

## Articulating the content of the first year lmd 'culture' syllabus to the cultural

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### Abstract:

The problem of program articulation between secondary and higher education has been a deep concern for a number of educationists and scholars in a number of countries around the world.

In the case of Algeria, however, the issue has never been subjected to any serious debate in the past, even though at an informal level it has always been expressed in the form of nagging complaints by teachers and students alike.

Yet in the recent national education reform program, there has been a conspicuous insistence, on the part of decision-makers at the highest rank, on the importance of articulating to one another the various constituents of the educational system at all levels and between the different levels.

The ultimate aim of the new reform is to reach a general integration of the education system by means of achieving cohesion and coherence throughout the various constituents of the system as a whole. In line with this new orientation, the present study is an attempt to address -- in the specific area of English language studies -- the question of the possibility of articulating the content of the First Year LMD 'Initiation to the Cultures of English' syllabus with the cultural content of Middle and Secondary School English language textbooks.

**Key words:** vertical articulation, secondary schools, tertiary/higher education, LMD system. cultural content. EFL

### المخلص:

إن إشكالية التنسيق بين التعليم الثانوي والتعليم العالي ما فتئت تشكل انشغالا عميقا بالنسبة للعاملين والباحثين في ميادين التربية عموما، وذلك في العديد من بلدان العالم. أما بالنسبة للجزائر على وجه الخصوص فالقضية لم تطرح قط للنقاش الجاد من قبل، رغم أنها كانت ولا تزال محل شكاوى متكررة من طرف الأساتذة والطلبة على حد سواء.

إلا انه في إطار برنامج الإصلاح التربوي الأخير يبدو أن هناك اهتمام جاد وإلحاح واضح من طرف المسؤولين على أعلى هرم السلطة حول أهمية الربط التكاملية بين مختلف عناصر المنظومة على كل المستويات وبين مختلف الأطوار من أجل تحقيق الانسجام المنشود.

فالهدف الأساسي للإصلاح الجديد هو تحقيق الدمج أو التكامل الشامل بين جل مستويات المنظومة من خلال السعي إلى تجسيد الالتحام والانسجام التام بين تلك المستويات لتشكل كلا متكاملًا. وتماشيا مع هذا التوجه الجديد تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تفحص إمكانية الربط الوثيق أو التكامل بين محتويات الوحدة الدراسية المسماة (مدخل إلى ثقافات اللغة الإنجليزية)، وذلك على مستوى السنة الأولى جامعي- تخصص لغة انجليزية- في النظام الجديد من جهة، والمضمون الثقافي لكتب اللغة الإنجليزية المتداولة حاليا في مرحلة التعليم المتوسط والثانوي من جهة ثانية.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Algerian instructors in higher education have always complained about the lack of readiness or preparedness of most of their freshmen students to pursue post-secondary studies. This is a common perception held by many lecturers in the former, pre-LMD system which is now in the process of being phased out in this country. With the implementation of the LMD system well underway, it now appears that both instructors and students are confused about how to face up to the new situation. We believe that the uncomfortable state in which teachers and students in higher education find themselves has been exacerbated by the novelty of the LMD pedagogical system, coupled with the problem of the ever-increasing numbers of students arriving on campus each year relative to the insufficient number of teachers. However, we equally believe that the crisis goes on partly because of the fact that old pedagogical practices and inadequate academic thinking are being carried over in the new system. In any case, the possibility which has never been seriously considered until very recently is that the problem may well lie in the lack of *articulation* (i.e., continuity or linkage) between secondary schools and higher education. Finding ways of bridging the gap between the two levels of the education system might well be the optimal solution to the problem.

The issue of program or curriculum articulation between secondary and tertiary education has been the subject of serious debate

in a number of countries around the world (Byrnes 1990; Bibtana 2002; Cutshall 2007; CAPRES 2008)). In Algeria, however, near total separation between the two levels of the system was consummated a long time ago. Since the 1960s, higher education on the one hand and primary and secondary education on the other, have been working quasi independently of one another. It was only recently, in the wake of generalized globalization and the resulting push for reform of the whole system, that the higher national authorities finally realized that the malfunctions of the whole education system were in large part due to this gap between the pre- and post-‘Baccalauréat’ systems.

