

***Student Curriculum Counselling
The Weakest Link in EFL Syllabi***

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It is not rare to hear Algerian EFL teachers mention a number of culprits (large-size classes, lack of audio-visual aids, high number of inexperienced teachers, shortage of appropriate teaching materials, absence of adequate methodology) to account for the supposed high rate of failure in English departments at university level. This state of affairs is the outcome of the rather large cohorts of unsuccessful students (statistically speaking, the failure rates do not exceed 20% of the total student population per year), but of the quality of their training: i.e., even if students are awarded a 'licence' degree, very often their overall proficiency level is lower than is expected from students at the end of a normal learning experience. If knowledge-wise students seem to have accumulated a lot of information, nevertheless, their training is incomplete, their language proficiency below average, their linguistic competence shaky, their communicative competence unsure, their study skills embryonic, and their problem-solving ability minimal.

We hypothesise that failure is already on the cards, upstream of their learning experience. Somehow, it is like the original sin to which very little has been done to avoid registering students already on the path to failure

because of the absence of a steering motivation, a stimulating vocation or a burning wish to succeed, and not just a desire to avoid failure (McClelland). This is mostly due to a disarming system of *curriculum counselling* (orientation system) students have no leverage on, to deflect the course of success to a higher level. Unfortunately, from their first registration, their pedagogical trajectory is similar in many ways to the fate of Sisyphus: studying year in year out routinely, reaching their final destination unscathed: i.e. not really improving their intellectual level, their language proficiency and problem-solving/thinking skills. It is true that these students are very often caught between their need to get a proper language training to start up a language-teacher career, and the exigencies/interests/aims of the Algerian political/educational institutions.

A state-of-the-art of curriculum planning and syllabus design practices shows a very institution-centred control of these matters. The trend since independence has been a *top-down approach* to these processes, which means that planning, implementation and evaluation of teaching programmes do rarely take into account the clients' (the learners) profile, needs, motivation, interest, etc., contradicting in many ways the tenets of the much advocated Communicative Approach to Language Teaching supposed to cater today for the needs of students in a more efficient way.

Our assessment of curriculum plans, syllabus outline, material production and methodological procedures is that all of them are delivered by experts as a package deal to teachers who are trained neither to implement nor adapt them to their context. This

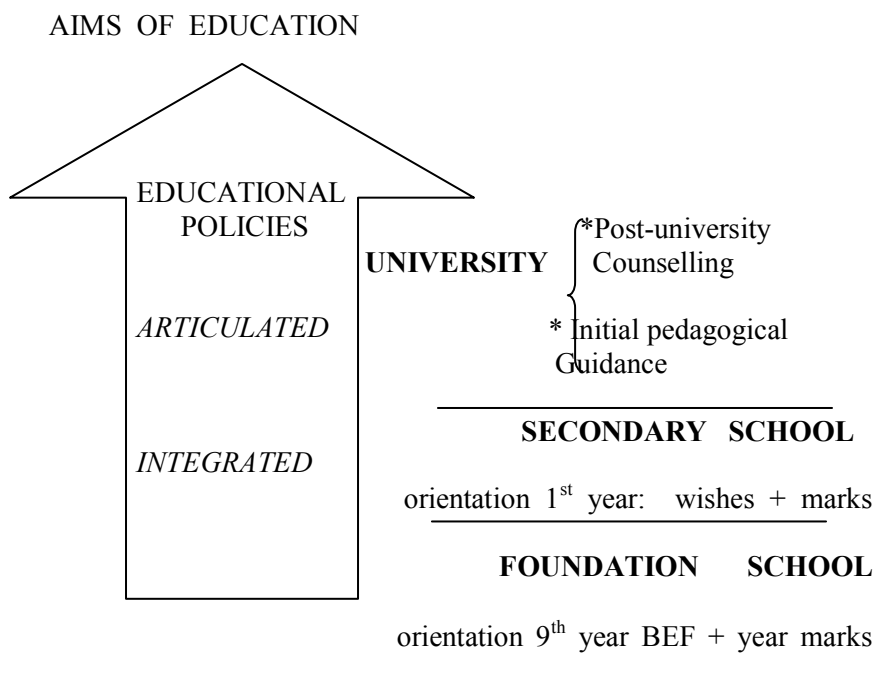
externally-produced self-contained pedagogical package is outdated (at all levels: content and method-wise), but has, in the long run, developed in the minds of teachers, at least, a very prescriptive approach to teaching geared towards ideal learners with a homogeneous way of learning, despite real mixed-ability EFL classes. This is then a far cry from the real contexts teachers usually face.

