Educational reform and the need to rethink approaches, attitudes and perspectives in the English LMD study scheme

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1. Introduction

Algeria is in the midst of two major educational reforms: the National Education Reform (or School Reform) set up in 2003 which established the Competency-Based Approach (CBA) as an instructional framework for schools, and the Higher Education Reform set up in 2005, which established the LMD Study Scheme as a framework for university degree studies.

In both reforms, one of the requirements is to revisit pedagogical approaches and practices, teacher and learner roles, and to seek for new perspectives to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

These reforms were set up to promote qualitative improvement in schools and universities. What is advocated by the philosophy of these reforms is essentially:
- To focus on developing the critical capacities of the learners
- To enable them to know themselves
- To become active and confident learners
- To think of themselves as complex and dynamic subject in a new and competitive global era
- To think for themselves

With respect to English language teaching, these reforms are currently raising issues and challenges, as a number of problems have emerged with the implementation of CBA in schools, problems not yet solved which are impacting the university to a large extent.

It would be a truism to say that the sooner the school comes to grips with the difficulties arising from its reform, the better the university will reap the benefits of the profound changes brought into the Algerian educational institution.

This paper examines the reform of Higher Education (or LMD Reform) and attempts to provide a way forward by exploring the conceptual underpinnings of the LMD study scheme, taking an insider perspective and focusing on the complexities of the context of situation.

The LMD study scheme (commonly referred to as 'the LMD System') has been used in several universities nationwide since 2005, and was introduced in the English department of University of Algiers 2 in 2009. Its implementation first met with enthusiasm and excitement by the stakeholders who saw in it an opportunity to reflect on the transformations occurring at a global level, and to contribute to these transformations at a local/regional level.

Thus the LMD study scheme offered attractive assets to deal with teaching and learning matters, one of them being the multidisciplinarity of the curricula, and from a methodological standpoint, a pedagogy centred on the learner.

Learner-centred pedagogy and learner autonomy, i.e. the learner's ability to take charge of his own learning (Holec 1981) are two innovative concepts that both school and university reforms have incorporated into their agenda, and their success largely depends on the integration of these concepts into learners' learning behaviours.

At school, the implementation of learner-centred pedagogy into the Competency-Based Curriculum is progressing slowly, but meeting with obstacles, not only of a material nature, but also relating to the individual, as this social cultural concept seems a difficult objective to achieve in the Algerian school.

2. Student Learning and Academic Study

With respect to student learning and knowledge construction that are core aspects of the LMD study scheme, it is important to mention that at least 50% of the student study time should be devoted to self-study .The remaining time is spent in formal classroom teaching with the teacher. Also continuous assessment of student progress plays an important role in the evaluation system of the LMD degree scheme. In some foreign language degree courses (e.g. French), self-study may account for up to 70% of the total scores obtained by the student, and formal examinations for only 30%. Credits are calculated on the basis of teaching time and private study time. For instance, 1 credit stands for 15-20 hours of work for the student (i.e formal teaching and personal work combined).Learner-centred pedagogy also implies that the student's learning process is "monitored" by a tutor who counsels, guides, suggests strategies , negotiates solutions, helps to revise and prepare examinations during tutorship sessions.

 Therefore, this type of pedagogy is meant to help the student develop into an independent learner and grow into a conscious citizen able to solve the real problems he faces at local and global levels. It entails less teaching and lecturing, less teacher control and teacher talk, and encourages more student involvement, initiative, participation and decision-making, both in class and outside of it through self-study.

How far is this concept understood and integrated into students' learning habits? How do students react to learner-centred pedagogy and are they ready to become autonomous learners? How do teachers react to it?

From discussions with last year students, I gathered, (with no surprise!) that they like teachers who dictate their lecture, who give, read and explain handouts thoroughly, who give little or no homework. On the other hand, they like pair and group work and think that these activities are relaxing, and even entertaining and fun, through which they can know each other, and use their English 'freely'. They do not regard them as 'serious' or providing 'serious knowledge'. For 'serious work', they prefer working alone. They are also anxious about meeting deadlines for homework and assignments, doing extra reading at home, consulting and using sources and prioritizing their tasks, all of which being crucial for the construction of student identity as an autonomous learner .It is clear from these responses that first year students entering university have difficulty taking responsibility for their learning. In principle, tutorship or advising sessions organized weekly should provide them with vital keys to understand academic study, as well as a world more and more complex. But tutorship is presently an issue as a conceptual and practical framework for student-teacher encounters is yet to be

defined. One of the priorities of tutorship sessions must be to change students perceptions of university studies and to guide them into autonomy, which is not an easy task because autonomy is currently viewed as a 'western 'concept, rather inadequate , not accepted by the majority; thus the necessity to find   'cultural alternatives' (Pennycook 1997).

