

Algerian students specialized in German civilization and the English language

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Abstract:

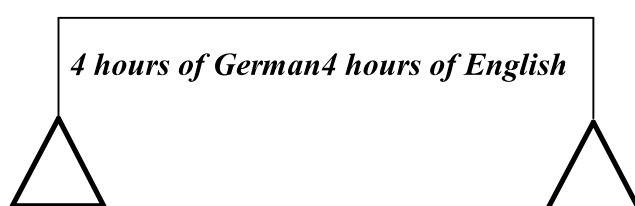
The aim of this article is to put light on the students' preoccupations at the university level, mainly the ones who have enjoyed learning English as an elementary subject in high school, and find themselves oriented to a specialty that tends to neglect the use of the English language in the university studies. These students face the teacher of English with a great desire to master the English language though they do know that the time limited to their encounter is only one hour and a half per week. This situation in itself is a challenge for the teacher, what to do? What are the possible axes of the learning curriculum that help the teacher reach the students' objective, speaking English fluently? Will online learning be of a great help? Will one hour and a half of English learning per week allow the instructor to ensure the final objectives, units and assignments? Will a native speaker's collaboration with a local one help things move on and satisfy the students' needs?

Key words: Algerian students, learning English, cognates, motivation, curriculum, online courses, bilingualism

The English language has become a powerful medium of communication all over the world. It is found in any curriculum of schools everywhere. Teaching effectively as students wish to learn, has become a challenge for the teachers. Generation Y (youth) major concern is to communicate fluently in English whether they are specialized in energy, Arabic literature or medicine. They all want to chat in English, understand English songs, and understand the computing items necessary to manipulate the computer usage, to download a game, to understand the given instructions to carry on a procedure on the screen. They turn more and more to MBC films, mainly because they are translated and help them acquire more English vocabulary.

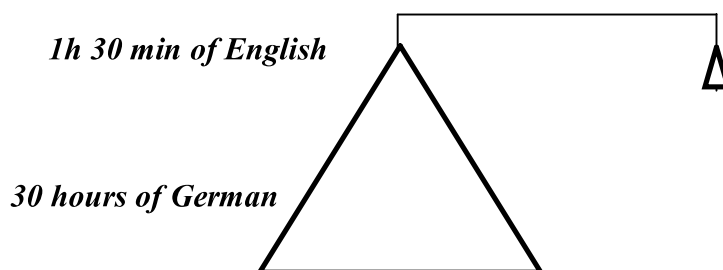
In Algeria, students start learning English right in the middle school for three hours per week. Once in high school, at the end of the first year, the ones who get good grades in English, they are enrolled in language classes. Besides French, considered the second language after Arabic, they switch between two foreign languages: English and German and the timing allowed for each of them is four hours a week; that's to say they study them on equal footing, as it is shown in figure 1.

Figure 1



This makes a balance in timing leading to a homogeneous language acquisition, which enables learners to find out the foreign language that responds to their needs, mental capacity, will and love for learning it more than the other one. Once at university, the ones who become specialized in English, and who were probably good or average at German, will never study German at all. The ones for whom German is the field of specialty, and who were probably good or average at English, will study it for one hour and thirty minutes a week, if they choose it; that's to say some choose to study French instead of English, so they will never meet English at all in their university studies. The following diagram shows the new timing volume that does not help them switch back and forth between the two languages easily.

Figure 2



To cope with this new situation, students of first and second year, specialized in German language, prefer to learn about German civilization in English during the one hour and a half per week. On the other hand, students of third year and Master degree prefer to learn about British lifestyle and civilization during the English session! Does this sudden disequilibrium in timing volume cause a crack or a blockade in learners' ability in the acquisition of foreign languages? What makes them want to learn about German civilization in English, in the first and second year, and to study about British civilization when they move to the further years of university studies? Is it a phase of stuttering in front of the iceberg or an exposure of a wish to join the two thread edges and knit up again what has been unknitted? When asked about this new situation, they speak out or rather shout complaining that they didn't know that they would face such a sharp decision; learning everything; easy and mainly difficult subjects in German and neglecting English. They say that they wished they had been able to communicate fluently in English.

So what can the instructor do to help the students be proficient in English? Can fluency in a foreign language be acquired by the use of the dictionaries only? Do we teach minimum entry standards in the English language, or do we teach fluency? The students need to be fluent and to interact within the everyday context as it is mentioned in the following quotation.