Theoretically speaking, *open-ended options* instead of the old rigidly-oriented and closed syllabi not in-line with the richness and particular traits of some learning contexts have recently been suggested to cater for differing needs and varied learning styles and preferences. Besides, the principle of learner-centredness has allowed the pedagogical partners (teachers and learners alike) to develop content/methods of language programmes through negotiations between them and the educational institutions, taking the trainee as an informant for decision-making at all stages of curriculum development. This has also meant going beyond the classroom contexts to include the most effective ways of doing one's future job outside the learning institution (cf. ESP contexts).

If theoretically, things seem to be suggesting a real participation of the learner at the level of decision-making concerning their future through the freedom not only to choose to read English, but adhere also to the training objectives of the 'licence' degree. Practically, matters show a learner struggling to find his way into the pedagogical maze Higher Education represents to him. Though choice is not totally free, students' task is not made easy because of a lack of coherence in the training system between the levels of education (from primary

school to university level). The educational policies have more often than not developed inconsistencies which have influenced pedagogical guidance not always for the better. The following diagram intends to show the lack of coherence between the system of orientation and the general aims of education. We believe that both processes should be submitted to a four-fold set of criteria (articulation, integration, projection and systems approach to decision making/taking).

Table 1. Stages of pedagogical counselling



The Algerian educational system has certainly not integrated the four quality criteria (*articulated*: because it must be congruent with other policies; *integrated*: it must fit a larger set or sub-set; *projective*: it must take into account the future not just the present state; and *systemic*: it must show a concern for the whole educational system) we believe to be central to the production of a more balanced educational entity. Hence, advice on courses, which is an eminently pedagogical act, responds more and more to extra-university considerations (social most of the time, but also economic: as far as job-hunting is concerned). The debate lies between individuals preoccupied by their needs and wishes and the institution's pedagogical/didactic exigencies and interests, not to mention the logic of the job market. What is advocated in this paper is a happy medium between the individuals' idiosyncratic visions/interests (*bottom-up processing*) and the regulations/laws of political and educational bodies (*top-down approach*) not sacrificing either one.

Our feeling is that the university should cease to be solely a professional-training institution to become also a place for the realisation of the learners' *self-actualisation needs* (Maslow). This means finding new missions for the Algerian University alongside the traditional one of student-influx containment.

The following table shows the various parameters at play in the process of pedagogical guidance:

Table 2. Approaches to and Criteria for Pedagogical Guidance

APPROACH	CRITERIA / MOTIVES	STAGE OF GUIDANCE	
		Initial Guidance	In and Post-training Guidance
INSTITUTION Top-down Selection (objective / institutional)	Institution needs Objectives/or project Decision Competition Merit Democratisation	Politically defined and determined Selection	Pedagogically determined Or Job-oriented Selection
Bottom-up Choice (subjective / individual)	Learners' Intention Motivation Expectations Wishes Vocation Disposition / Talent Aptitude/ Capacity Right	Guided Choice Through Negotiations	Controlled Choice
INDIVIDUAL			

What is at stake in pedagogical guidance is the balance between the institution's objective(s) and the individual's expectations. One may posit that the equation of curriculum guidance is solved if learner

choice equals institution's selection. This means that neither a fully top-down nor an entirely bottom-up processing of pedagogical guidance should be advocated. In order to maintain the *criterion of excellence* without discarding the principles of *democratisation* central to the pedagogical act, one should not surrender to populism. It is true that very often under the pressure of students, the educational/political authorities change the principles of curriculum guidance without any consideration for the latter's real competencies and aptitudes in the English language.