3. **Teachers 'Views of Learner-Centred Pedagogy and Academic Study**

Looking at teachers' reactions and attitudes to learner-centred pedagogy, the difficulty of giving up conservative habits of controlling the class through formal teaching of knowledge is manifest. Few senior teachers have embarked on the LMD teaching experience. These reluctant persons put forward arguments such as lack of preparation for a newly developed curriculum, suspicion about the learning outcomes, inability to manage a complex assessment system involving both formal and informal tools, lack of expertise or little professional competence, lack of visibility overall.

Besides, a learner-centred teaching methodology might mean extra workload for teachers who must continually monitor student progress and learning processes, and evaluate the work done inside and outside the classroom. However, if one of the aims of the LMD study scheme is to bring about approaches and practices which are less examination-oriented or controlled and more focused on student reflection and metacognition, this educational change needs to relate to teacher development as the successful implementations of innovations presuppose teacher learning of new practices, change in beliefs and understandings, and the time-line of at least two years of active assistance during implementation (Huberman & Miles 1984).

What has emerged from my discussion with teachers is a mismatch between their expectations -to produce high standards performing students- (whether in the 'classical system' or the 'new LMD system') and the students' main goal to pass exams. This mismatch between teacher and student agendas tends to create constant pressures, and can be explained by the deeply rooted school experience of the learner. The pressures originally generated from the influential national examination, the Baccalaureat, creates in students an examination culture rather than a learning culture, and students always position themselves as examination learners. This implies going beyond the language classroom and looking into the socio-cultural context which may explain such attitudes. Besides, a number of students sit and re-sit the Baccalaureat examination year after year, even when they have succeeded to get enrolled at university for a degree course, which demonstrates that examination behaviours are deeply rooted in them.

 Besides, the students' context of learning and their previous experiences are heavily based on a reproducing orientation to studying. Some teachers who taught content, language and skills courses last year noted the gap between the teacher's intentions and the students' perceptions of the context of learning, and realized how change is difficult to undergo.

Literature on approaches to learning which has emerged from research into teaching and learning in higher education for the last fifteen years demonstrates that learning has a qualitative aspect (Ramsden 1992). It is about how people experience and organize the subject-matter of a learning task, about 'what' and 'how' they learn, rather than 'how much' they remember. Studies carried out with lecturers about their aims for student learning , in different 'western' universities (Lancaster University, UK; Monash University, Australia; Alberta University, Canada) , have identified three main educational objectives (Entwistle & Percy 1974, Entwistle 1984, Knapper 1990):

      i- To teach students to analyze ideas or issues critically

      ii- To develop students' intellectual/thinking skills

      iii-To teach students to comprehend principles or generalizations

Additional aims were stated by other researchers such as capacity to respond flexibly to changing circumstances, lifelong learning, capacity to integrate theory and practice by generalizing from theoretical knowledge, capacity to deal efficiently with new or previously unmet situations (Bligh 1982, Knapper & Cropley 1985) .

Literature also reports that student learning is determined by the requirements of the 'formal curriculum' and the 'hidden curriculum' (Snyder 1971). In the hidden curriculum, students adapt to the requirements of the teacher which are defined by their perceptions of teaching procedures and assessment. While the formal curriculum promotes independent thinking, analysis, problem-solving ability and originality, the hidden curriculum involves memorizing facts and theories (to 'please' teachers) and achieve success in examinations. On this point, Bruner (1966:72) remarks: 'We teach a subject not to produce little libraries on that subject, but rather to get a student to think (…) for himself (…), to take part in the process of knowledge-getting. Knowing is process, not a product'.

But how to reconcile teachers' 'high expectations for student learning' (Richards 1987:217) and student low motivation to learn? Is the new study scheme more motivating? What should change in student attitudes? It seems important to train first year students to use deeper approaches to learning so that they no longer perceive learning as the accurate retention of large amounts of content which would help them to pass their courses. Teaching them that self-organization is a crucial skill, in the same way as they direct, organize and rely on themselves in other domains of their lives, seems a priority. This 'strategic investment' (Brown 1994) will help them deal with their own learning and learning problems.

4. Matters of Concern

My discussions with both students and teachers have led me to realize that the attitudes and expectations of both parties are not quite positive overall, for a number of reasons.

Some teachers fear that the LMD study scheme will turn universities into professional colleges where students are simply 'trained to do things', thus leaving little room for critical reflection and creativity. Also, the social cultural concept of learner autonomy, defined in European contexts, is not perceived as socially relevant for many students. The issue of autonomous learning is therefore critical to this reform and lies at the heart of the students' intellectual development as it can determine their academic success or failure; it is quite legitimate that both students and teachers worry about it. This aspect of the reform , complex and demanding ,seems to have been downplayed in the reform: rethinking approaches and practices would mean helping students to learn how to learn and how to construct their academic or professional project, with the assistance of their teacher as this reform does not proclaim 'the death of the Teacher'! Student autonomy is to be co-constructed with a tutor /advisor devoting a large amount of time to student learning and knowledge construction, developing their critical thinking skills, with or without peers, and managing time for self-study and examination preparation. For every single hour of classroom teaching, there should be two hours of private study at home and/or in the library.