The problem of the lack of *coherence* which has characterized the Algerian system of education as a whole was brought up in full by the Algerian President in his speech before the newly appointed members of the National Commission for the Reform of the Education System on May 13, 2000. The word *articulation* came up at least six times in his speech, signifying full cognizance of the importance of the issue, and thereby the need for a coherent *linkage* between the different levels of the national education system considered as a whole (Bouteflika, 2009). In fact, the goal of this articulation between the different levels of the system is to reach a higher level of *integration* or *coherence* of the whole system. It is this lack of coherence, due specifically to the lack of articulation between its different parts, which has caused the whole system to become dysfunctional in the long run (Benbouzid, 2009).

The problem of articulation is particularly acute in the area of English language studies where new students are not accustomed to

taking classes in various subjects taught entirely in the foreign language. Learners normally need some background knowledge to lean on in order to help them assimilate any new subject of study. If what they are exposed to has no relation to what they have learned before, they are inevitably headed towards failure, or ‘false successes’. This is a basic principle of the constructivist approach to learning on which current pedagogy is based. In consequence, there is a need for every teacher in any area of knowledge to try to find ways to connect as much as possible what he/she is teaching to what students have been exposed to prior to pursuing higher studies. Some kind of background knowledge is of utmost importance to help new students to relate to the new learning.

This is especially true in the area of foreign language study. Some sort of a transition is necessary between what students have presumably learned in secondary school and what they are going to study at a higher level, especially in terms of the cultural content concomitant to mastering any language. In the area of Culture & Civilization, this linkage would be highly beneficial, in terms of *pedagogical* as well as *cultural* coherence, for a more adequate cultural literacy or optimal cultural awareness, i. e., a more appropriate cultural education at this level. It is within this context that the present study has been undertaken.

The joint authors of this paper are both teachers at the University of Biskra Department Of English Language Studies in charge of the LMD unit officially titled “Initiation aux cultures de la

langue.” Translated into the context of English, this should mean “Introduction to the Cultures of English.” Given the high level of generality in the sketchy description of the unit as presented in the curriculum guidelines, it has not been easy for us to figure out what the content of the unit should exactly consist of. However we believe we have, in spite of the confusion, been able to come up with an acceptable syllabus for this particular unit, even though it is still not entirely satisfactory in our eyes. It is this lack of satisfaction that has motivated us to delve deeper into the problem, through systematic hard thinking and research, in order to lay out a well-grounded basis on which it will be possible for us to draw the outline of a sounder syllabus on which we will continue to build our course/unit in the future.

In this context—and keeping in line with the idea of the importance of prior knowledge for the successful pursuit of further learning—we decided to engage the concept of *vertical articulation*, in this case the transition or linkage between post-primary and tertiary education, specifically as it pertains to the area of cultural content in English language education. Empirically, we embarked on the project of trying to find a way to articulate between the cultural content of the latest series of Middle and Secondary School EFL textbooks and the content of the First Year LMD unit “Introduction to the Cultures of English” as briefly described in the curriculum guidelines concerning this course/unit. The main purpose of the study was to analyze the cultural content of the English language textbooks as a background or

springboard for developing a more relevant content for the First Year LMD unit on culture.

An outlined syllabus for the sub-unit will be drawn later on, based on the results of the study on the analysis of the content of Algerian Middle and Secondary School English language textbooks. Meanwhile, an attempt will be made in the present paper to answer the following questions:

1. What is the nature of the cultural content of the latest series of post-primary/pre-tertiary English language textbooks? Whose culture is depicted in those texts: the local/national culture of the learners, the culture of the target language (English), or both, or some kind of a common or international/universal culture?

2. To what extent is the cultural content of post-primary school English language text-books likely to prepare learners or make them ready to pursue further study in the areas of English-related culture(s) and civilization(s) within the new curriculum based on the LMD system?

3. How can we, based on the results of the cultural content analysis, devise a new syllabus which will articulate the study of culture and civilization in higher education to culture and civilization learning in pre-tertiary schools, in the area of English language study? In what follows, a definition will first be provided of the concept of *articulation*, especially as it pertains to the relationship between the secondary and tertiary levels of an education system. This will be done based on some of the literature on the subject, especially as it

relates to the area of foreign language education and the field of TEFL (the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language). Then, a review will be presented of some ideas about the most appropriate cultural content in EFL textbooks. In a later section, a summary will be presented of the results of a qualitative study of the cultural content of the latest series of Algerian Middle and Secondary school English language textbooks, drawing on two previous similar studies performed on the content of the First Year Middle School English textbook. The final section will draw a conclusion on the results of the study and also attempt to point to the possible implications for the development of a new syllabus for the First Year unit on Culture.

