

Educational Reforms and EFL Teaching at Algerian Middle and Secondary Schools

الإصلاحات التربوية والتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المدارس المتوسطة والثانوية الجزائرية

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ABSTRACT:

Nowadays schools face enormous challenges. In response to a very complex society and a technology-based economy, schools are required to meet the new standards and educate students to higher academic standards than ever before. Besides, the goal of higher education in Algeria is to impart knowledge and skills to an increasing proportion of the population for future professional, academic and social leadership for the country. The present work reviews the literature on the evolution of pedagogical theories from the lecturer style to the development of a blended learning environment. It starts by providing an overview about the current learning theories. It then sheds some light on the status and role of English in Algeria. The important role of learning English as a foreign language, with special focus on English composition teaching, is also discussed. The educational reforms that were led by both the Algerian Education Ministry are highlighted focusing on the methods and innovations newly adopted.

Keywords: Algerian educational system, Educational reforms, EFL teaching, Innovations.

ملخص:

تواجه المدارس في الوقت الراهن تحديات هائلة استجابة لمجتمع معقد للغاية واقتصاد قائم على التكنولوجيا ، لذا كان لزاما على المدارس تلبية المعايير الجديدة وتعليم الطلاب على معايير أكاديمية أعلى من أي وقت مضى. إلى جانب ذلك ، فإن هدف التعليم في الجزائر هو نقل المعرفة والمهارات إلى نسبة متزايدة من المتعلمين للقيادة المهنية والأكاديمية والاجتماعية المستقبلية للبلاد. يستعرض العمل البحثي الأدبيات حول تطور النظريات التربوية من أسلوب المحاضر إلى التعليم ضمن بيئة تعليمية مدعمة بالوسائل التكنولوجية. يبدأ البحث بتقديم لمحة عامة عن نظريات التعلم الحالية. ثم يلقي بعض الضوء على مكانة ودور اللغة الإنجليزية في الجزائر. كما يناقش الدور المهم لتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على تدريس التعبير الكتابي للغة الإنجليزية مع تسليط الضوء على الإصلاحات التعليمية التي قادتها وزارة التربية والتعليم الجزائرية مع التركيز على الأساليب والابتكارات المعتمدة حديثا.

كلمات مفتاحية: النظام التربوي الجزائري، الإصلاحات التربوية، تعليم اللغة الانجليزية، الابتكارات.

1- Introduction:

The teaching of English as a foreign language in middle and secondary in Algeria as defined in the official orientations by the policy makers is to equip our learners with required knowledge and skills so as to enable them to access documentation written in English and to use the target language for communicative purposes. Subsequently, the educational authorities have designed new English textbooks that comply with the new syllabuses laid out by the National Curriculum Committee of the Ministry of National Education in March 2006. In order to achieve the objectives set to the teaching of foreign languages at this level, the Algerian educational system has undergone a series of reforms.

2- The Status and Role of English in Algeria:

Many theorists such as Baker (2003) agree that English has been established as the worldwide language of all domains; nowadays the English language imposes itself in every single field of human beings' daily life. People used to define an illiterate as a person who neither reads nor writes, but today illiteracy refers with no exaggeration to the person who does not master English and the computing sciences. Thanks to the economic tendency of the country that the English language found its way to the Algerian people in the early 60's and 70's. This is stated clearly in the British Council Profile on ELT in Algeria 1975 (cited in Khelloufi,1983:56): "Algeria's interests in the field of petroleum, natural gas, iron, steel, orientate her increasingly to the English speaking west..." Nevertheless, and despite its importance, the English language remained and is still in a perpetual competition with French.

The fact that the use of the English language is restricted in use only in classrooms is systematically reflected on the kind of the Algerian learners' language proficiency that may vary between average and poor. Classroom exposure to English remains insufficient to master a foreign language and meet learners' communicative needs as explained by Mountford and Mackay (1978:2):

When English as a foreign language is taught to children at the primary school and early secondary levels of education, it is generally taught with a general aim in mind – that is, it is regarded as a 'good thing' for them to learn a foreign language as a part of a broad education. There is usually, however, no immediate and specific requirement for such children to make use of the language in any communicative situation.

