

Educational Reforms and English Language Teaching at Tertiary Level in Algeria

الإصلاحات التربوية وتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في المستوى الجامعي في الجزائر

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Abstract:

Higher education institutions mainly at tertiary level are facing enormous challenges. Higher education institutions are required to meet the new standards and ensure higher academic standards than ever before to meet the technology-based society. Besides, the goal of higher education in Algeria is to impart knowledge and skills to an increasing proportion of the population for future professional, academic and social leadership for the country. The present work reviews the literature on the reforms undergone recently, shifting from the lecturer style to the development of a blended learning environment. It sheds some light on the status and role of English in Algeria. The important role of learning English as a foreign language is also discussed. The educational reforms that were led by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in Algeria are highlighted focusing on the methods and innovations newly adopted.

Keywords: Algeria - Higher educational system – Educational reforms – EFL teaching –Higher education – Innovations

ملخص:

تواجه مؤسسات التعليم العالي بشكل رئيسي تحديات هائلة تجبرها على تلبية متطلبات المتعلمين وضمن معايير أكاديمية أعلى من أي وقت مضى لتلبية حاجيات المتعلم المعاصر المحاط بالتكنولوجيا. إلى جانب ذلك، فإن هدف التعليم العالي في الجزائر هو نقل المعرفة والمهارات للمتعلمين للقيادة المهنية والأكاديمية والاجتماعية المستقبلية للبلاد. يستعرض هذا العمل الأدبيات المتعلقة بالإصلاحات التي مست القطاع مؤخرًا، حيث انتقل من أسلوب إلقاء المحاضرات إلى تطوير بيئة تعليمية مطعمة بالتكنولوجيا. البحث يسلط بعض الضوء على مكانة ودور اللغة الإنجليزية في الجزائر، كما يناقش الدور المهم لتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. تم تسليط الضوء على الإصلاحات التعليمية التي قادتها وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي في الجزائر مع التركيز على الأساليب والابتكارات التي تم اعتمادها حديثًا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الجزائر – نظام التعليم العالي – الإصلاحات التربوية – تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية – التعليم العالي – الابتكارات

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1. Introduction

Education is a key to any nation's development and for it to play this role, education reforms should be inclusive, clearly planned, protected from political dictates, owned by stakeholders, adequately financed, subjected to periodic technical consultations, full implementation of the commission's recommendations to achieve innovation. Education reform is for innovation especially the recent education reforms throughout the world, are intended for realizing the future vision.

The teaching of EFL in higher education in Algeria aims at equipping learners with the knowledge and skills required to enable them to access written documentation in English and to use the target language for communication purposes. Consequently, a set of new English syllabi have been designed in line with the new curricula established by policy makers. The Algerian tertiary system has undergone a series of reforms to achieve the objectives set for the teaching of foreign languages at this level.

2. The Status and Role of English in Algeria

Syllabus designers and policy makers have led some educational reforms stressing the fact that all that is taught is not communicative knowledge of the English language use, but knowledge of how the syntax and lexical rules of English operate (Mackay, 1978). Hence, students go to University lacking many aspects of the language. This lack affects negatively their performances like the communicative competence which is required in the utilitarian purposes. They encounter difficulties in communicating mainly when they travel abroad, look for a job or simply when they write correctly and effectively which is the concern of the present research. According to Brumfit (1979), the problem lies in the fact that students still struggle, show weaknesses and remain deficient in using the language for communicative purposes despite the fact that they have been exposed to this language for years. That is why, immediate reconsideration and urgent change must occur on both English language status, and the way it is regarded and taught by the Algerians.

3. Education and Reform in Algeria

All over the world, educational reforms are aimed to respond to the needs dictated by the fast changes in the socio-economic world. In this context, USA and Canada serve as good examples of the countries that underwent important reforms right from the 1980's. According to Waks (2007), the publication of "*A Nation at Risk*" in 1983 paved the way for a series of educational reforms in the United States of America, and similar reforms followed in Canada and many other industrial countries.

