

Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Algeria

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الملخص:

Abstract :

Being fully aware of the importance of English as a foreign language, both at the national as well as the international level, especially, as the world has become a global village, the Algerian curriculum developers incorporated English as another foreign language (besides French) to be taught in the national educational programme. As the potential of teaching this foreign language in a more positive environment in Algeria is available, this work attempts to conduct a brief exploration of the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) in the Algerian context. It also, attempts to shed the light, and in depth on the syllabus and the objectives suggested by the Algerian authorities (June 1999) for both Middle and Secondary school education.

باعتبار أن الجميع مدرك لأهمية اللغة الإنجليزية على جميع الأصعدة، وخصوصا أن العالم أصبح قرية صغيرة فقد أدرج المختصون الجزائريون في البرامج الدراسية اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ثانية (إلى جانب اللغة الفرنسية) في المنهاج التعليمي الوطني. و لكون قدرات تدريس هذه اللغة الأجنبية في وسط ملائم متوفر في الجزائر، فإن هذا العمل يحاول الكشف، و باختصار، عن كيفية تدريسها في السياق الجزائري و نريد كذلك تسليط الضوء وبعث على مناهج تدريس هذه اللغة المسطر من طرف مسؤولي البرمجة البداغوجية لكل من الطور المتوسط و الثانوي مع توضيح أهداف هذه المناهج.

Introduction

English is compulsorily taught throughout the Algerian Middle and Secondary schools and universities (even in some military/security, economic and cultural institutions). Its status thereof is that it is considered as the second foreign language, besides French, despite the fact that it does not particularly play an important role in the national and social life of the Algerian people. As it (English) is not one of the historical components of the Algerian cultural identity, people do not seem to need to resort to it to live their social, intellectual and economic daily realities. Also, English in Algeria is not the students' natural communicative environment. Besides, this foreign language is not akin to the students' mother tongue; Arabic. Therefore, apart from the limited amount of English they hear, speak, read or write in the classroom, English is, to a certain extent, absent most of the time in their daily lives.

Moreover, the entire cultural context in Algeria is different from lifestyle in Great Britain, or any other English-speaking country for that matter. In spite of the dramatic spread of English in media and social networks as a medium of communication, it is amazingly true to say that only the teachers of English or the textbooks and the reading documents they provide the learners with are considered to be the only source that can inform them (to some extent, however) about the way of thinking and living of the English speaking peoples. More than that, and as stated by Hayenne (1989 : 43), English is considered by some Algerians as “ a language of an ex-colonial and imperialist country”.

In spite of all these challenges encountered by the English language, the Algerian political and educational authorities have managed to undertake the rehabilitation of the status of this language. Because of the technical and economic exchanges all over the world, English is now occupying a better position in the Algerian educational system. Hence, most of the Algerian students and even their parents are becoming more conscious of its importance as an international language ‘par excellence.’

1- The Importance of the English Language

Nowadays, English is considered as the primary international language of technology, education, aviation, global business, and international diplomacy. It has become the most commonly used language of international communication today. People, all over the

world, use it for both sending and receiving messages. Of all languages in the world today, English deserves to be regarded as a world language. It is the world's most widely spoken language after Chinese. Also, it is the common means of communication between the peoples of different nations (Verghese, C.P. 1989: 1). As such, it is regarded as the unique language for global communication in the 21st century. Most people who use English these days are not English and were not born in an English speaking country. English is not only attracting people's notice, but it has gained access to both their hearts and minds as well. Again, the number of speakers of English as a second/foreign language is increasing every year, as mentioned before, because there is a growing importance towards that language as an international language and as a lingua franca.

The English of today reflects many centuries of development. Baugh & Cable (1978: 1) state that, the Renaissance, the development of England as a maritime power, the expansion of the British Empire, and growth of commerce and industry, of science and literature, have, each in its way, contributed to make the English language what it is today. In short, the English language reflects in its entire development the political, social, and cultural history of the English people.

So, the existence of modern mass communications and international commerce has made it possible to set up international bodies and organize events on a global scale. The United Nations, the World Bank, and the European Union all have several official languages, as do international conferences and learned journals. Practical realities nearly always dictate that English is one of the official languages and also the one mostly used.

