

The New Reform at the University Level in Morocco: Objectives and Realities

Kenza Saadani Hassani^{1*}

¹Professor of English Language at Sidi Mohamed bin Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco

***Corresponding author**

Kenza Saadani Hassani

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Abstract: Reform of educational institutions is an ongoing process which constantly molds and refits curricula, teaching methodologies, and infrastructures to new content and shapes in order to meet the needs of continuously changing communities. Congruent with such statement, Morocco, as other states elsewhere, has undergone several reforms the last of which was in the academic year 2003/2004 with the introduction of the LMD system (Licence, Master, and Doctorate) to higher education. Such reform and its influence on English language teaching are the main concern of the current study. Informed by policy documents and evidence drawn from qualitative data collected through means of observations and interviews of students at Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Sais, Fez, the study revealed that, on the one hand, the new reform has brought an innovative curriculum; however, a number of acute problems impeded the effectiveness of the reform. The problems were mainly linked to lack and poor educational infrastructures, insufficient coverage of some subjects (say, ESP), and the lack of student academic advising program which is necessary for students to develop self-autonomy. The cumulative effects were high attrition rates and repetitions, poor learning outcomes, and generally mismatch between the goals of the reform and its outcomes.

Keywords: Educational reform, higher education, Morocco, LMD system, English language teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years that I have been teaching English as a foreign language at the university level, I have had time to reflect on the objectives behind implementing the new educational system in the Moroccan universities in general, and its direct relevance to the teaching of English in particular. My experience of teaching has been accumulated over many years, in which I have taught classes with different subjects and have come out with different findings. Hence, the aim of the present paper is to provide an assessment of the operation of teaching a foreign language within the perspectives of the recent educational system, to consider the potential purposes and functions of English in Morocco and to make some suggestions on the way to cope with the developments which have taken place in the last decade. The data are based on materials collected through classroom observation and personal interaction with university students.

The information covered in this article is structured as follows: (a) in the first section, I deem it necessary to present a brief overview of the status of English in Morocco, (b) the second section considers ELT and the reform movement with priority given to its structure and objectives, (c) the third section will

basically review the realities of the new educational system.

The status of English in the Moroccan context

There is no doubt that English has been deeply penetrating the Moroccan society by its range of functions. The decision to include it in the educational curricula has been based on the conviction on the part of decision makers that this language is likely to contribute to the overall development of Morocco. Ennaji [1] states « The aim of teaching English at the national level are cultural, socio-economic and educational ». The rapid expansion of English in Morocco is also attested to its first implementation in middle schools, and by its insertion in the curricula of other departments belonging to other faculties, namely the faculties of juridical, economic and social sciences. The creation of Al-Akawayn University and the launching of many private institutes of primary and higher education may also be cited as clear evidence that English is considered a vehicle of progress in Morocco. Nowadays, the Moroccan system is struggling to establish an educational system tailored to the needs of the 21st century [2]. So, to truly prepare students to enter the job market, an effective route should be established while taking into consideration several vital elements. The following are summarized

below as important and relevant criteria to successful English language teaching and learning.

- Moroccan government and the national ministry of education are attempting to construct an effective and equitable framework for an appropriate delivery of English language teaching (henceforth ELT) services. Still, it can be noticed that the new educational system is in a real crisis and has not yet managed to level up the standard of English education.
- Moroccan teachers have always been concerned with setting up innovative techniques and materials, challenging their own pedagogical habits, and adopting new methods and approaches to follow the logical progression of teaching foreign languages. A more realistic view about the deficiencies of the infra-structure of Moroccan faculties disappoints Moroccan teachers. At the heart of these problems, the increasing number of students reduces the possible amount of opportunities they may have to be involved in different learning tasks.
- In the new era, Moroccan students should basically develop a range of large skills as well as a range of critical reflective abilities to take an active role in life and to access the job market easily. What actually may be noticed is that Moroccan students are in a critical situation, handicapped by the evident mismatch between the input and the output, and between what the Moroccan educational system provides and what the job market demands.

