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Higher Education: Issues in Teaching English

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Abstract

The present article is an attempt to look into a number of problems faced by the system of education in Morocco such as those pertaining to the role of the university, the course content, the curriculum, the set book, etc. Some of the problems which are raised are viewed in relation to the department of English at the Faculty of Letters in Marrakech. The solutions that are provided are suggested by various readings of the relevant literature and by personal experience.

Introduction

The Moroccan university today faces a number of challenges despite the long years that have elapsed since the first initiation of what is commonly termed 'University Reform' in 2003. These challenges have to do with the role played by the university, its contribution to the development of the country, the course content and the teaching methods, to name only a few. This article tries to look into these challenges in relation to teaching in the English department of the Faculties of Letters.

1. The challenges

The Moroccan university has not yet managed to get rid of the cultural content it used to disseminate before the advent of the 2003 Reform. Before this time, the decision makers felt that there was a need for a total rethinking of the socio-economic role of the university. There was a kind of mismatch between the great efforts deployed by the authorities and the rampant high rate of unemployment among university diploma holders. The university, it was believed, was not able to provide work for the thousands of young Moroccans who graduate every year. It was not able to fulfill one of its basic functions, i.e. that of contributing to the socio-economic development of the country. For the layman, the university has become a machine that produces unemployment. The institutions that are accused are the Faculties of Letters and Human sciences, the Faculties of Law and Social Sciences and the Faculties of Science.

The modern university in Morocco emerged after the independence of the country in 1956 as a continuation of the French university in terms of its organization, the ideology underlying it and the social roles that are assigned to it. However, it also embodied the expectancies of the authorities as a place of acquiring knowledge and an economic lever which was meant to contribute to the development of the country. For some, this double identity of the Moroccan university accounts for a number of problems in higher education (Aljabri, 1983).

In addition, the Moroccan university seems to have lost the prestige of a higher cultural institution which was once one of its attributes. There is a general feeling among both teachers and students that the social prestige of the university has greatly dwindled as a result of a number of factors which have greatly impacted its role in society. Thus, teachers and students believe that the university in Morocco, and probably in the rest of the Arab World, is no longer the unique source of knowledge as it used to be in the past (Guessous, 2004). Today, knowledge can be obtained easily from various other sources such as the internet, television, and the mass media. Both teachers and students feel that the kind of knowledge which is produced by the faculties of letters in Morocco, for example, is outmoded and that a 'better' form of knowledge can be obtained from various electronic media such as the internet, electronic learning and computer- assisted instruction which can provide a huge amount of resources about various fields of knowledge.

Concerning the role of the university in Morocco, it may be said that the 2003 Reform managed to assign a number of new functions to the university in terms of providing services for economic institutions, consulting, setting up courses which lead to certification, building incubators and creating small- scale firms. While some of these functions are, indeed, performed by the university as such, faculties like those of Letters and Human Sciences and those of Law and Social Sciences are left behind. For example, the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in Marrakech can, if it were offered the necessary means, indulge in teaching courses for the purpose of certification in sociology, tourism and foreign languages and provide consultancy in matters of social work, the family, education, etc.

In addition, there is the feeling that the faculties of letters in Morocco do not contribute much to the development of scientific and technological knowledge in the country. To consider but one example, it may be interesting to wonder

about the contribution which the faculty of letters in Marrakech has made, after thirty five years of existence, in the fields of knowledge production, devising new hypotheses, literary creation and the development of human sciences in general (Guessous, 2004).

It is well- known that the kind of teaching delivered by the Faculties of letters in Morocco, for example, relies on the accumulation of knowledge which is meant to be consumed by the learner. This latter regards the course content as a product that should be learned and restituted in order to pass the final examination. The student's chief concern is not the acquisition of knowledge; it is the anxiety to pass the continuous assessment and the final examination. His efforts during the whole academic year are focused on how to go through these two obstacles and succeed.

This situation has given rise to a strange relationship based on personal interest between the teacher and the student. This situation is characterized by the existence of certain forms of behavior which are borrowed from economy such as bargaining, purchasing and selling whereby knowledge is bought and sold. Most often in certain disciplines, the student in the examination is required to give back the course content he is given by the teacher during the year without making efforts to learn more and reflect upon what he has learned.

The easy and free access to knowledge in the internet has encouraged many students to adopt the policy of 'the least effort' when dealing with the course. When asked to make readings for their research paper, many students content themselves with downloading material from the internet with no attempt to understand it, re- edit it and present it in their own words.

Student's laziness is coupled with a disappointing teaching environment whereby most courses are taught in over- crowded rooms, which provides no opportunity for discussion. Neither teachers nor students have the chance to exchange information about the course content and discuss it. Oftentimes, this situation results in the teacher's presenting the course in the form of dictation with very few opportunities for assessment.

A corollary of this situation has to do with the teacher's involvement with teaching at the expense of research. As is well- known, the university teacher's function is two- fold; he is required to teach and to indulge in scientific research. Due to the problems mentioned above, and despite their good intentions, most teachers have to relinquish their function as researchers.

2. Issues relating to the department of English

Teaching in the English department of the Faculty of letters in Marrakech is affected by a number of problems similar to the ones mentioned above. More specifically, these problems have to do with the curriculum and the set books, to name only these.

(i) The curriculum

Concerning the curriculum in the English department, it should be said that it is in need of a profound rethinking. The new Reform of education initiated in 2003 made it compulsory for students to attend a total number of 16 weeks of courses every semester divided into four modules. Each module has a minimum 90 hours of teaching and assessment. These requirements are far from being met in reality. Due to a number of factors such as the late beginning of the academic year, the great number of holidays, course distribution, etc. the number of weeks which are devoted to teaching is much below the required 16 weeks. By way of consequence, the number of hours which are taught in each module is much less than 90 hours.