### **DEFINITION OF THE CONCEPT OF ARTICULATION**

Foreign language program articulation has received considerable attention on the part of foreign language practitioners, program designers, and educational institutions in a number of countries. *Articulation* in general has been viewed broadly as the process of transition or continuity and coordination from one instructional level to another to ensure effective sequencing of program levels in a given education system (Lange 1982, Wilson 1988, Byrnes 1990, Bibtana 2002, Conley 2005, Morris 2007). Foreign language experts assume that articulation allows students to reach their learning goals in the most coherent fashion, and guarantees maximum levels of effectiveness in the whole education system.

In some countries, the most compelling reasons for better-articulated programs--such as the need for high levels of language competency, accommodation of diverse goals in language instruction,

and accountability in public education--have led FL practitioners to focus on a kind of academic preparation that allows students to make an easy transition between different systems and levels. In a UNESCO policy paper on change and development in higher education (Mayor 1995), the issue of articulation has been given considerable attention for the simple reason that any reform of higher education needs to consider the interrelation and interdependence with all levels of education. The paper also emphasizes the indispensable coherence of the educational systems because of the fact that “higher education depends on the results of the work done by prior levels of education” (p. 30).

### **ARTICULATION IN EFL PROGRAMS BETWEEN SECONDARY AND POST- SECONDARY LEVELS**

It is widely believed that secondary school EFL (English as a Foreign Language) programs must be articulated with tertiary EFL curricula to accomplish their mutual goals of increasing learners’ success levels. In fact, successful articulation requires smooth and logical continuity in terms of program contents. The lack of articulation between secondary school and higher education EFL program contents may reduce students’ levels of readiness to follow the university EFL courses and create a real obstacle in their way that hinders their efforts to pursue effectively their learning goals.

Recently, there has been an increasing recognition among course designers, language teachers, and institutions to establish a genuine educational atmosphere in which secondary school English textbooks



must be aligned with post-secondary EFL courses. This recognition to design secondary school instructional programs that prepare students for higher education requires a set of collaboration strategies for sequenced instruction to ease the learners' transition from secondary to post-secondary levels. In this context, Conley (2005) states: "High school courses must be sequenced to develop intellectual maturity, improve critical thinking skills, and increase rigor as students approach college entry."

When it comes to the context of TEFL (the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language), the issue of articulation is addressed as a major concern for teachers and course designers at both levels of the education system. It has become urgently necessary to design well-articulated programs, both culturally and linguistically, for the purpose of creating an effective continuity that would produce the desirable results for learners and teachers alike. Bubtana (2002) confirms the assumption that both system levels (secondary school and higher education) must work together. As he states it, "The fact that the higher education curriculum does not exist in a vacuum means that it has to be built on those which exist in the lower levels of education and most important the secondary level." Therefore, EFL program contents in pre-tertiary school textbooks and higher education EFL courses should be on the same continuum to make learners ready to pursue higher level studies in the field.

### **CULTURAL CONTENT IN EFL TEXTBOOKS**

Aliakbari (2004) contends that textbooks present a certain way of looking at the world through the cultural lens of the author. He

noticed that some textbooks stress the English-speaking culture, others include non-English speaking cultures, and others focus on the international uses of language while still others choose to focus on the learners' local or national cultures. Therefore, introducing cultural elements in EFL learning materials, and textbooks in particular has been for years an issue of debate among teachers, researchers, and textbook designers (Adaskou, Britten & Fashsi 1990; Kilickaya 2004; Aliakbari 2004).

Culture, in its broadest sense, represents a “membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and a common system of standards for perceiving, believing and action” (Kramsch 1998: 127). Cortazzi and Jin (1999: 200) consider the textbook as a cultural ideology in the sense that:

It reflects a world view or cultural system, or social instruction that may be imposed on teachers and students and that indirectly constructs their view of a culture.”

