



TEACHING ENGLISH IN ALGERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: STATE OF THE ART

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Résumé: L'importance de l'apprentissage des langues étrangères est reconnue par tout le monde comme il est prouvé qu'il existe certains paramètres qui déterminent l'importance d'une langue étrangère donnée sur les autres comme ils ont parfois de déterminer la vitalité et la mort des langues.

Cet article est une introduction à la façon dont l'anglais est enseigné dans les écoles secondaires algériennes. Etant une langue internationale utilisée dans tous les domaines, l'anglais impose son enseignement à travers le monde dont l'Algérie. Ainsi, l'importance de l'enseignement de l'anglais et sa méthodologie seront la première préoccupation de cet article. Après avoir discuté les buts et les approches de l'enseignement de l'anglais dans les écoles secondaires, ces aspects seront examinés à partir d'un point de vue pratique. Cela signifie que l'on montrera si ces principes sont appliqués, et si oui, sont-ils réussis.

Abstract: The importance of foreign language learning is acknowledged by everybody as it is proved that there are certain parameters that determine the importance of a given foreign language over the others as they sometimes determine the vitality and death of languages.

This paper is an introduction to the way English is taught in Algerian secondary schools. Being an international language used in all fields, English imposes its teaching throughout the world including Algeria. So, the importance of English language teaching and its methodology will be the first preoccupation of this paper. After discussing the teaching aims, approaches, and teachers of English in secondary schools, these aspects will be examined from a practical point of view. This means that one will show whether these principles are applied, and if so, are they successful.

1. Introduction:

The English language enjoys a great importance not just as an international but as a world language. It is spoken now by more than 508 million people ranking in the second place as far as the number of its speakers. No one can consider himself as part of this globalization if he does not master two things: English and computing. Concerning the first skill, Burshfield believes that:

"Any literate, educated person on the face of the globe is deprived, if he does not know English".

(Quoted in Louznadji 2003: 78)

English is the world's language not because it is the most widely spoken as a native language. Mandarin (1 billion speakers) and Chinese would be more

important in this case. But because it is widely spoken outside its native countries either as a second or a foreign language. The importance of English springs from its wide use rather than from the number of its speakers:

"English is the major language of news and information in the world. It is the language of business and government even in some countries where it is a minority language. It is the language of maritime communication and international air traffic control, and it is used even for internal air traffic control in countries where it is not a native language. American popular culture primarily movies and music carries



the English language throughout the world."

(Kitaok 1996: 1)

It is this importance of English that is behind the advent of ESP teaching all over the world in the 1960s. And that is why almost no faculty in the Algerian universities is free from an English department. English is both a language that enjoys a great instrumentality nowadays and it is a window on the other cultures and civilizations. It widens the learners' horizons and teaches him many great values.

Aims and Objectives of English Language Teaching in Algeria

As far as its linguistic map is concerned, Algeria enjoys a 'linguistic plurality (or diversity)'. The national language used in administration and the media is Classical Arabic. Algerian Dialectal Arabic and Berber are spoken in everyday life and informal situations. For historical reasons, French stands as a second language. Though many laws and policies were followed so as to weaken the influence of the French language in favour of Classical Arabic, this did not succeed to make it disappear from the Algerians' lives and culture.

English on the other hand stands as a foreign language in Algeria. Algerian learners meet it only in the classroom whereas the *"national environment is far from being supportive"* (Baloto 1996: 31). The teaching of English as a foreign language in Algeria is inspired by the national policy that sees its interests in the language that enjoys the importance explained in the previous part. It can also be another way to diminish French interference as claimed by Miliani:

"In a situation where the French language has lost much of its ground in the sociocultural and educational environments of the country; the introduction of English is being heralded as the magic solution to all possible ills-including economic, technological and educational

ones"

(Miliani 2000: 13)

Whatever the cause may be, English is actually taught in Algerian middle, secondary schools and most Algerian universities.

2. Approaches to English Language Teaching in Algeria

In teaching any language, the whole staff that is responsible has to share a common understanding of this language and of the way it should be taught. This understanding constitutes the approach. It is:

"the sum of assumptions course designers make about language and language learning. This term gives a description of the many ways psychologists and linguists look at language... it is a combined theory involving both language and the learning process"

(Miliani 2003: 20)

In speaking about the adapted approaches for ELT in Algerian secondary school education, we should refer to two phases where two approaches have co-occurred. The first one is the Communicative Approach. After discovering and trying many approaches and methods (the Grammar-Translation and the Direct Methods), the Algerian educational designers agreed upon the *perfection* of this approach. This choice is justified by the tendency that teaching is communication:

"The first act of pedagogy is communication Teaching implies a 'know-how to communicate'. The first apparent element is the one of language, more exactly of discourse and of the logic it carries"

(Morandi 2002: 20)

The communicative approach, on the other hand, aims at helping learners acquire communicative competence (or ability). This term refers to the speaker's knowledge of the rules of grammar and his ability to use them appropriately



according to the different social circumstances. The focus is then on the meaning conveyed rather than on the forms used. The communicative approach which was introduced and developed in Europe and North America during the 1970s and the 1980s, favours function over form. As far as the teacher's role is concerned, he moves from being the instructor he used to be in other approaches to be a facilitator under the communicative approach.