4. Tertiary Education in the 21st Century

Coleman (1966) found in their study that there was a variety of elements that support learning, among which they enumerated physical elements, such as the educational infrastructure, that is, the classrooms, language laboratories, libraries and textbooks; which today would be supported by information and communications technologies.

Motivation in students was raised by Astin (1999), who stated that student involvement was based on the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. In this case, a highly involved student is one who expends considerable energy in studying, spending time on campus and actively participating in group activities, with frequent interaction with faculty members and other students. The underachiever and less successful students thus participate in these activities less than the average undergraduate. Astin believed that higher education resources were maximized if student motivation and engagement were given primacy over subject matter and technique; thus all university policies and practices, administrative as well as academic, should be evaluated on the basis of encouraging student involvement. Further,

university faculty success in student engagement contributes to the higher education experience for undergraduates.

These views were also held by Al-Hazmi (2006) who noted the challenge for the Saudi Arabia Kingdom in accessing sufficient professional and infrastructure resources to educate the increasing numbers of students approaching the age for higher education. E-learning was an option which could radically broaden the number of undergraduates by increasing their access to university resources through ICT. The findings of Al Hazmi's study of the attitudes of Saudi university undergraduates toward online learning are that its use is influenced by computer and online access, students' online experience, and perceived behavioral control by instructors. The issues raised by Al-Hazmi (2011) reflect those of Ginsburg, who also questioned the efficacy of online learning. The researchers noted a global growth rate of 35.6 per cent for the e-learning market, however, there are factors affecting user satisfaction. The results of their study showed that the learner's computer anxiety, instructor's attitude toward e-Learning, e-Learning course flexibility, e-Learning course quality, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and diversity in assessments are the critical factors affecting learners' perceived satisfaction (Allen, K. 2005).

In summary, the characteristics of higher education that inform this research are those of researchers following Coleman et al. (1966), who identified and assessed the elements of higher education; and the work of Astin (1999) in describing factors that engage students with their studies. The literature thus describes the characteristics of higher education over time and points toward future trends and the challenges they represent.

5. Higher Education Reform and the LMD System Implementation

The Algerian universities first adopted a system based on the French model which meant that the university faculties were autonomous even in designing the teaching curricula. The system resulted in duplication of academic offerings, and complete loss of credits by students changing programs (Benrabah, 1999). Some reforms designed to modernize the university system were introduced in 1971, and major reforms were introduced in 1988. Nevertheless, the universities still loosely resemble the French model, and French remains widely used for instructional purposes.

Like any other developing country, Algeria is facing the challenges of the new century with the hope to catch up with the demands of globalization and the technology-shaped society. In this process many governments all over the world are taking steps to implement the Bologna Process, and Algeria is no exception. Since 2004, it launched the LMD system (Licence, Master, and Doctorate) which is a consequence of this process as an attempt to reposition Higher Education in terms of globalization and competitiveness. To achieve this aim, tremendous changes have been promoted at different levels; architectural, organizational and pedagogical ones. These changes are of paramount importance since they are meant to affect both the teaching process and consequently learning and the teaching profession.

6. The LMD System and the English Language Teaching

Within this system, EFL academics are required to innovate some of their practices. They need to:

- develop the contents of their pedagogical programs instead of complying with the national program set by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research,
- adopt the learner-centered approach instead of the teacher-centered instruction.
- and provide their students with on-going assessment instead of a one-shot exam at the end of each semester.

According to the above stated requirements and from the official documents, a positive position of the system is fulfilled. The latter is exemplified in the huge focus laid on education, reform and learner autonomy that are highlighted through this system, the LMD.