ELT and the reform movement

Morocco has undergone a major shift in many domains including higher education at the university level. The emergence of the new reform came to mark the end of a previous period and marked the beginning of the transformations of universities. The new project was officially implemented in the curricula in September 2003 after agreement on its objectives and structure.

In the national charter, it is said that the new reform is inserted with the purpose of providing students with the necessary skills and competences to respond to the changes in society. Such outcomes are to be achieved through continuous assessment, implementation of new subjects, new roles attributed to both teachers and students, and additionally through the new pedagogical architecture of education, namely LMD (License, Master, and Doctorate).

Continuous Assessment

Assessment is perceived as a co-operative enterprise between teachers and students. This attributes a new role to the teacher in the sense that s/he is supposed to conduct a continuous evaluation during each semester to formally evaluate all courses. However, with the increasing number of students in

class and the lack of proper resources, the teacher finds he/she unable to act as an effective mediator for his students, hence unable to assess regularly students' performance. Another difficulty for implementing continuous assessment is the crisis of confidence that this type of evaluation engenders in the great majority of students. Their lack of knowledge of the importance of assessment accentuates their feelings of insecurity and frustration. When asked about their opinions about this new option of evaluation, the majority of students replied that it is much more demanding than the traditional end of year examination system. What is actually happening is that students come to the university holding the old belief that they should be evaluated only when the whole program is finished.

English for specific purposes

The implementation of very few new subjects is opening up rich opportunities for teachers to be assigned new responsibilities for the design and implementation of courses and for students to develop new skills that would be required for the job market [3]. These subjects (like communication skills, English for tourism and business English) fall under the general heading of English for Specific Purposes (henceforth ESP) which is revealed an exciting movement in foreign language education. Hutchinson and Waters [4] assume that ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason of learning. When asked about their attitudes to ESP, most students' answers appeared to provide striking confirmation that these subjects were highly appreciated by them and will open new horizon to join the job market in the special areas of their interest. They are generally very excited and enthusiastic to know how to open bank accounts and how to deal with foreign customers in currency exchange. At the same time, they admit that their exposure to these newly implemented subjects is very limited and cannot guarantee an effective training to prepare them adequately for the job market. In such condition, students are just initiated to new subjects. Still, it is important to realize that learning any subject requires necessary exposure to language which will give opportunities to learners to establish good habits and to confirm their learning.

Teacher's responsibility

Since they are involved in the new educational system, teachers may become agents of change in teaching foreign languages [5]. They cannot retrieve from responsibility and the quality of autonomy attributed to them encourages them to be fully committed in the task of teaching. Let us take, for instance, the traditional reading comprehension class. It used to be handled as a solo-independent activity where the teacher used to read aloud an extract, explain vocabulary, turn to comprehension questions, and then paraphrasing. With the new reform, to encourage

students autonomous learning, they may be assigned the task of bringing texts of their choice (contemporary topics), and once in class they are expected to be involved with their peers in recognizing the significance of the article, understanding the intentions of the writer, and going beyond what is written to guess at hidden or implied meaning. The second stage is that of comprehension questions. In this type of exercise, the student's task is to derive as many comprehension questions as possible. This policy may stimulate the reading comprehension class interest and may help to transform the traditional class where the teacher acts as an initiator and advisor. Many teachers will surely question the validity and usefulness of this technique within the actual conditions. Still, the experience will surely prove to be fruitful, and students at least may be motivated to become actively engaged in the learning process.

Student's responsibility

It is assumed that out of the total number of Moroccan students who enter primary schools, only one percent finish university studies, partly because of inappropriate teaching strategies or because of the system as a whole. So, when there is a failure in learning a language, we attribute it to deficiencies in the teaching operation or to the complexity of the system. Yet, nobody has blamed students. When asked about the objective of learning English, most students' answers reflect their inability to set precisely definite goals in terms of learning a foreign language. Assuming that the starting point in any kind of success is the identification of objectives and goals, students should be aware of the specific reasons that push them to enroll in the department of English which will be an important motivational factor in their learning process.