Since September 2005, EFL teaching methodology shifted to use the Competency-Based Approach answering the 21st century needs and the world's new changes. A key concept of this approach is competency meaning:

" a know-how-to-act process which integrates and mobilises a set of capacities and skills and an account of knowledge that will be used effectively in various problem-solving situations or circumstances that have never occurred before. I.e. a competency continues throughout and beyond the school curriculum"

(Louznadji 2003)

Inspired by the Cognitivist and Socio-constructivist theories, the Competency-based approach tends to make the learning skills related to the outside environment. It aims at making the learner able of sharing knowledge and cooperation with others. The spokesmen of this approach give the following characteristics on the part of the teacher:

- A less authoritarian attitude
- Openness to discussion and negotiation.
- Sensitiveness to learner's concerns.

3. The EFL Teacher:

Speaking about English teaching in Algerian secondary schools opens doors to a discussion of the teacher as an important partner in the process. He is the one who applies the approach and gives life to the educational tools. The importance of

the teacher as an agent of change in the teaching-learning process is widely agreed by specialists in education. Lier (1990) suggests three areas that need to be developed and evaluated in the teacher's personality. These areas are: *Having, Doing and Being*. These aspects of the teacher's personality are explained in table (1):

Aspect	Definition
'Having'	Refers to the knowledge the teacher holds either of the subject matter (language in this case) or the treatment of learners and the psychological handling of situations.
'Doing'	Is related to putting that knowledge in action and implementing it in real learning situations.
'Being'	Concerns the traits of the teacher's personality, attitude and conscience

(Arnold 1999: 4).

This discussion will include three sides of the teacher that determine the success of his mission.

4. From Theory to Practice: A Critical View

The points discussed in the previous parts were seen from a theoretical point of view. In practice, however, there is a number of shortages and negative aspects. This implies either that the theoretical suggestions are not appropriate to the Algerian context or that they are not applied in the right way. These shortcomings include:

a. Centralized Decision-making

It has been noted earlier that the teacher is considered by a great number of educational



theoreticians, as the most important member of the educational unity. So, he is supposed to be the one who decides on the kind of methods and strategies to be used in each teaching situation. Since each situation is a case in itself different from the others and since there is such a thing called "individual differences" between learners even in the same classroom, the teacher needs to have a great room of freedom to teach the way he sees appropriate. However, this is not the case as far as Algerian schools are concerned. It is not the teacher who decides but the inspector.

"The educational system is still highly centralized, although several suggestions have been voiced by skilled teachers, and are still being attempted towards decentralization. In vain, the general education policy is ultimately decided at the top"

(Bouabdesselam 2001: 102)

The problem in the centralization of educational decisions and planning is that it does not take into consideration the specialists' views. It is rather based on political or economic purposes which are most of the time contradictory with what should be taught from an educational and intellectual point of view. Not to say that these interests (the economic and political ones) are temporary and ever-changing.

b. Teaching Aims and Learners' Needs

Most of the time, learners ask themselves: why do we learn such and such a thing? This question springs from the fact that they do not know the aims of the curriculum. They come to the classroom to receive pieces of knowledge, memorize them then give them back in the exams to move to the next year. They do not know what they will benefit from what they learn in their real lives. On the other hand, teachers do not know what their learners need to know. They do not even make efforts to know. Here, the gap widens between the two partners who are supposed to work in collaboration to achieve success and development.