Concerning the cross- curricular modules of language and communication, it should be said that their teaching is simply eccentric in that no recognized course content is set for these modules. There are several reasons for this. First, there are very few qualified teachers of language and communication in the various faculties of letters in Morocco. Most often, teachers from the French language and literature departments are entrusted with the course of Language and Communication. It is needless to say that these teachers are not normally qualified to teach communication. Second, there is a kind of reluctance on the part of teachers concerning the teaching of the Language and Communication course which they consider as the poor relation to the rest of the courses. The impact of this situation on the students' level of achievement in foreign languages and communication is quite evident. The students' standards in this course are very low.

It is well- known that the curricula are accredited by the ministry of higher education after proposal from the faculties. The teachers are supposed to teach in total respect of the criteria set by the Accreditation and Evaluation Committee. Here again, the criteria are not respected due to several reasons, chief among which are the lack of qualified teachers, timetable restrictions, post

shifting, etc. Thus, it is not unusual to see that certain course contents are not taught the way they are accredited and are changed to suit the teacher's profile.

The course about Study Skills is a fundamental course that should be taught in the first semester immediately following the student's discovery of the university as a new environment. The course should be planned to teach the student how to interact with the institution both as a building and as human relationships. The course should teach the student how to choose a given teaching stream, how to make research in the Faculty library, recognize the different areas of the Faculty, use the social services made available for him, know his own rights and obligations, etc. The student's familiarity with these things is likely to facilitate his integration into the Faculty system and make him show respect for his environment.

Another aspect of the curriculum which requires some reorganization is grammar. The Grammar course in the first semester, for example, should include selected points of grammar which the student needs in order to write 'good' and appropriate English. The second semester course should be a course on remedial grammar and not an in- depth teaching of the same points already taught in the first semester. Remedial grammar gives the teacher an opportunity to save a great deal of time which can be used to assess the student's knowledge of English. At university, the student is supposed to correct and further refine the grammar content he has learned. He is helped in doing so by using grammar in meaningful contexts. Lack of time and overcrowded classes are well- known handicaps which prevent grammar students from coming to grips with their mistakes. A remedial grammar course is centered on treating the student's errors through gap filling texts, student contribution and error treatment. Remedial grammar is a kind of remedy for the student's errors; it is not another course on grammar aspects in which teaching progresses from the simple to the most complex. It is grammar teaching in context.

Additionally, the student in the English department should be taught theoretical and methodological tools which are likely to help him build his competencies. For example, a course on basic assumptions in sociology is a must for the university student who is required to know his society, understand how it works and apprehend the main changes it undergoes. These assumptions may include social stratification, culture, demography, race, ethnicity, economy, religion, politics, collective behavior, social movements, etc. The student's knowledge of

these basics in sociological thinking will help him understand the society in which he evolves.

(ii) The set book

Concerning set books, there is a real need for every student in the English department to have, as a requirement, a number of books he will be using as pedagogical support for the various courses. The student should not be trained to rely only on the teacher's handouts despite their importance as pedagogical tools. Most students do not keep trace of their handouts when they finish using them and some of them major from the department without having read a single book.

One of the serious setbacks faced by specialists in higher education is that students do not read. They are not able, even after completing their academic formation, to show a good mastery of discussion and argumentation techniques. In discussion forums, for example, most students show very poor knowledge of the facts of life and a poorer mastery of conversation management. It is known that learners in general accumulate their knowledge over years helped in that by the different agencies of socialization like the family, the school, the street, the university, etc. At university, students manage to acquire much of their knowledge through extensive reading and discussion.

The idea that is advanced here is that the set book can be used by students to improve their reading competencies in general especially when the reading material is of an academic nature. As the student is normally required to attend different courses throughout the three years of higher education, he will be exposed to different reading types such as those pertaining to civilization, culture, sociology, media, literature, poetry, history, etc. Each one of these readings requires different skills and different strategies. If the student has the chance to be guided by the teacher, he will end up being able to make critical reading of a large variety of texts written in English.

Reading also teaches the student how to write 'correct' English through emulating his sources. Much can be gained from simple reading of great authors. To get the maximum profit from his reading of the set book, the student can be asked to write short texts about the content he has read in special disciplines or summarize given texts using his own words. This activity is an immense opportunity for the teacher to teach the student the basic rules of academic writing. Thus, the student will learn how to credit his sources whenever he quotes from them, avoid plagiarism by making paraphrases and

quoting, take notes and make references. As everybody knows, these are the basic research conventions which students must follow.

Finally, set books do not only serve the function of pedagogical support; rather, they can help the student have a future relationship with books, and knowledge in general, if they are kept as a building block for the student's personal library. They also have a sociological function in that they train the student to read and respect written material.

Conclusion

This article has surveyed some of the issues which are faced by higher education in Morocco. These have to do with the deteriorating prestige of the university, its quasi- insignificant contribution to the socioeconomic and technological development of the country, the archaic teaching methods based on the students' internalization of knowledge and the lack of opportunities to conduct research, among others.

The article calls for a rethinking of the curriculum in the English department in relation to the actual amount of time which is devoted to teaching, the nature of the Language and Communication course and that of the Grammar course.

The article insists on the importance that should be given to the textbook as a pedagogical support and as an incentive for the student to read and acquire academic knowledge.

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