Another responsibility of students is that they should be aware of the new role attributed to them once at university; they may no longer be regarded as passive recipients of knowledge. This responsibility is re-evaluated within the new reform in the sense that they should develop their own learning strategies, which is a considerable step towards becoming dynamic autonomous learners. According to Benson, P 2007 [11] and Balçikanli, C. 2010 [10], to be well prepared to actively play their role in society, learners should take the habit to use English outside in their daily encounters.

Additionally, recently a considerable amount of research has been directed at investigating the role of technology in learning English as a foreign language. Students are still not interested in updating their knowledge about technological devices which may in fact improve their learning capacities. They actually use technology in their daily life and for personal aims other than learning a foreign language. The ultimate acceptance of using technology in the learning process

is also dependent upon teachers' commitment to this new dimension of teaching

Why is the new reform failing?

A tremendous hope has been put on the LMD reform [6], which normally was assumed to adopt an efficient policy aimed at creating a strong education in general and a good management of English as a foreign language in particular. However, no precise remedies have been brought to the already existing conditions.

Some of the short falls of the new reform may be summarized as follows

a- One of the most important trend of the national diploma constitutes the shift from a four years to a three years B.A. (bachelor of arts) studies. The main objective was to prepare competent students to meet the changing demands of the socioeconomic situation. Still, students holding their bachelor are unable to cope with the actual inconsistencies between what is taught and what is required for the job market [7]. No other horizons are scheduled to students of the English department if not joining the teaching profession. A long term vision should be set up to put objectives in teaching English to well prepare students to roam freely and safely as workers in different sectors. The new reform is to challenge the fostered thought held by a number of students that all public universities are factories of unemployment.

b- Teaching global English to global students involves more than replicating a degree [8]. Teaching a global language requires a different approach, one that enhances and improves the quality of English by integrating the four required skills (critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity) in the Moroccan classroom setting.

c- The new reform has been superficial in the sense that it has just been imported and implemented in a context without the adequate infra-structure. Adopting a new policy requires primarily a commitment to change at the level of the infrastructure. Without reshaping the use of resources, no significant change may be applicable.

d- The time allotted to ESP subjects cannot enable students to master neither the relevant communicative skills nor the professional skills for them to handle specific jobs. Additionally, ESP classes in the Moroccan context are still lacking a spund program that gives priority to a selected content of a specific field.

e- With the huge number of students, teachers find themselves unable to integrate different forms of assessment during the learning process. Consequently, students too are unable to have a clear idea about their knowledge and their command of specific aspects of

language. The various types of assessments may stimulate students' motivation and raise the level of efficiency and efficacy.

f- The ministry of education denies the concept of placement test assuming that each student is to have the chance to access higher education and to enroll in any department. We deem it important, however, that each student should take a placement test and be oriented toward the more convenient and suitable specialization that goes in line with his abilities and interests and this will guarantee the equitable educational opportunities for everyone. With the current circumstances, the outcomes of graduates after being awarded their university degree is still below average and the percentage of graduates who join the labor market is very low.

g- Despite many years of implementation, the system is still at a very early stage in terms of instructional technology. Meeting the challenges of a changing world requires a different technological reshaping of the learning teaching processes to bring about better educational outcomes [9]. Teachers should be provided opportunities to participate in trainings to be acquainted with the more advanced educational technological practices.

CONCLUSION

The socio-economic changes that are taking place urge a reshaping of teaching and learning English. The success of implementing new strategies for the expansion and the improvement of the use of the English language is a whole enterprise where all sides should be heavily involved.

What is fundamentally needed is concentration on the matters that most impede the teaching and the learning process in an attempt to save public education. The important issues have not been given priority such as the design of new pedagogical perspectives for a better treatment of the English language and the exposure of learners to authentic varieties in a functional context.

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