As a result of not being stated and explained, learners' needs are by no means answered as far as the syllabus is concerned. This is to be added to the fact that there is no rapport between the long-term aims and the short-term objectives:

"The English syllabus in secondary education in Algeria is narrowly defined and restricted to a collection of functions that are randomly selected... however, the major lack of harmony between the various official documents is over the degree of specificity of overall objectives: instructions in the English syllabus are not in harmony with those in New lines and in pedagogical instruction"

(Baiche quoted in Bouabdesselam 2001: 103)

c. Teacher's Training

In the absence of specialized institutions devoted to the training of teachers, each teacher relies on his own experience in deciding about the strategies and improves himself (if ever he does) individually. Observation shows that many Algerian English teachers teach just the same way they were taught. On the other hand, ministerial references put forward an evaluation grid made up of ten parameters that would-be teachers should fulfill. The question to be asked here is: Do all secondary school teachers hold the required qualities?

d. Large Classes

The Algerian secondary school classroom is generally made up of 30 to 45 pupils. In this case individualization of language teaching will be difficult if not impossible. That is instead of seeing learners as individuals (each one with different attitudes, capacities and motivation); the teacher will see a mass of brains which must acquire whatever teaching task they are involved in:

"What options does a teacher have when his or her high school class consists of 50 students? Such a course, common in compulsory English study, simply does not enough exposure to the



language"

(Krieger 2005: 9)

The fact of having a great number of pupils in small classrooms will hinder the possibility of working in groups. Experience shows that if the teacher tries to divide his class into small groups, he will devote more energy to control the process. Yet, this activity will not take place

"It is clearly the case that physical conditions have a great effect on learning and can alter a student's motivation either positively or negatively. Classrooms that are badly lit and overcrowded can be excessively de-motivating, but unfortunately many of them exist in schools"

(Harmer 1991: 5)

The problem of large and crowded classes is recurrent in Third World Countries widening the possibility of individual differences among learners, creating discipline problems and demanding more efforts from the teacher.

e. Absence of Communication

Speaking about the implementation of the Communicative approach opens doors to refer to language as discourse or teaching as discourse analysis. It involves analyzing language in use moving from language units to communicative acts in the form of sentences. And one wonders whether our secondary school pupils (or teachers) know about this notion. In a study done in Greece, Doukas (1996) reported that the communicative approach failed partly because teachers did not work in an adequate manner with its principles. They misunderstood the nature of communicative language teaching. Although they used materials meant for communicative activities, they fall in the trap of using traditional teacher-centred routines (Deckert 2004: 12).

Apart from very few exceptions, the English class in Algeria as well as other subjects' class is the kind of *"sit down, shut up, and listen so that you can*

memorize facts to dump onto a test sheet" (Luce: 2).

f. Concentration on Marks

In addition to the absence of communication in the classroom, there is another drawback which is the system's concentration on grades as a measurement of success or failure. According to Travis and Wade, this is among the factors that decrease the learner's intrinsic motivation:

"The fact that our school system relies heavily on grades may help explain why the average college graduate reads few books. Like all extrinsic rewards, grades induce temporary compliance but not necessarily a lifelong disposition to learn"

(Travis & Wade 1997:232)

The importance given to marks has many drawbacks:

1. It makes the learner concerned with exams and marks rather than the value he gets from what he is learning.
2. It decreases his curiosity and thirst to learn things apart from the syllabus.
3. It can urge the weak pupils to cheat in exams.
4. It transforms knowledge from a precious thing to be sought into numbers and scores.

g. Humble Teaching Materials

As far as the majority of Algerian secondary schools is concerned, teaching materials are confined to traditional ones such as the board, the chalk, and the textbook (or handouts). This is not to mention the absence of audio-visual aids which are said to facilitate language learning.

h. Teacher's Dilemma

Apart from the considerable number of teachers who do not do their jobs properly, the serious ones are in a difficult dilemma. They are torn between coping with the learners' needs in an



attempt to recapitulate what is missing in their capacities and finishing the syllabus on time. Being put in such a situation, a teacher has to choose between two reactions: either to consider the learners with priority and spend as much time as needed to make them acquire a certain language point no matter when the syllabus will be completed, or to follow the planning blindly being satisfied with the few pupils who have understood.

As a conclusion to this critical view, one may describe the Algerian secondary school pupil as the ones described in Coma's statement:

"Unfortunately, many students dislike learning English; and although they attend lessons, they are not interested in speaking properly. They only want to pass the compulsory exams"

(Corria 1999: 17)

Conclusion

This paper was a presentation of the state of the art of English language teaching in Algeria with reference to secondary school level. English enjoys a worldwide importance and interest in all fields of life. This left its print on the educational field and that is why English is taught everywhere. It is the case for Algeria, whose educational decision makers are trying to find the most appropriate way that makes learners master this language. This 'appropriate way' involves an approach to be thought about as well as a textbook and a teacher, of course. Each one of these components was analyzed in this paper with much concentration on the teacher's role, expertise and experience. The shortages noticed in the teaching-learning process are due to the contradiction that exists between theory and practice. Many problems appear to the surface and need to be analyzed and solved if Algerian decision-makers really seek success and joining the train.

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