How many students are aware of this necessity? When I asked my first year students to design a timetable with their daily activities, many stated :'chatting on the phone with a friend',

'watching television' 'watching a DVD", ' listening to music' and 'chatting on Facebook'; (also 'cooking' 'baking cakes' 'cleaning the house' and 'washing-up dishes' for girls). Only two (girls!) out of thirty-five mentioned 'study time' in their timetable. It is worth mentioning that the majority complained about spending an invaluable amount of time travelling to university and returning to their homes or their halls of residence, trying to get on a bus (student bus or other) to go back home before it gets dark; also borrowing a book from the library, finding a seat in the reading room/library to do their coursework alone or with peers, etc. Consequently, there is urgent need to think about adequate means and ways to enable students to invest their time in 'true' learning through the use of the library, cyber spaces and other learning centres in order to develop the study and learning skills so vital for academic study.

 Another matter of concern for both students and teachers is the role of continuous assessment (Contrôle Continu) in the LMD study scheme .The rationale is to encourage the student to progress at his own pace, to construct his knowledge in an incremental fashion, alone or with peers, and to develop positive attitudes towards learning. In this study scheme, the final /formal examinations are no longer regarded as the ultimate steps or the most important academic events in the student's life but as one way among others, of demonstrating his acquisition of knowledge and skills. Besides, the scheme encourages Vygostky's approach to learning through collaborative learning and preparing for assessment with peers.

But the university study conditions in general do not provide for such activities to take place because libraries are not equipped with group study rooms where students can meet and work together. Besides, there is no way for students and teachers to get direct access to electronic sources and other materials on-line through a university webmail, as is the case in many libraries in the world . In addition to the fact that they close their doors early (with no access on week-ends) thus limiting student time for study, university libraries are not fitted with an electronic system for borrowing and returning books and other teaching/learning materials, to save time queuing at the library desk to borrow or return a book or journal; and no photocopying service and other computer facilities are available to ease students (and teachers)' use of resources. As a result, these poorly equipped spaces impact negatively on student progression and assessments and many students mention having difficulties producing and submitting coursework and projects as well as meeting deadlines.

It is important to stress that the use of IT for learning has been integrated into all the curricula designed for the LMD study scheme (following the reform in higher education) as it is a crucial learning and research tool for the academic community. Because the continuous assessment of student progress plays an important role in the evaluation system of the LMD scheme - essentially based on self-study-, student performance on self-study may account for a maximum score of his total scores (e.g.70%), and the formal examinations for a minimum of the total scores (e.g.30%) . A new student culture is therefore to acquire as emphasis is placed on learning rather than teaching. Attendance and participation in class work and homework assignments are also assessed by the teacher and integrated into the student learning process and final scores. It is through the process of reviewing lectures and tutorials, and through the production of personal projects that the student can indulge into deep learning and thinking, and surface learning resulting from 'cramming' for formal examinations to get

pass marks is unlikely to lead to success as the philosophy of the LMD system is that ' all students should achieve, no student should fail'.

Tutorship (i.e.student advising) is also a matter of concern. In tutoring sessions, the student's learning process is 'monitored' by a tutor who explains 'what it is to be a student at university'. The student is therefore expected to change role, and no longer to be spoon-fed and a passive recipient, but reactive. These are attitudes that he will not quit easily, having been 'mothered' in school for many years, by a teacher who was 'the father/mother', 'the master', ' the -cheikh –who- knows-it-all'. These individuals have also been shaped over many years by a rigid school system, where their creativity and imagination were stifled. The LMD system is requiring the students to adopt a new 'psychological frame of mind' and do their 'cultural revolution'; because what is at stake is the construction of their student identity, as members of a student community, as persons taking responsibility for their own learning, and as citizens able to tackle the issues of their social, professional and economic environments.

5. Conclusion

The reforms of the Algerian educational system both at school and university, can be viewed as a Copernican Revolution in the field of English language pedagogy, with the ultimate aim for the country to become a 'Knowledge Society' in the same ways as other nations in the world. By 'destabilizing' both learner and teacher, they will enable all stakeholders to stop and think, to reflect on experiences , to look for new perspectives and to contemplate the necessity to find alternative models of language teaching and learning that would fit into our social, cultural, economic and political context. The revolution in student culture must happen if the LMD study scheme is to succeed. Besides, teacher development should take a central role in both educational reforms, integrating leadership and mentoring at all levels of education… Also, schools and universities might benefit from working in partnerships in projects to improve learning, teaching and research in both institutions. But the university' response to these challenges is not yet adequate. If substantial measures to create a stimulating environment for study, reflection, work and growth (at a personal and professional level), are not taken urgently, the philosophy behind these innovative reforms will be lost. These suggestions underpin our vision for a 'new' Algerian School and University of the 21st century which we believe is worth pursuing.

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