fact, schools must ensure that all students have the equal opportunity in the way to achieve their goals. Thus, there is a new mission and emphasis on accountability for the success of all students. Put simply, opportunity-to-learn standards can address the following areas:

- the quality and availability of curricula, instructional programs, and instructional materials;
- the extent to which curriculum, instruction, and assessment align with standards reflecting high expectations for students;
- teacher capacity to provide high-quality instruction;
- financial and programmatic resources that support high levels of learning, including technology, laboratories, and school libraries;
- teacher and administrator access to sustained, long-term professional development;

- a safe and secure learning environment;
- parent and community involvement with the schools; and
- non-discriminatory school policies (Lachat, 1999).

Thus, there is a new mission and emphasis on accountability for the success of all students. The term ‘mission’ implies that students, alone, are not responsible for their own learning, although the nature of standards leads to believe individuals responsible for their learning. McKay (2001, cited in McKay, 2007, p. 144), incompatible with the use of standards, states that this individualistic, rationalistic, competition-driven path “can lead to blame the victim mentality” which may be destructive to learning.

Standard-based evaluation is not without its problems and controversies. According to Nunan (2007), some of these criticisms are as follows:

- Standard-based evaluation leads to fragmentation of the curriculum and its approach to instruction is atomistic.
- Evaluating the overall worth of a program by tallying lists of items on a checklist is problematic since it assumes the whole is simply the sum of the parts/since checklists provide quantitative information.
- To what extent, one can understand one’s underlying competence from samples of observable behavior.

Another problem related to the educational standards, according to Marzano and Haystead (2008), is the lack of uni-dimensionality. Principle of uni-dimensionality assumes that there is a single real latent variable to be measured in a test (Johnson & Junker, 2003, cited in Birjandi & Mosallanejad, 2010). Marzano and Haystead (2008) believe that the standards are not written with uni-dimensionality or effective assessment in mind, and thus mix multiple dimensions in a single statement which makes it almost impossible to effectively assess the content in standards.

3. Conclusion

Behavioral objectives, ideally, provide a well-worked-out tool for rational planning in education. Behavioral objective movement has certainly made possible improvements in education, and should not be abandoned in disgust just because they do not succeed to meet more rigorous standards. Nevertheless, these objectives use should be tempered by a profound understanding of their restrictions. Furthermore, regarding specificity of objectives there are not any comprehensible rules. In fact, when objectives have been specified they do not stipulate the choice of instructional means.

In sum, if not often traced in our action, the wish for improved education in our country resides in the hearts of many of us. Standards can make concrete the prospect that all learners can learn to turn out work of high quality. The standards movement is at a turning point. Behind us lie some astonishing areas of progress and more than a few mistakes. When standards are properly implemented, students, parents, and teachers know the rules of the game, and adults have clear expectations. It is the gospel truth that standards are *systemic* (Snow & Katz, 2009). Effectiveness in a system is tied to how well different parts of it — teachers, students, and programs— perform. Also, standards are *dynamic*, some standards set five decades ago need to be revised. When educators write standards, they incorporate their beliefs into them, and since such beliefs reflect a specific time and place, these standards call on a necessity to be reviewed.

References

- Bertalanffy, L. V. (1950). The theory of open systems in physics. *Science*, 111, 23-29.
- Birjandi, P., & Mosallanejad, P. (2010). *An overview of testing and assessment*. Tehran: Sepahan Publication.
- Borthwick, A., & Nolan, K. (1996, March). *Performance standards: How good is good enough?* Paper presented at the National Education Summit held in Palisades, New York.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Combs, A. W. (1972). *Educational accountability: Beyond behavioral objectives*. Washington, D. C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Eisner, E. W. (1967). *Educational objectives: Help or hindrance?* *The School Review*, 52(3), 250-260.
- International Reading Association & National Council of Teachers of English (1996). Retrieved in 2012 from www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Books/.../StandardsDoc
- Kneller, G. F. (1972). *Behavioral objectives? No!* Retrieved in 2013 from www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el_197202
- Lachat, M. A. (1999). *Standard, equity and cultural diversity*. South Hampton: The Education Alliance.
- McKay, P. (2007). The standards movement and ELT for school-aged learners. In J. Cummins & C. Davison (Eds.), *The international handbook of English language teaching* (pp. 439-456). Norwell, M A: Springer.
- NKwetisama, C. M. (2012). The competency based approach to English language education and the walls between the classroom and the society in Cameroon: Pulling down the walls. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(3), 516-523. doi: 10.4304/tpls.2.3.516-523
- Mager, R. (1962). *Preparing instructional objectives*. Belmont, Calif: Fearon Publishers.

- Marzano, R. J., & Haystead, M. W. (2008). *Making standards useful in the classroom*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Marzano, R. J., & Kendall, J. S. (1997). The fall and rise of standards-based education. Retrieved in 2011, from www.mcrel.org/pdf/standards/5962ir_fallandrise
- Montana, P. (1991). *Management*. New York: Barron's Educational Series.
- Nunan, D. (2007). Standardized-based approaches to the evaluation of ESL instructions. In J. Cummins & C. Davison (Eds.), *International handbook of English language teaching* (pp. 421-438). New York: Springer.
- Oxford advanced learner's dictionary (8th ed.)* (2010). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Reginald, F. M. (1978). Resolution of conflicting claims concerning the effect of behavioural objectives on student learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 48(2), 291-302.
- Richards, J. C. (2001). *Curriculum development in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press
- Richards, J. C., & Schmidt, R. (2002). *Longman dictionary of language and applied linguistics*. London: Longman
- Simons, H. D. (1973). Behavioral objectives: A false hope for education. *The Elementary School Journal*, 73(4), 173-181.
- Snow, M. H., & Katz, A. (2009). Standards and second language teacher education. In A. Burns & J. C. Richards, *Second language teacher education* (pp. 66-76). Cambridge: Cambridge university press.
- Taylor, F. W. (1911). *The principles of scientific management*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Tumposky, N. R. (1984). Behavioural objectives, the cult of efficiency, and foreign language learning: Are they compatible? *TESOL Quarterly*, 18(2), 295-310.
- Van Ek, J. A. (1976). *The threshold level for modern language learning in schools*. London: Longman.
- Williams, M., & Burden, R. L. (1997). *Psychology for language teacher: A social constructivist approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.