“As general accounts, dictionary definitions should cover not only fluency in everyday native speech but also fluency in a foreign language. Yet when it comes to foreign speech, it is difficult to imagine that fluency could be restricted to rhetorical aspects: both fluency and the adjective fluent are commonly used to qualify the production of foreign speakers in interactional everyday context^{xviii}.”

Learners are proud of being able to speak English, that is an international language – though not fluently as they wish- and to speak German, a language of a powerful country famous for its

world known genuine products. They are also proud of being able to speak French which is a social prestige in Algeria, ignoring the other foreign languages since the world consists of so many different languages and dialects, mainly the language of China that is becoming the new world power. Does bilingualism lead to linguistic and cultural confusion? Will a learner feel at home in either of the foreign languages he is taught?

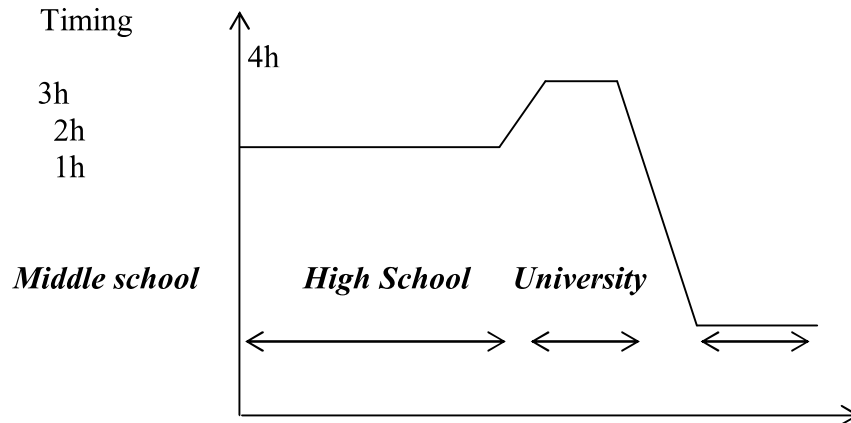
What is the linguistic terminology that refers to an equilibrium in teaching foreign languages? An equilibrium that would help to acquire a deep and knowledgeable assimilation of languages. An equilibrium in teaching that would also lead to mental willingness to acquire notions easily, and that would make both the presence of mental capacity and learning stimulus in harmony. This would give result to a self-confident learner with a mind forged with solid arguments rather than floating ideas in a smashed mind incapable of reasoning and changing things? A smashed mind or rather a robotized mind moving from one mould to another one without creating and changing things.

What are the possible ways that would enrich this equilibrium? Real life applications could put light on difficulties from which the learner suffers but through which he gains achievements. The result is the ability to respond and to speak the language at ease; that's to say to express oneself fluently, literately, easily and confidentially. If not, teaching would therefore be a hammer and not a prosperous tap filling the ready to learn and thirsty spirit.

Let us review in the following diagram the timing allowed for teaching English as a foreign language for foreign languages' learners whom we call in Algeria LVE (Langues Vivantes Etrangères)

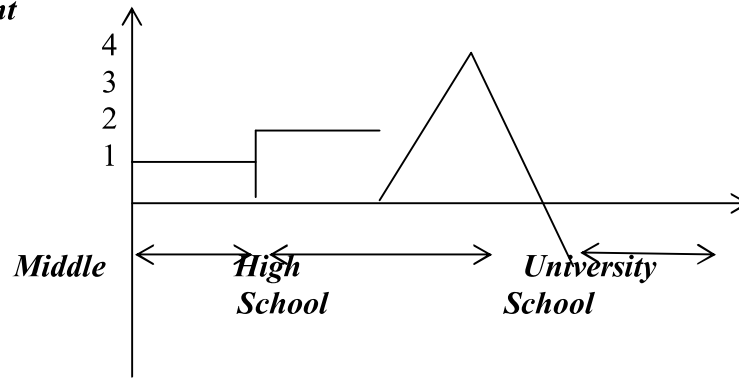
- In middle school, they study English as a third language after Arabic and French for three hours a week and a coefficient of 1.
- In high school, besides Arabic and French, learners enrolled in language classes, study English and German for four hours for each and a coefficient of 4 for each too.
- In university, the students oriented to study German, they do it for thirty hours a week, and English only for one hour and a half with a coefficient of 1.

