

The University Language Department: from an educational to a social role

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Abstract

The present paper examines the dual roles of university foreign language departments in general. It attempts to explain how quality of education within these contexts can influence language spread in society. For the sake of reference however, the department of English in Algeria will be taken as an example throughout. This is first because English being the first foreign language worldwide, English departments are far more numerous than any others. Second, being a teacher of English in an English department, the author is naturally quite familiar with what goes on in such a setting.

Introduction

University language departments throughout the world have a crucial role in developing second/foreign language education. They are the educational institutions students attend in order to get a 'specialised' instruction. In fact university language departments remain for most students the final stage where they can gain knowledge of the target language they have chosen to learn. The extent to which such departments recognize or realize this responsibility is of course variable. Nevertheless, it still stands to reason that university language departments highly determine the success or failure of language teaching at different stages of education, i.e. high school, middle school and even primary school.

The educational and social roles of university language departments

The central aim of most university language departments is to develop students' foreign language proficiency to the highest level possible. Accordingly, the role of an English department for example consists (or rather should consist) of providing students with the most advanced and specialized proficiency in English. It is at the university

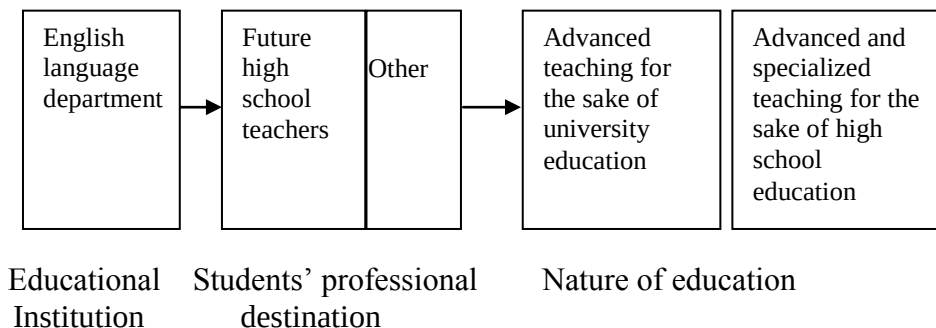
that most students ‘complete’ their English language learning experience in the sense that the university language department represents, for the majority, the final stage of education.

Although an English language department attracts students with variable professional perspectives and ambitions (teaching in high and middle schools, working in foreign companies, or undertaking postgraduate research), and although it is not primarily meant to train teachers, most of its students will become teachers of English at high and middle school level.

Stern raises the point about language departments:

*“I recognize that ULDs (university language departments) are not intended to be narrowly career-oriented. In particular, they’re not meant to train teachers, although many of their students will become language teachers.”*³²

Taking this fact into account, it becomes clear that an English department’s educational role and responsibility lies beyond the boundaries of the department itself. It thus relates to or affects the teaching of English in high school as well; since it is there that the majority of its trainees will go. The following diagram may illustrate the above idea:

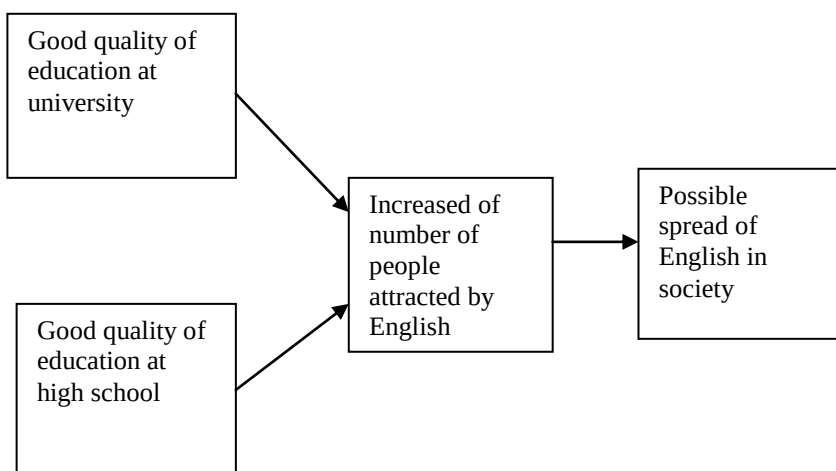


University English department's dual educational role

³² H.H., Stern, "Language teaching and the universities in the 1980s" 1981, p.219.

The above then shows a double-standard educational role, which puts on a University English department a great responsibility. As far as its role as a social institution is concerned, we believe that the quality of education the department provides, and by extension the way it affects high school education may determine the way people look at, or judge English language teaching in Algeria and thus influence its status in society. To put it another way, if English language teaching is successful in a society, this is likely to attract people to it, hence contributing towards language spread.³³

The following diagram attempts to illustrate this relationship:



The social influence of English language departments

What has been argued so far shows that the role of a language department lies beyond the boundaries of the university itself, and this

³³ Although we are aware that this on its own does not determine language spread, the latter being also subject to government policy

responsibility surely suggests that a serious attention should be paid to the way English is taught / learned in such an institution.