They classify textbooks in three types of according to their representation of culture. These types are mentioned in Aliakbari (2004):

1. Textbooks that mirror the source culture
2. Textbooks based on the target culture
3. Textbooks based on international target cultures

The first category of EFL textbooks reflects the source (local) culture of certain countries. It aims at reinforcing the national cultural values and norms via presenting national heroes and figures, historical

places, social celebrations and traditions, local characters and settings. A number of EFL textbooks around the world have adopted this approach: Scott, 1980 (China); Hajjaj, 1981 (Kuwait); Adaskou, Britten & Fahsi 1990 (Morocco); Al-Quraishi et al. 1999 (Saudi Arabia); Dede & Emre 1988 (Turkey); Núñez 1988 (Venezuela).

The second category of EFL textbooks, which are based on the target culture, usually attempts to convey English culture and values via texts and activities portraying target social norms, history events, traditions, public figures and celebrities. This type of textbooks is widely used to teach English through culture-based learning materials: *Success-Communication in English* (Walker 1994), *Flying Colours* (Garton-Spinger & Greenall 1990). In fact, textbooks that are based on the target culture utilize English names, characters, places, etc., to put the learner in an English-speaking like setting. They, accordingly, support Wendt's view (2003) which states that language is learnt in context and any approach to research on language learning needs to take this fully into consideration.

The third category of textbooks, which are based on international target culture, supports the latest trend in language teaching, namely *intercultural language learning*. This new approach intends to raise students' awareness of their own culture while helping them interpret and understand other cultures by the same token (Kilickaya 2004). This type of textbooks pays no particular attention to any specific culture. It covers the culture of English-speaking countries and the culture of countries where English is not the first or second language but rather used as international language (Aliakbari

2004). The integration of cultural elements in this type of textbooks aims at presenting international characters and universal norms and values.

The inclusion of English culture and western culture in general is the subject of much controversy. Some language teachers and course designers support the inclusion of cultural components of the target language, while others prefer to focus on learners' own culture and compare it to other international cultures (Mackay 2004). However, many language-teaching experts reject the inclusion of western culture in the EFL text-books for its potential risks for the integrity and authenticity of the cultural identity of the learners: Adaskou, Britten & Fahsi (1990) for the Moroccan context; Mugglestone, Elsworth & Rose (1999, 2000) for English textbooks in Chile. The following section reports the results of a qualitative analysis of the cultural content of Algerian textbooks at both the Middle and Secondary School levels. It basically draws on previous studies done by two Algerian scholars (Yassine 2006; Nait Brahim 2005).

### **NATURE OF THE CULTURAL CONTENT IN ALGERIAN EFL TEXTBOOKS**

Until recently, Algerian officially-appointed designers of foreign language textbooks (be they French or English texts) have always been reluctant to deal openly with the target culture in the textbook content. The reasons for that seem to have been mainly of an ideological nature, based on the long-held belief that exposure of

Algerian pupils to the foreign culture may have a potential risk for the cultural identity of the nation. There seems to have been a change of heart, however, following the recent official decision to embrace globalization and open up to the world, be it in the economic or the cultural realm. Official documents concerning the latest educational reform state openly that one of the aims set for English language education is "becoming part of an international community of people who use English to exchange and share ideas and experiences in the fields of science, technology, culture and civilization." (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale (2003:53). How is this new stance reflected and interpreted in the content of the latest series of English language textbooks designed following the 2003 reforms?

Souryana Yassine of the University of Tizi Ouzou, in a contrastive study of the pre-reform MS 1<sup>st</sup> Year English textbook *Spring One* and the post-reform English textbook of the same grade *Spotlight on English One*, reports a clear difference in terms of inclusion of target, foreign cultural content between the two textbooks. The first textbook does not present any explicit reference to cultural content, while the foreword of the second textbook "overtly deals with the notion of culture, setting it within an international perspective." (Yassine 2005: 35). And "while *Spring One* includes exclusively national culture, in *Spotlight on English* the perspective is rather one of international scope. [...] Reference is made both to the learners' first culture and to a set of other foreign cultures. It points to the parallels to be drawn among various world cultures." International

communication too is present through depiction of Internet chat.” (Ibid.)

However, in his analysis of the same MS First Year English language textbook, *Spotlight on English*, Nait Brahim (2005) notices three aspects that have been overlooked in the elaboration of the content of the textbook. Among these aspects is “the social dimension of the content” which has been neglected through the attenuation of the ideological and cultural nature of the English language. He comes down to the conclusion that *Spotlight* presents the English language as “a referential system in the form of a universal and neutral medium devoid of any particular embedded cultural/ideological substance” (Ibid.: 86). This clearly indicates that the cultural aspect of the first year Middle School English textbook does not really emphasize the culture of English-speaking world per se; it seems rather more concerned with representing world cultures (flags of various countries around the world, world monuments, sports around the world, etc). Nait Brahim (2005: 81) states that the English language in the *Spotlight* textbook is presented as “a mere lingua Franca, an uncultured language.”