Figure 3



The coefficient attributed to English in the three different levels of schooling in Algeria differs from one stage to another one. In middle school, it is attributed (01) where learners start learning English for the first time. At high school first year level, the coefficient moves upwards to (02). Meanwhile, learners long for learning it because it is the language of modern technology; that is to say it has become the language of everyday life met on computers usage, mobiles, songs, I phones and I pads. If the learners are sent to foreign language class, the coefficient of English becomes of a more significant importance since it moves upward again to (04). At the university level, if these students of foreign languages are oriented (sometimes against their will) to specialize in German civilization, the coefficient of English degrades to (01). This can be seen clearly on the following diagram.

Figure 4
coefficient



Students speak English disfluently, and meet difficulties in thinking in English only. They always confuse between German vocabulary items and English ones since the two languages share many cognates. They also face serious problem when asked to supply the correct punctuation in a bare paragraph, mainly in capital letters since in German, nouns can take capital letters even in the middle of the sentence. In English, proper nouns always begin with a capital letter. Common nouns; however, begin only with a capital letter when they are the first word of a sentence or a question. Whereas in German, they are very easy to recognize since all nouns, proper and common, are capitalized, regardless of where they are in a sentence. So, is giving them an exercise as supplying the correct capitalization a good idea that helps them write correctly in English?

Let us read what some authors think of this situation.

“Sometimes words are easy to learn because they are the same or very similar in both English and German. These words are easy to recognize in German, but you will have to concentrate on the differences in spelling and pronunciation

<i>House</i>	<i>Haus</i>
<i>To swim</i>	<i>Schwimmen</i>
<i>Green</i>	<i>grun^{xxviii}</i>

“There are many words, called cognates, that have the same meaning and approximately the same spelling in English and German

<i>House</i>	<i>Haus</i>
<i>Student</i>	<i>Student</i>
<i>Intelligent</i>	<i>Intelligent</i>
<i>Garden</i>	<i>Garten</i>

Occasionally knowing one German word will help you learn another ^{xxix}

To what extent can this be true for all the words of both languages? If cognates were of such a great help, why do students specialized in German language complain about their weakness in the English language? Some linguists say that the total burden lays on the teacher since he/she has to find out techniques and methods that pave the way to the easy acquisition of foreign languages. Here is one of them who says:

“As educators, we are in the privileged position to recognize that the learning process never ends. Just as science is always questioning itself, professional educators continue to examine, test, deconstruct, and reconstruct strategies to become better at the important job we are entrusted with” ^{xxx}.

One major fact which one notices on first glance is that the role of the educator is of an utmost importance, and he/she should cope with modern teaching strategies and tools. Nowadays, students prefer the I phone and the I pad rather than the printed lessons. That is to say they rely much more on listening than on reading. Here is what Andrew Weiler says in relation with this idea:

“.... The quality of your speaking in a second or a foreign language will be determined by the quality of your listening. This will no doubt be a surprise to many people, as most language teaching does not appear to not take this on board. Instead many learners and teachers think that studying the grammar and the vocabulary will give the learners their desired results. There is a lot more to successful language learning than that” ^{xxxi}.

Conclusion

One can say after reading this article that the school has done its duty towards the learner as a citizen, it has made him able to communicate in different languages, and once in university, he has to rely on himself if he wants to speak English fluently. If he wants to move from the state of a beginner to the advanced level, he can get benefit of the quick services and lessons online. The student knows that the English language is pervasive in German media and popular culture, so he has to continue learning English. Hence, one should ask oneself, what are the risks of the recommendations to slow down or rather to limit tightly learning English on students fluency? Is there a risk that German student will reverse the word order of English since the German has SOV (Subject, Object, Verb) word order whereas English has a SVO word order? Is bilingual education ineffective since the bilinguals mix their languages? Will online learning redefine quality education? We have to mention that students do have brilliant ideas, but need motivation to get those ideas out, so one should shift from the victim analysis to the educational problem solving. Getting in touch with Jane Lawson, a native English teacher, at daily.step.com, and ask for her contribution in this problem solving may make things greener on the other side of the fence since the students liked so much her texts last year.

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^{ix} Ibid.134

^x Ibid., p137

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^{xiii} Ibid P.101

^{xiv} Ibid P.102

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^{xxviii} *English Grammar for Students of German*, page 2

^{xxix} *English Grammar for Students of German*, page 5

^{xxx} *Teaching the Brain to Read*, page 10

^{xxxi} *Strategies in Language Learning*