Approaching the term « education » from its linguistic meaning, it means to give intellectual, moral and social instruction mainly in a university environment. Yet, originally, the term "education" (from Latin: e-ducere) and that means to lead out indicates properly: "leading out or drawing out the latent powers of an individual" (Cassel Encyclopedic Dictionary, 1904). This definition leads us towards the core of the discipline. It is accepted in the recent educational approaches that education has the individual as a subject. This individual is the most important factor of this discipline upon which all turn. This salient individual is the Student. Relying on the original definition we stated at the start, to educate is meant to sort out the student's hidden abilities. That is, the student should be seen as an individual with latent, implied, indirect, inferable, understood, unspoken, tacit, inherent, intrinsic, innate, natural, inferential capabilities referred to as power in the above definition. Our point here is that our teaching should or must be based on this student as an individual, as a human who is believed to possess some prerequisites; he/she is able to do, able to achieve, able to think, able to change, and, hence, autonomous.

7. Learner Centeredness and Autonomy

Learner autonomy refers to a concept introduced by Henry Holec (1981). It is a seminal contribution to the field of foreign language teaching and is still a focal issue in language. In the late 90s and at the beginning of the new millennium there were numerous publications dedicated to the topic. Learner autonomy in language learning in the last twenty years has had significant influence on English learning. The educational systems today put a lot of emphasis on differentiation and catering to individual learners with different abilities and individual interests. Curricula make several references to giving learners choice and creativity in both input and output.

Learner centeredness and autonomy cater to all of this as they move the focus from teaching to learning. They allow learners to work on different tasks, not all doing the same thing at the same time. They accentuate self-assessment with emphasis on logbooks and written journals.

When implementing learner autonomy in the classroom teachers need to take a lot into consideration. In this section we will try to clarify the meaning of learner centeredness and autonomy in relation to the ESL/EFL classroom, and discuss the roles of teachers and learners in the autonomous classroom, and also the main characteristics of the autonomous classroom.

8. Collaboration and Group Work

The socio-cultural theory of mind emphasizes the role of interaction and peer collaboration in L2 development. From a socio-cultural lens, learning is a socially situated activity. Higher cognitive functions appear first on the social, inter-mental plane, and only later on the psychological, intra-mental plane (Vygotsky, 1978). Learners, novices construct knowledge in collaboration with more capable individuals, experts. Researchers applying socio-cultural theory to the study of L2 learning maintain that learners can have a positive impact on each other's development because they can act as both novices and experts (e.g. Storch, 2004). Because no two learners have the same strengths and weaknesses, when working together, they can provide scaffolded assistance to each other and, by pooling their different resources, achieve a level of performance that is beyond their individual level of competence (Ohta,2001).The collaborative dialogue that occurs in LREs, as learners collaborate to solve grammatical and lexical difficulties, constitutes an example of languaging (Watanabe& Swain, 2007).

For example, in writing classes, in recent years, a number of studies have called attention to the benefits of collaborative writing tasks, which require learners to work in pairs throughout the entire writing process (e.g., Storch, 2004, Addisson, J., & McGee, S.J., 2010). Research from a

socio-cultural perspective suggests that collaborative writing activities push learners to reflect on their language use and work together in the solution of their language-related problems (Watanabe & Swain, 2007). By pooling their linguistic resources to solve the problems encountered, learners engage in language-mediated cognitive activities that are thought to facilitate the co-construction of language knowledge and a higher level of performance (Beauvais & Passerault, 2011).

9. Educational Reform and the Adoption of Innovations

Theoretically, *“the purpose of educational change presumably is to help schools accomplish their goals more effectively by replacing some structures, programs and/or practices with better ones”* (Fullan, 1991: 15). That is, we seek educational reform because of dissatisfaction with the status inadequacy with our current situation. Educational reform is sought when we feel that something is not right, others are moving ahead, or we are standing still, and therefore we act in order to improve our situation. Consequently, as we often do not know what we want, the what and how questions must be the core of any change (Fullan, 1991).

According to Fullan (1991), change is not needed if there is no need for change. It requires time to be seen as an integral part of the system. In addition, change is seen to be a long process of implementation and modification to ensure maximum suitable condition for the new innovation to work properly. Therefore, educational change should be seen as a process rather than an event.