The English language department

The nature of foreign language pedagogy is context related, thus differing from one educational environment to another because of varying socio-economic and political factors. This is why...*during the last few decades we have become far more environment-conscious than ever before.*³⁴ Consequently, in any context related research, questions such as which the learners/teachers are, where the foreign language is learnt, the nature of teaching goals and the learners' social and professional needs of the TL become of paramount importance.

The English department in most Algerian universities offers a four year degree course in English as a foreign language. Throughout the course, English is the medium of instruction. Most students have had at least five years of formal instruction of English as a subject of their middle and high school curricula. Most teachers in this department are Algerian themselves who hold postgraduate degrees from Algerian universities.³⁵ Until the beginning of the academic year 2007/2008 English has been taught in most Algerian Universities on the basis of the four year course which was meant to dispense learners, at the end of their course study, with a degree called a 'licence'.

The four year course in the English language department includes three major components, namely language development, linguistics, and literature. It is beyond the scope of this work to provide a full description of each component; however, a brief account of each may help providing a general idea about the curriculum.³⁶

The language development component is conventionally divided into skills. It is thus taught/learnt as sub-components whereby grammar, listening comprehension, written expression and oral expression- as they are referred to in the department – are treated in

³⁴ E., Oskar, "Creativity and interactional competence in foreign language learning", 1986, 34.

³⁵ Students' and teachers' profiles are described in more detail in chapter four.

³⁶ We are aware that the new educational system LMD is under discussion in many Algerian universities, and already applied in some. Further research needs to be devoted to the LMD in relation to the different components it offers and mostly to the way oral communication is understood and meant to be taught.

isolation. Thus typically, in the grammar class, the teacher provides structural rules of English. Students learn them and practise them formally via grammatical exercises. The teacher of written expression, on the other hand, teaches students how to write correct English; they thus get practice in writing essays and letters for example. A separate class concentrates on developing students' listening comprehension capacities. This is generally done through making learners listen to texts, answer related comprehension questions, read texts and do a series of written exercises based on the text under study. Concerned with developing students' conversational skills, the oral class offers them the ability to speak in the foreign language.³⁷ Finally, the language laboratory provides learners with practice in various aspects of the language namely, listening comprehension and phonetics. It may be worth noting at this stage that as students move from one year to another, more emphasis is placed on academic (content) teaching than on language development. In other words, whereas the first and second years concentrate on developing students' language proficiency; the third and especially fourth years are more concerned with academic development.

Another component which is an important part of the English curriculum is the linguistic one. We have used the term linguistic here in a very wide sense to cover linguistics with its sub-branches such as phonetics and phonology as well as other areas of linguistics such as sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and applied linguistics. Thus, this large component consists of what we have referred to earlier as academic teaching. It seems as a matter of fact, that it is towards this component that most attention is concentrated in our department. The main concern here is to provide learners with theories of language, language learning and acquisition, language in use and finally- during the last year of the course- language teaching. As can be noted, this component is quite diverse; it is highly theoretical too.

Finally, the literature component is one which includes different areas of literary studies such as British literature, Third World literature and American literature. These courses are directed towards linking language and literature. The literature component

introduces students to some outstanding literary works written in English, and initiates them to literary criticism.

Thus a close look at the nature and process of English language teaching at the university language department suggests that these have hardly ever been altered or updated. Consequently, teaching is still based on traditional grounds: language is presented and taught in terms of isolated skills, and the focus with every skill is mainly on correct language use.

Local specificities of the language department and their impact

The extent to which FL teaching/learning depends on several different factors. Some of them are of a purely pedagogical nature such as the teaching methods, the evaluation procedures, the choice of curricula or the time allocated to the subject. Some influential factors have, on the other hand, a more material and physical nature. These may consist of for example, the pedagogical material that is available and put at the disposal of learners in a given institution. This can range from books and magazines to computers and internet facilities. Material conditions may also include the seating arrangement of classrooms such as whether there are fixed tables or individual desks, small classes or amphitheatres, etc...

Finally, the success or failure of a foreign language class heavily lies on the human dimension which it is composed of, i.e. the teacher and the learners. Questions such as: is the teacher newly enrolled in teaching? Does he/she have previous teaching experience? Is he/she 'open' to new teaching methods and techniques? Or is he/she an adept of 'teach as you have been taught'?

Learners are the other important partners of the classroom experience. Their number per class, their age, their level of proficiency in the target language, their cognitive abilities and general knowledge, their gender, relationship to the target language and its culture as well as to their teacher; may all have an impact on their overall learning experience.

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