2- Motivation to learn English in Algeria

The overwhelming majority of teachers recognize that pupils come to the classrooms with different rates of readiness to learn. This readiness is called by researchers "*Motivation*". Harmer (2001: 68) defines motivation as "some kind of internal drive that encourages somebody to pursue a course of action." If we perceive a goal and that goal is sufficiently attractive, we will be strongly motivated to do whatever is necessary to reach that goal". Bernaus (1987: 45) states that "teachers, who want to be successful in teaching, should have this definition in mind when planning lessons to encourage themselves and their pupils." On his turn, Gardner (1985), as cited in Berns (2010: 164) defines motivation as the combination of effort plus desire to

achieve the goal of learning the language plus favourable attitudes towards learning the language.

From the very first session, experienced teachers can spot those skilful ones with a strong incentive and determination to learn whatever it takes. These intrinsically motivated pupils, are mostly a big help to teachers. By the same token, it could be also, noticed that some other students with a potential in learning a foreign language expect to be extrinsically motivated by the charisma of their teachers. All in all, we can say that there are two types of pupils; those who come into the classroom with an intrinsic motivation to learn while others rely on the teachers to trigger their extrinsic motivation.

It is obvious that, variety is one of the most important factors in maintaining a high level of motivation and interest among the learners. Yet, there are many things that can be done by the teacher or the textbook writer which add variety not only to the learning process but also to the pupils' interest in English. All teachers know that nothing is more tedious for the pupils than doing the same activities every day.

3- Objectives of EFL teaching and learning in Algeria

In Algeria, the general objectives of teaching and learning English as a foreign language, according to the Algerian official syllabuses for English, June 1999, state that the learner should achieve communication in its various forms, aspects, and dimensions; four main categories of objectives can be mentioned:

- socio-cultural objectives;
- humanistic objectives;
- educational objectives;
- academic objectives .

These objectives should be reached through the development of mental abilities and skills which should be catered for by all the subjects included in the curriculum because these skills are the basis for any efficient acquisition of language. They are: (*always, according to the Algerian directives of June 1999.*)

- 1- **knowledge**: *state, recall, and reproduce;*
- 2- **comprehension**: *predict, identify, explain, illustrate;*
- 3- **application**: *predict, select, use, construct;*
- 4- **analysis**: *select, compare, and break down;*
- 5- **synthesis**: *summarize, argue, organize, and conclude;*
- 6- **evaluation**: *judge, select, support, attack, and evaluate.*

4- The aim of teaching English in Algeria

According to the Algerian Government 'directives' and official texts (June 1999), the syllabuses of the English language aim at providing the Algerian learners with the language necessary to communicate efficiently in a normal social and /or working situation both in speaking and in writing. At the same time, they aim at enhancing those who go on further studies to use the foreign language as a means to widen their knowledge for academic purposes in their field of study, (degree in English language, translation, or journalism) and those who join the job market to exploit, through reading, by themselves documents, leaflets, notices related to their occupations.

The unfortunate reality, however, can be seen in the following statement: 'Reading is neglected to a great extent in opposition to the aforementioned directives.' One wonders: How can we make our students self-sufficient in exploring and exploiting materials that are linked to their field of study without giving much importance to reading? And of course, when taking into consideration the amount of language communicated will certainly require the necessary amount of time which is not in accordance with the optimistic objectives set by the authorities.

5- Learners' knowledge by the end of middle school education

The pupils at middle school level are supposed to have attended about 250 hours of English teaching classes (4 hours per week in 3 AF and 5 hours per week in 4 AF). They are supposed to have acquired basic English (structures and vocabulary) necessary to express the four main functions of the language which are: description, instruction, narration, and socializing in the four linguistic skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). As a result, they are expected to master the basic characteristics of (English) language which are: (*always, according the Algerian directives of June 1999.*)

- listening to and understanding oral messages;
- guided production of simple oral messages;
- reading of simple passages and showing their understanding of them (without the interference of the oral) through performing various activities of linguistic checking;
- writing simple personal letters;
- filling simple forms and writing elementary application letters;

-taking notes and writing simple summaries of medium-length texts.

Although this supposedly acquired knowledge seems to be significant, exam results show that most learners experience difficulties in using the foreign language (English) correctly and appropriately during their first years in secondary schools.