Because of this, syllabus designers and policy makers have led some educational reforms stressing the fact that all that is taught to primary, middle and secondary level children is not communicative knowledge of the English language use, but knowledge of how the syntax and lexical rules of English operate (Mackay, 1978). Hence, students go to University lacking many aspects of the language. This lack affects negatively their performances like the communicative competence which is required in the utilitarian purposes. They encounter difficulties in communicating mainly when they travel abroad, look for a job or simply when they write correctly and. According to Brumfit (1979), the problem lies in the fact that students still

struggle, show weaknesses and remain deficient in using the language for communicative purposes despite the fact that they have been exposed to this language for years. That is why, immediate reconsideration and urgent change must occur on both English language status, and the way it is regarded and taught by the Algerians.

3- Education and Reform in Algeria:

Most countries have been engaged in a series of reforms at all educational levels. Algeria is not an exception, and it is not new in a world of globalization. All over the world, educational reforms are aimed to respond to the needs dictated by the fast changes in the socio-economic world. In this context, USA and Canada serve as good examples of the countries that underwent important reforms right from the 1980's. According to Waks (2007), the publication of "A Nation at Risk" in 1983 paved the way for a series of educational reforms in the United States of America, and similar reforms followed in Canada and many other industrial countries.

4- Reform and EFL Teaching at Middle and Secondary Schools:

Algerian policy makers planned a reform of national education in 2002. The principal change in this reform, related to our research, was that English would be taught in the sixth year (middle school), two degrees earlier than in the past. This vast reform movement that was launched in July 2002 prepared the ground for an approach focusing on the learner in the learning process against a model led by teachers. This reflects Roegiers' (2006) educational mission that fosters values such as 'autonomy' and 'responsibility for learning' making learners actively implied in their learning process. Intentions vary considerably from one educational system to the other. Yet, as claimed by Perrenoud (2000), it seems obvious that the momentum behind reform of education is a desire to modernize the objectives of education in order to adapt them to contemporary reality and to provide an education that is adequate for learners. Holding this view, the ex-Minister of National Education Benbouzid, in his introduction to Xavier Roegiers' (2006: 7-8) *L'Approche par Compétence dans l'Ecole Algérienne* says:

"Une réforme globale visant l'édification d'un système éducatif cohérent et performant s'impose donc aujourd'hui pour permettre à la société algérienne de faire face aux multiples défis du 21ème siècle"

(A comprehensive reform to build a coherent and effective educational system is therefore necessary today to allow the Algerian society to face the multiple challenges of the 21st century.)

Moreover, Benbouzid claims that schools should develop the Algerian society in terms of knowledge and know-how. According to him, this reform is also sought to have the ambition to help move the society in its knowledge and expertise.

Roegiers (2006) pinpoints that two major challenges condition the reform of the Algerian school: internal challenges (*défis d'ordre interne*) and external challenges (*défis d'ordre externe*). In the first category, i.e internal challenges, we may cite enabling the Algerian school to vehicle the values of tolerance and dialogue and preparing the learners to exercise their citizenship in a democratic society. In other words, it consists of improving the efficiency of the

educational system in accordance with the needs of today's Algeria. Internal factors also include the progressive restoration of the job market (Roegiers, 2006). As for the second category, it is characterized by the modernization of economy, the development of scientific and technological knowledge as well as the recourse to the new information and communication technologies and learning to use them in different sectors of life (ibid).

The Algerian Educational Reform is based on three principal pillars: teacher training, pedagogical reform and the general reorganization of the educational system. To put the educational policy into practice and to familiarize instructors with the innovative methods, an acceptable teacher training course is more than necessary. Within the perspective of the current reform, it emphasizes the valorization of teachers' status, the enhancement of their competencies and their mastery of the content to be taught. Pedagogical reform counts for many measures, including for instance the introduction of new syllabuses and course books in all school subjects. As regards the reorganization of the educational system, it restructures teaching via the generalization of the pre-school, the reduction of the duration of the primary cycle into five years and the prolongation of that of the middle school level into four years (Ministère de l'Education Nationale, 2003).

5- Reform and New Teaching and Learning Approaches:

Nowadays schools face enormous challenges. In response to a very complex society and a technology-based economy, schools are required to meet the new standards and educate students to higher academic standards than ever before. For that reason, teachers needn't only understand subject matter but also know about curriculum resources and technologies to connect their students with sources of information and knowledge that allow them to explore ideas, acquire and synthesize information, and frame and solve problems. And teachers need also to know about how to structure interactions among students, how to collaborate with other teachers, and how to work with parents to shape supportive experiences at school and home. In other words, teachers and learners have adopted new roles which require new visions, suitable strategies and adequate curricula on one hand. Thus schools in countries like Algeria have to adopt the new theories and innovations to meet the Academic standards.

