

Teachers' Perceptions of the Teaching of English to Non-English Undergraduates at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in Rabat

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Abstract

This paper is part of a larger project which examines the teaching of English to non-English majors at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Rabat. Starting from the official objectives set on Law 01.00, the implementation of these objectives at the level of the Cahier des Normes Pédagogiques Nationales (Book of Pedagogical Guidelines), to the teachers' practices in the classroom, the teaching of English to non-English majors suffers of many shortcomings: definition of clear objectives, content and teaching methodology, human resources, logistics, and the degree of readiness and motivation of the students themselves. This paper deals with the human resources aspect of the problem, namely the teachers themselves, the way they conceive of their mission, how prepared they are to accomplish it, and their perceptions of the challenges before them. Current teachers of English to non-English majors have been asked to fill in a questionnaire devised to this end. Results show that while the surveyed teachers' attitude towards their teaching of English is in general moderately positive, they see the students' readiness and behavior as major obstacles to an effective teaching. Their opinion of the content is evenly split between positive and negative.

Key Words: *Teachers' attitudes, Language and Communication, Higher Education, Non-English majors.*

1. Background of the study

Except in the case of some social sciences and Islamic and Arabic departments, French has always been the language of instruction in higher education in Morocco. Recently, however, it appears that English has officially been envisioned as more valuable than French especially in scientific circles. For example, Lahcen Daoudi, Moroccan Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, emphasized the importance of acquiring English as the language of scientific research to the point of making its mastery a requirement for the obtention of a doctorate degree and for access to some teaching positions, especially in health, engineering, economics, and management (Circular 2014). Minister Daoudi also cited Spain, Portugal, and

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Romania as countries where English is the sole language of instruction in higher education and has made the recommendation for Morocco to follow suit.

Currently, English is taught as a foreign language in Morocco at some middle schools (third grade) and all public high schools. As far as primary schools are concerned, only private schools include English as of the first grade.² Apart from formal education, most, if not all, private language centers include teaching English as part, if not the only, service they offer to meet the increasing learners' demands.

As far as Higher Education is concerned, the situation is quite complex. English is not taught throughout the three fundamental academic years. In the Book of Pedagogical Guidelines (2004), Language and Communication covers 15 to 25% of the global volume of the first four semesters. In the third year, Language and Communication is allocated 10 to 15% of the global volume within a Skills Module³. In the recent Book of Pedagogical Guidelines (2014), there has been a radical change at the level of the said module. Language and Communication is replaced by Language and Terminology with the same allocation of 15 to 25% of the global volume for the first two semesters. In quantitative terms, the volume of the teaching of English has decreased from seventy two hours to forty eight hours between 2004 and 2014.

The case of Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in Rabat is no exception. Before the new reform, English had been included within the complementary modules of all the departments⁴. The difference was depicted in the number of semesters assigned to the learning of the English language. Some departments offer English for three semesters while others for only two. Currently, a number of departments have dropped the teaching of English altogether. Only French, Italian, and German studies Departments have kept English in their tool module as a part of the curriculum. However, it is only taught in Semesters One and Two of the first academic year. The number of hours is still the same; English was and is still taught for twenty four hours a semester.

As to the objectives of the teaching of English, the French Studies department aims to promote the understanding and deployment of English for everyday use as well as for specific purposes, the ability to interact in an easy way and produce language in both written and spoken forms. The German and the Italian Studies departments, on the other hand, stress fostering basic linguistic knowledge: grammar, writing, and speaking.

² On 10 March, 2016, the Minister of National Education, Rachid Belmokhtar, announced that English will be introduced at the 4th grade of elementary education in public schools as of next year. (<http://www.maroc.ma/fr/actualites/ministre-de-leducation-nationale-louverture-du-systeme-educatif-national-sur-les-langues>, Accessed on 18.04.2016).

³ It is important to highlight that at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, English, as a Language and Communication element, is only taught to non-English majors. The Language and Communication module may also include French and Arabic depending on the Department's objectives.

⁴ The departments are French, Arabic, German, Italian, Portuguese, Hispanic, Islamic Studies, Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology, and History.