This situation and the newly devised time-table have led the secondary school teachers to devote a large part of the teaching sessions to the brushing up of the previously studied linguistic stock. The insufficient time allocated to the teaching of English has not really helped. Bearing in mind that 2 hours per week for the scientific classes and 3 hours for literary classes during their first year in the secondary school are just sufficient to preserve some of the acquired language, they have to restrict their objectives to the mere reactivation of basic elements seen in the previous two years. They have for the literary streams, supplied a few more functions and structures whereas for the scientific stream, the effort has been restricted to selected functions in relation with English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and their related structures. Besides that, some school administrators believe that English is a secondary language, and they often schedule it in inconvenient time (the afternoons) where the pupils are less energetic and less motivated. In most cases, all these factors have severely hindered the learners' performances.

6- Learners' knowledge by the end of their first two years in secondary schools

By the end of their first two years in secondary school, the pupils are supposed to have attended 296 hours of English, (156 for the literary streams and 140 for the scientific streams) and they are supposed to have acquired more knowledge in the four linguistic skills: (*according to the Algerian directives of June 1999.*)

1- listening comprehension

-they should be able to understand a simple oral message said in everyday English in interpersonal exchanges;
-they should understand the broad lines of a short talk that is delivered in standard English.

2- oral expression

-they should be able to communicate in a limited number of topics in correct simple English.

3- reading comprehension

-they should be able to read simple authentic texts and documents (maps, charts, forms, notices...).

4- written expression

-they should undertake simple writing tasks in relation with samples studied in class.

The above skills are supposed to be achieved through the following functions:

a- describing people (physical appearance, personality characteristics, clothes, tastes)

b- describing places (in the past and in the present + geographical location, inhabitants and their activities...);

c- describing objects (what they are made of, their use..);

d- narrating an event, a fact...;

e- relating personal experiences;

f- asking for and giving directions;

g- making simple comparisons between people;

h- formulating intentions and prospects;

i- instructing.

These functions are studied deeper with literary streams as they get more sessions of the language (during their first year only). In scientific streams, more importance is given to functions related to:

- describing processes

- instructing...etc.

7- Learners' knowledge by the end of their last year in secondary schools

At the end of the third year, the pupils are expected to have certain mastery in:

1- listening comprehension

-understand different types of oral messages linked to everyday activities (face to face conversation, telephone conversation...);

-understand the main points of a talk in standard English on various cultural, scientific, and technical themes (this talk could be worked out in terms of lexis, grammar, and overall organization).

2- oral expression

express themselves with some kind of "fluency" so as to be understood clearly (even with some mistakes in pronunciation and grammar) without a risk of false interpretations.

3- reading comprehension

- read and understand, to some extent, various kinds of various authentic texts (narrative, descriptive, argumentative) of intermediate difficulties; (But, what are the criteria that helped the curriculum designers to predict these difficulties?)
- exploit various documents and technical and scientific literature (newspapers' and magazines' articles, brochures, adverts, instructions for use...etc.);
- use reference books efficiently (dictionaries, encyclopedia).

4- written expression

- master different writing skills, note taking, organizing, summarizing, so as to be autonomous in written expression when starting from models learnt in class;
- be aware of major aspects in the culture, life, and civilization of societies using this language;
- master methods and working techniques so as to be, also, autonomous in exploiting documents.

Next to the above objectives, the pupils should be able to reach the educational objectives and this is in unison with the other subjects of the curriculum. They should be able to:

- interpret percentages;
- interpret information contained in charts, tables, diagrams, pie-charts...;
- transfer verbal information into non-verbal information and vice versa;
- match elements of information;
- classify facts and information;
- sum up a text;
- take notes;
- predict logical succession of ideas, facts,...;
- extrapolate (guess) and solve various problems.

The literary streams need more exposure to literature concerning aspects of civilization that use English as a means of communication. They also need practice in translating and interpreting from their mother tongue and vice-versa. Research works and summaries of personal readings are to be encouraged.

These skills will be achieved through the exploitation of functions, some of them seen in the previous years and others introduced for the first time. Of course, some aspects will be more or

less stressed according to the choice of the pupils. The common core will be the following:

- describing/ - narrating/ - arguing/ - comparing/ - questioning/ - reporting/- deducing/ - classifying/ - planning.

5- Syllabus of English for third year classes in secondary schools

During their third year, it is assumed that the learners can show a relatively satisfactory mastery of the main English language functions. They are supposed to be able to dominate more than one function at a time. They are also supposed to have acquired the ability to express themselves with sufficient fluency.

