

***The BA in English in Algerian Universities:
What teachers and students really need***

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The aim of this paper is to shed light on some of the most significant shortcomings of the B.A. in English Studies program in use in Algerian universities. Observations based on a very long teaching experience and commonly associated with formal and informal discussions with colleagues and especially students have shown a common agreement on the current program which is viewed as far from meeting the real needs of students simply because it does not reflect the needs of their community, i.e., their local needs and the needs of the market at large. In other words, the various domains in which the students are expected to operate and the specific functions for which they need the foreign language in question are not taken into account.

A close look at the program itself reveals that the basic modules, i.e., the ones through which the students can acquire the foreign language with a sufficient, if not a relatively strong degree of competence are taught during a rather limited period of time in spite of the fact that the length of the whole course is four years. Furthermore, the material conditions such as lack of books and pedagogical means in general, very limited access to the

library due to the great number of students, inadequate evaluation, limited classroom interaction and feedback due again to the great number of students per group, non-trained or non sufficiently qualified teachers have made the whole situation in the departments of foreign languages even more complex. Consequently, the students reach the second and fourth year and even graduate without being able to understand, speak and write the foreign language properly.

Therefore, how can such students enter into the professional life in which, as far as the use of the English language is concerned, two functions prevail. These functions which have to do with the educational and administrative domains require competence in the various skills such as reading documents, books and correspondences of various kinds, understanding them, interpreting them, explaining and translating them to others, producing oral and written feedback, in short being able to communicate, negotiate and deal with others using the foreign language in question in a variety of encounters for general and specific purposes.

The Algerian graduate of English cannot possibly satisfy all these requirements for all the reasons mentioned earlier and especially the following ones which are of a more theoretical and pedagogical nature. The fundamental question here has to do with the two basic modules of grammar and written expression which are taught during the first two years only, period which is incompatible with the defined objectives as quoted in what follows: "The students are supposed to be able to master the grammar of English by the end of the fourth term". Furthermore, the two-year period is justified by

the fact that grammar is implicitly included in the teaching of written expression which, in turn, cannot reach the specified objectives such as “argumentative writing, deductive and inductive meaning, techniques of summarizing, analysis of government publications, newspapers, writing business letters” and so on, since the teachers who are in charge of this module have themselves had no previous training directed towards such objectives, hence enabling them to perform such activities with the students. The same comments apply to the oral expression module which is extended to the third year but whose teaching cannot equip the students yet with the necessary knowledge to satisfy the performance criteria defined in the objectives of the course such as “free expression with appropriate style and refined choice of words, fluency in the manner in which the student expresses nuances or shades of meaning and respond with correct grammatical structures” etc. Other basic skills within modules are taught rather superficially or given minor importance such as listening and especially reading comprehension whose roles are fundamental together with translating from and into the language which is inexistent and which is a prerequisite for the satisfaction of the needs of the labour market whether these needs are of an administrative nature in which case various transactions take place requiring mastery of various registers and the ability to interpret and translate them into and from various languages or of a pedagogical and scientific nature where such skills are widely recognized nowadays as significant strategies for achieving foreign language proficiency and undertaking research.

On the basis of the foregoing discussion, a number of recommendations, suggestions emerge which focus on the following measures which, if taken, may constitute possible answers towards satisfying the above mentioned needs:

- Offering more practical courses within the existing ones, introducing performance -based activities in a significant manner to illustrate how theoretical knowledge can be exploited and put into use for the benefit of society, involving students much more and enhancing competitiveness.
- Extending basic language skills modules to further years and introducing a module of translation performance which, apart from its qualifying nature for a profession, can also be a complementary exercise in developing foreign language skills. In other words, listening comprehension and oral expression will improve through interpretation, and reading comprehension and written expression through translation particularly into the target language.
- Reviewing the content of modules in the light of the suggestions made so far, adding other modules and in short, re-evaluating the whole course structure together with providing all the necessary conditions for adequate study will make the present degree system fit in more easily with other systems and course structures at the international level. For example, keeping the system based on two main cycles, namely undergraduate and postgraduate studies and maintaining the standard period of undergraduate study of four years, as already practised, is suitable particularly in the case of Algerian

students who have no exposure to the target language in a native language context . Within the four year undergraduate cycle, adopting the first two year period for a foundation course common to all students, i.e.; a sort of 'tronc commun' and orientating the last two years in accordance with a prospective professional life for some students and academic research for others. In this way, opportunities will be given to both future labour candidates and researchers to be respectively. other shorter cycles can also be introduced leading to the obtention of specialized diplomas and certificates directly qualifying for a profession as the DPGS (Diplome de Postgraduation Spécialisée).

- Giving training courses to novice or untrained teachers and re-cycle or up-date training for the experienced ones. These trainings will certainly stress the importance of identifying first what students need to know, what they know already and what they do not know yet, in short, help teachers to identify the local needs of particular groups of learners, the purpose for which they are learning the language so that they can work towards meeting these needs as explained by Tarone and Yule (1989) in their introduction.

- Possibly, sending students and even teachers for short stays in the country of the foreign language in question and essentially opening Algerian universities worldwide. To conclude, all the measures proposed so far require, as stated by Hormuth (2002) that universities should be granted a much higher degree of autonomy in decision regarding personnel appointment (teaching and administrative staff), planning and finances. This more independent and faster decision making should also be

introduced within faculties and even departments to allow for better results at the administrative, pedagogical and scientific levels and for more efficiency in all domains and avoid as Hormuth (ibid.), very appropriately puts it, going through endless processes involving various committees representing the various groups of the university as commonly found here. We all know that these processes are very time consuming and inefficient. Debates, as suggested by Hormuth and commonly advised whenever appropriate, which are very much needed particularly in non-native language environments, should also take place on a regular basis involving government representatives, university and secondary education organizations and student organizations towards the following goals:

- Coordination between the different sectors: educational including primary, intermediate, secondary and higher education and the industrial sectors.
- Compatibility between the various courses and trainings given by universities and the needs of the labour market for employability purposes.
- Life-long learning or permanent education from a theoretical and practical point of view resulting in pre-service/in-service training and experience-based training or what is commonly known as teacher education and teacher development respectively.
- Competitiveness at the national and transnational levels though the latter is still far beyond the reach of Algerian universities.
- Teacher and student mobility in the sense of encouraging exchanges of all kinds between universities (nationally and internationally) and also between all the

sectors of higher education and the socio-economic sector. For example, simulation exercises and experiments of various kinds can be performed in association with the various sectors to illustrate how problems and difficulties encountered can find solutions and so on.

Finally, it should be understood that the B.A. in English is not and must not be exclusively concerned with the teaching profession as many people, including the university environment, tend to think but rather, it is a degree which should open up various opportunities for the labour market to graduates.

References

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