10. The Teacher’s Role

The impact of the Internet in education in the recent years fosters the vision of an open, global and flexible learning, as authors such as Colls state (2003), leading to radical shifts in the teacher’s role and competencies. In the framework of this educational landscape, the role of the teacher is that of acting as guide and instrument to assure a comprehensive learning process via the Internet, managing the student’s learning process by creating - at the same time- new instructional models set in newly-created virtual environments. Lo(2007) understands knowledge manager as the person who is able to manage the student’s skills, abilities and knowledge, motivating and taking benefit of the student’s both individual and collective learning possibilities. Thus, the teacher’s role is multiplied and shifts from being a single transmitter of knowledge to become facilitator and guide of the learning process, integrator of new ICT media, researcher and designer of suitable learning scenarios, collaborator (with other teachers and students), orchestrator, learner and evaluator. The ICC report (2002), especially devoted to the role of teachers of foreign languages, determines the skills and competencies a teacher has to master in order to integrate ICT in a successful way. Thus, the report mentions the acquisition of technical, organizational, conceptual skills together with the new literacies: technical, scientific, digital, critical, linguistic, cultural and mediation literacies.

Similarly, referring to the role and function of teachers who develop their activities in ICT-based settings, Lufti, Gisbert and Fandos (2001:70) point out *“five main functions a teacher should compile: information consultant, group collaborator, facilitator, critical generator of knowledge and finally, academic supervisor.”* The authors add that the teacher’s profile is shaped in three dimensions: cognitive-reflexive, active-creative and affective-communicative. Thus, teachers are regarded as assessors and guides of the autonomous learning process, resource facilitators, designers of new technology-rich learning environments, adapters of different materials, producers of new didactic materials in ICT-based settings, evaluators of the different processes in which these environments and resources are involved and finally they will have to be able to acquire a professional viewpoint on ICT life-long learning.

11. The Learner’s Role

The learners, citizens of the 21st century, have to be given access to didactic and technical strategies so that they can become competent users of new tools and resources. They are autonomous and responsible for their learning. Moreover, they not only have to acquire skill and

ability to cope with technological demands, but also they have to acquire the capacity to use them effectively at technical, rational and critical levels. Thus, the great challenges a teacher would have to face regarding the student's instruction would be: teach to search, teach to understand, teach to use a critical thinking and teach to communicate, putting emphasis upon the different educational needs and qualities of the student. Cabero (1998:5) puts it straight: "*the final goal is to enable learners to manage themselves in the society of the future, which -as it seems- will be the society of learning, and it will be a life-long learning. Just like the teacher, the learner definitely has to adjust to a new role in the learning process.*"

S/he must take on new responsibilities, often working without any supervision whatsoever. According to Cabero (Cabero, 1998), to succeed in technology-rich environments, learners have to develop certain key abilities and skills such as the adaptability to an environment which is in constant change, the work in team in a collaborative form, the use creativity to solve problems...etc.

The ICC report establishes many of the new settings' advantages. The learners have the possibilities to publish and distribute their own productions for a wider audience (ICC, 2002). Activities will encourage learners to become inquisitive, rather than becoming solely passive recipients of knowledge, thus furthering the idea of the learner as an active participant in the learning process (ICC, 2002: 14). Set in new technological environments students are given the possibility to work in an autonomous way, becoming more conscious of their own learning process and of the knowledge they acquire, thus becoming more aware of the contents and objectives to be achieved. The inclusion of ICT into the English classroom favors, above all, communication: "*Learning on-line is different from learning off-line in another important way: there is much more learning and much less teaching (...) at least there is much less teaching as it is typically done in off-line settings*" as stated by Peterson and Facemyer (1996:55).

12. Conclusion

Algeria, like most countries of the world, has gone through a series of actions in the policy of education, reaching the state of an open country in the twenty-first century. When the winds of change blew over the Algerian educational system, it had to adopt a modernization policy to keep pace with time, with the hope to catch up with the demands of globalization and to satisfy the new generation learners' academic needs. Rita Dunn (2009) argues that in case the child is not learning the way teachers are teaching, then they have to teach in the way the child learns. In this respect, Algeria like most developing countries adopted the current learning theories and encouraged academics and lecturers to exploit technology to the maximum in the field of education.

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