In our own examination of the cultural content of this same textbook, we have noticed that even though the texts and pictures refer explicitly to specific places in London and Algiers, for example, these texts and pictures sometimes take on a simple sightseeing orientation, shunning any deeper reference to the cultures of either Algeria or the target culture(s). The inter-cultural encounter limits itself to a brief,

casual international acquaintance of sorts. This international orientation in textbook content is carried over in the subsequent English textbooks for the MS 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Years. According to the foreword to the Middle School 4<sup>th</sup> Year textbook, that book includes a "widening of the intercultural scope to new horizons (the USA, India and Australia) through comparison and contrast with Algeria." However, the authors of the MS English textbooks present rather superficial aspects and merely fleeting images of the culture(s) of a few English-speaking countries and do not go to any depth in presenting significant civilization traits or specific cultural characteristics of those societies.

From our analysis of the content of the Algerian Secondary School English textbooks we have come to the conclusion that they are even more internationally-oriented. They introduce a variety of intercultural elements ranging from the national culture to the target language culture, to a form of international target culture in the form of universal themes expressed in English, such as nature, education, ethics, business management, pollution or scientific discoveries and technological inventions. In reading the syllabus descriptions which inform the content of these texts, we find in the section on 'intercultural outcomes' an emphasis on understanding others' values in general, and the benefit of being involved in global cultural awareness. However, in contrast with the Middle School textbooks, where a certain emphasis is put on English-speaking countries, there is even less focus in the Secondary School EFL textbooks on the cultures of English-speaking areas per se.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LMD 'CULTURE' SYLLABUS**

Based on the above analysis, it appears that the overall content of pre-tertiary English language textbooks does not focus so much on the cultures of English-speaking areas per se as on some universal themes expressed in English, within an international and intercultural perspective. The references to a few specific English-speaking countries are rather of a superficial nature and do not provide insights for an in-depth understanding of those cultures. As such, the cultural content of both Middle and Secondary English language textbooks does not stand as a solid background or springboard for further culture and civilization studies in English departments at the tertiary level. Tertiary English syllabi focus specifically on the cultures and civilizations of Britain and the United States, while pre-tertiary English language textbooks focus on more universal themes expressed in English and thus give only superficial and passing attention to the cultural specificities of some of the English-speaking areas or societies.

At the same time, pre-tertiary EFL textbooks do not provide an understanding of more general concepts such as those of 'culture' and 'civilization', nor a grasp of the relationship between language and culture, which would provide the learner with a solid basis on which to stand for a deeper understanding of tertiary required syllabi in the culture(s) and civilization(s) of specific English-speaking countries. In order to reduce the gap between the pre-tertiary and tertiary levels in EFL cultural studies, First Year students in English departments



should therefore be acquainted with extensive explanations of the general cultural concepts mentioned above, prior to an extended review of the development of world civilizations already introduced in the 3<sup>rd</sup> SS Year.

An *intercultural* approach to cultural studies would require that students review the development of Islamic civilization itself and its contributions to world civilization and to the development of Western civilization in particular. This would be followed by the study of the development of Western civilization and the basic ideas on which it was built. Only then would it be possible to introduce Anglo-Saxon or Anglophone culture or civilization as an historical part and the current spearhead of Western civilization, along with the concomitant role of the English language in the development and spread of that culture/civilization around the world. The study of cultural movements and tendencies and the development of institutions in Anglo-Saxon countries would be introduced later in the Second Year, before focusing on the study of international cultural relations and the study of identities and universalities in the Third Year LMD.

\* This is an edited version of a paper presented at the seminar “The Teaching of English as a Foreign Language in the LMD System”, held at the University of Biskra, December 7-8, 2009. It is a summarized report of a more expanded study based on a detailed analysis of the cultural content of the series of English language textbooks currently in use in Algerian Middle and Secondary schools and the extent of its usefulness as a background for further cultural studies in higher education. The full report of the textbook analysis is available upon request.

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