They should thus be able to reach a certain level of performance when using that foreign language (English).The various skills will be integrated to move from skill getting to skill using. To teaching those learning strategies, the syllabus will aim at:

- expanding their language acquisition;
- developing their verbal and graphic communication skills;
- exposing them to various types of discourse : narrative, descriptive, expository, prescriptive, argumentative.

That is why it was thought useful to build the third year classes' syllabus around themes not functions. Each theme (or series of themes) will allow the use of several interrelated language functions. The emphasis will be more on authentic communication than on individual functions. The language structures will be, of course, still be studied and their functions deduced.

The rules then could be drawn, made explicit, and then consolidated through appropriate activities. It is not thought appropriate to devote sessions to translation, as that involves a certain specialization on the part of the teacher and as this appears too early, at this stage of the learning process. It is enough to simply arouse the learner's awareness of the range of possibilities and prospects when setting their career plans.

Aspects of literature and, in general, civilization of the people that use English as a national language will not be neglected. It is even important to select passages from two or three novels written by natives (American or British twentieth century writers).

The cultural dimension of literature teaching aims at:

- deepening the learner's knowledge of the socio-historical dimensions of English speaking societies;

- facilitating the learner's comprehension of the texts at the inferential level while, of course, paying attention to ideological implications when selecting texts;

Culture conditions the pupils' response to the texts both thematically and stylistically and therefore aesthetically.

At the end of their 3rd year, the pupils of literary streams will

1- in listening comprehension

- understand different types of aural messages linked to everyday activities;
- understand the main points of a talk delivered in standard English on various cultural and / or social themes. This talk could be worked out in terms of lexis, grammar, overall organization, possible interpretations...

2- in oral expression

express themselves with some kind of fluency so as to be understood clearly and without a risk of false interpretations.

3- in reading comprehension

read and show understanding of various kinds of authentic texts (narrative, descriptive, argumentative) of intermediate difficulties;

- exploit various documents linked to the topic and themes studied (maps, charts, itineraries, diagrams);
- use reference books efficiently (dictionaries, encyclopedia).

4- in written expression

- master different writing skills: note-taking, summarizing, so as to be autonomous in written expression when starting from models seen in class;
- write about major features in the culture, life and civilization of societies using English;
- research works and summaries of personal reading are to be encouraged. These skills will be achieved through the exploitation of themes from the syllabus on the various text types.

8- A very brief historical background of the teachers of English in Algeria since the independence

Throughout the 1960's decade, the teachers of English represented the over-whelming majority of foreign language teachers' community in Algeria both in the middle and secondary school education. According to Hayenne, (1989 : 49) in 1968, 84.6 % of foreign language teachers were "cooperants". In other words, these were teachers serving on voluntary overseas. They were primarily French whose knowledge, experience and expertise were about French pupils in a French learning environment.

These teachers might have some way opened new scopes and intrinsically motivated Algerian pupils, but, their ignorance of the intricacies (the complicated details) of the Algerian social, educational, economic and political context might as much have hindered foreign language learning and teaching. Hayenne (ibid: 62) asserts that these cooperating teachers used the same curriculum, the same textbooks in teaching the Algerian pupils. They actually were not looking for the conducive atmosphere and a healthy environment to the better teaching of English. It's worthy to say that the time allotted to English sessions in France and to English in Algeria was not the same at all because the French pupils learned seven years whereas the Algerian pupils received only five years of English sessions.

Conclusion

We have attempted in this work to come up (briefly) with some aspects of the incorporation of English as a foreign language in the Algerian curriculums. Also, it tried to show that the designers of these curriculums, are too ambitious but, they were doing most of the work without being aware of the pupils' realistic socio-cultural milieu, and (without) involving experts in the educational field. As Fuller (2011 : 70) states that, programme designers must learn to think more like administrators. Despite the fact that English has become the first language used in the world, Algeria is still lagging behind in developing curriculums that would lead the learners to be proficient speakers of that language. This is partly due to the lack of serious investigation as well as the scientific gradation and sequencing other pedagogical input. But, in spite of the many constraints, difficulties and hardships, the Algerian teaching community is making huge efforts and sacrifice in order to make the teaching of English as a

foreign language effective due to their good intentions and honest efforts and they managed to a good extent to discover the secrets of a successful teaching of that language.

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