6- Adopting Competency-Based Approach (CBA)¹:

Following the recommendations set by the National Commission for the Reform of Education, the Algerian Educational System has adopted the CBA to teach all school subjects including foreign languages. Unlike the traditional teacher-oriented teaching paradigms which were directed at pouring knowledge into passive learners, CBA is learner-centered in that it regards learners as being responsible and active agents in their learning process. This approach reflects a shift from the teacher who is responsible for transmitting knowledge into passive learners towards the learner whose own interests and needs are brought to the fore. In addition,

¹Competency-based learning or competency-based education and training is an approach to teaching and learning more often used in learning concrete skills than abstract learning. (definition by wikipedia).

it aims to form autonomous individuals capable of coping with the changing world and to enable them to utilize the skills acquired in the school environment for solving real-life problems.

Regarding English, it is granted more prominence in that it is introduced in the first year of the Middle School level. As said previously, the recent reform resulted in designing new syllabuses and textbooks in all the disciplines including foreign languages such as the English language. Amongst the EFL syllabuses and textbooks, we find the ones conceived for Secondary Education whose objectives will be described in the following section.

7- General Objectives of Teaching English in the Secondary School:

The importance of the English language is stressed by syllabus designers who justify the aim behind its introduction in secondary education. For them, English is the language of science and technology, and learning this language helps integrate harmoniously into modernity by fully taking part in the linguistic community which makes use of it for all types of interaction. This participation, based on the exchange of ideas and experiences, would allow the Algerian learners to have a better knowledge of themselves and of the other.

In addition to the acquisition of linguistic and communicative competences, transversal competencies like critical thinking, tolerance, openness to the world, and the respect of the self and of the other are also considered as crucial elements of CBA teaching (SE1 Syllabus). In sum, once the English language is mastered, the learners will have a vision of the world enabling them to share knowledge, have access to science, technology and universal culture and become "The Future Citizens".²

The Algerian Secondary School syllabuses are based on principal objectives which will consolidate the competencies acquired through the four main skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. These objectives are worded in the syllabuses as follows:

- Provide the learners with the necessary linguistic tools (grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and pronunciation) which allow them follow with success studies in English at university or in a professional milieu.
- Allow the learners to understand the English language and use it in different communicative situations.
- Develop learners' intellectual and mental abilities like analysis, synthesis and evaluation through a series of exercises.
- Promote learners' strategies of learning and of self-evaluation to enable them expand and deepen their knowledge.
- Learn the rational use of oral and written texts in English in order to prepare the learners for their future professional lives (SE 2 and SE 3 syllabuses).
- Enable the learners to learn and use technological tools like the Internet which are of great relevance to their inquiry (ibid).

²A citizen who is capable to integrate with harmony into the process of globalization (SE2 Syllabus: 07).

As for the approach, the authors of the three Secondary School syllabuses claim that nowadays, education should respond to learners' needs by creating a climate which favors autonomy and responsibility for their learning. In order to reach these aims and the aforementioned general objectives, CBA should be adopted. Indeed, CBA is, in the designers' view, appropriate to attain the targeted objectives. This learner-oriented approach centers on a conception of learning which is both socio-constructivist and cognitivist in that it regards learning as a creative construction of knowledge through social interaction with other learners and offers ways which permit the attainment of cognitive objectives. Besides, the syllabuses require the implementation of this approach for the consolidation of the competencies acquired in the previous years of English study. These broad competencies are worded as follows: interacting orally in English, interpreting oral and written texts, and producing oral and written texts.

8- Conclusion:

Education is a key to any nation's development and for it to play this role, education reforms should be inclusive, clearly planned, protected from political dictates, owned by stakeholders, adequately financed, subjected to periodic technical consultations, full implementation of the commission's recommendations to achieve innovation. Education reform is for innovation especially the recent education reforms throughout the world, are intended for realizing the future vision.

In this respect, Algeria, like most countries of the world, has gone through a series of actions in the policy of education, reaching the state of an open country in the twenty-first century. When the winds of change blew over the Algerian educational system, it had to adopt a modernization policy to keep pace with time, with the hope to catch up with the demands of globalization and to satisfy the new generation learners' academic needs. Rita Dunn (2009) argues that in case the child is not learning the way teachers are teaching, then they have to teach in the way the child learns. In this respect, Algeria like most developing countries adopted the current learning theories and encouraged academics and lecturers to exploit technology to the maximum in the field of education.

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