Undeniably, the university trains very little to satisfy the needs of the socio-economic world, which means that guidance is synonymous with speciality streams with a dead-end, not offering any outlet for students. We also feel that the university should stop social pressure exerted on certain training profiles (most valued : medicine, computer sciences or trading sciences). A further rethinking of the English degree should redirect the training, somehow like the new EFL syllabus the 2003 reform is trying to introduce (Language, Literature and Civilisation; Language Sciences; Applied Languages) making the needs more explicit than the shapeless current syllabus.

If the university must be attentive to its socio-economic environment it must not surrender to a purely instrumental philosophy. It is also a place to get knowledge and culture. ***Guidance by failure*** (according simply to the baccalaureate mark) should end allowing new careers to emerge. More information about outlets and exigencies of each profession or training profile

should be given to invite vocations, not intellectual suicides.

The B.A in English is for a good majority (over 80% of students) not their first choice. It is not a very prestigious branch, and the social statuses linked to it are not that high. This renders the learner's decision-taking all the more problematic because he is very often torn between a demanding environment (family, society...) and an uncertain personal intuition. Choosing to read English is then subjected to a number of exogenous variables which in front of the protected streams (medicine, computing...) do not present any real incentive to follow such stream. Besides, the offer of a unique English profile does not render the actual English curriculum any attractive. In addition to that, the absence of multimedia self-access systems, of language-laboratories (despite of the latter's limited value pedagogically, but psychologically important for learners) has not made the EFL context attractive.

A series of measures need to be introduced in order to compensate the feeling of near total despondency students often have when starting their English degree. Diversity of training profiles in accordance with the socio-economic environment to train 'usefully' should be introduced, while at the same time avoiding feelings of frustration or uselessness even after the award of the degree. Vocations should be initiated, which means providing psycho-pedagogical support for those needing orientation, i.e. more information. Identification of most apt students (point of view of their learning strategies and capacities but also motivation in order to help them choose according to their abilities) to help them choose

consciously. This is also a way to reduce the level of failure and thus develop a *pedagogy of success*.

Reform of Higher Education being on the Ministry's agenda today, where are we going from here? The state of today's language syllabi being what it is, i.e. in total shambles, how can future EFL programmes be elaborated? One can easily hypothesise that only syllabi in harmony with future jobs can survive, but also in accordance with what globalisation is imposing on countries of the Periphery like Algeria.

This means that serious and systemic planning is demanded to avoid amateurish handling by a vast majority of unprofessional teachers. This need for planning will undoubtedly generate more adequate objectives. However, these have to be not only intellectual in nature (towards a particular learner's knowledge development), but also social (linked to particular discourse communities found in all socio-economic and cultural sectors of the country), and emotional (never tackled by previous language programmes that rarely considered the learner as an individual, as a **total person**).

Purpose has then to be the stepping-stone from which content in EFL curricula has to be defined. Furthermore, it is also recommended that content serves in the future (J. Bruner) if not this will not develop the learner's motivation to learn and succeed. One needs to prevent effort-avoidance motivations (Rollett) be developed by students who ask to participate to goal-setting instead of leaving it to others and involved in the design of their own training. One needs to keep their instrumental motivation (Gardner) high because the

reasons for studying are as important as methodology and content of syllabi.

For once, the ball seems to be in the teachers' court, are we going to lose a lifetime chance to go beyond theoretical and idealistic stands? And in so doing, rid the system of what constitutes a major flaw in the system and replace it by an improved process of orientation of students in their university life for a desired training and future career.