2. Statement of the Problem

The current situation of the teaching of the English language in higher education is confusing in more than one regard. Between, on one hand, the official objectives as depicted in the official higher education policy guidelines and the different informal declarations of the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, and, on the other hand, the practices on the ground, there seems to be a huge gap. This paper addresses the way teachers, as the last link in the chain, cope with this problem. We take the case of the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in Rabat, which is to a large extent representative of all the open-access institutions in Morocco, as an example.⁵

There is an observed general regression at the level of the teaching of English in the non-English major departments. If we consider this trend solely in quantitative terms, only three departments out of fourteen have maintained the teaching of English in their curricula (French, Italian and German studies departments). In addition, the semesters in which it is taught has gone down from a minimum of three (up to six) to only two.

Research Questions

In order to reach the objectives set for this article, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges LC teachers encounter while teaching English as a foreign language to non-English majors students?
2. What are the teachers' attitudes towards the teaching of English as a foreign language to non-English majors?

3. Research method and procedure

We mean the present contribution to be a descriptive study of the teaching of English to non-English majors at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in Rabat. The study opted for is a mixed-method design, the aim of which is to have an inclusive view of the situation of English teaching at the Faculty. A detailed description of the participants and the instruments of the study are provided below.

The population sample consists of seven teachers of English as an element of the LC module. Most are also doctorate students and were previously trained in the teaching of English as a foreign language.

Based on our own individual experiences as teachers of English within the LC module, we have observed a number of tendencies regarding the students' behavior towards their learning of English as a complementary subject within their tracks. Besides the students' behavior, the teaching environment and the content being taught have both played an important role in triggering our interest in investigating the issue further.

⁵ Higher education institutions in Morocco are divided into two categories: limited access institutions, mostly of a vocational nature, are accessed through admission tests; open access institutions are accessible to virtually any high school degree (Baccalaureate) holder.

The four-page questionnaire we used covered the general background, the objectives, the challenges and the attitudes teachers of LC-English have experienced since they joined the program. The questionnaire aims at eliciting the attitudes of the teachers towards the teaching of English as a LC module and towards the students. The respondents were asked to fill in the questionnaire online through a Google form. While anonymity of the respondents was guaranteed, they had to answer on the basis of their experience(s) in the teaching of English within the LC- Module.

To support the data we collected through the questionnaire, we have also had recourse to an actual face-to-face reflective meeting with the parties involved. Thus, a group discussion was held gathering some of the members involved in the teaching of English to non-English majors at the Faculty of Letters Rabat.

4. Data analysis

Our population consists of seven graduate students of the English Department at the Faculty of Letters -- five females and two males. All the respondents are doctoral students and were previously trained in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language during their graduate studies. They have acquired a three-year experience in the teaching of English. Also, their experience in teaching English as a LC element ranges between two and a half years for females and four years for males. All of the respondents are involved in the teaching of English as a LC element at the time the study was taking place. The teachers have taught different levels at different departments. These levels include elementary (71.4%) and pre-intermediate (100%) while only 1% of the teachers taught the beginner level. However, advanced and intermediate levels are not available due to the discontinuity in the teaching of English as a LC module within non-English major tracks. It is important to mention that the classification of language levels follows the Common European Framework of Reference for language learning and teaching. As far as the departments are concerned, the data revealed that teachers have taught English to the students in virtually all the tracks of the faculty namely, Psychology, Islamic Studies, Geography, History, French, Italian, German, and Portuguese. However, with the recent reform (see Section 1), only the French, Italian and German tracks have maintained the teaching of English. Table 1 shows the participants' profiles in more details.

		Female	Male
Teachers		5	2
Age		25-26	30-33
Educational level		Doctoral students	Doctoral students
Experience in TEFL		3 years	3 years
Experience in LC		2.5 years	4 years
Training	Yes	5	2
	No	0	0

Table 1: Participants' Profiles

During the reflective group discussion, the respondents raised a number of questions related to the issues they encountered. Two of the issues are large groups and mixed abilities; the teachers indeed expressed their concerns over the quality of their teaching and learning for the students when the classes they are assigned are overcrowded and heterogeneous. Among the suggested solutions, one was to divide the groups into sub-groups of no more than twenty students for the teachers to ensure a better classroom management and a more effective teaching. In order to do so, it was suggested that a placement test should take place in the beginning of each academic year to place students in appropriate levels.

Statistical findings

To begin with, the first question the participants had to answer is related to the official objectives of the teaching of English as a LC module. The results show that 71.4% of the teachers are aware of the objectives set by the departments. Only 28.6% expressed their unfamiliarity with the official objectives. In support of their favorable answer, the respondents added a number of objectives. We have concluded that the objectives they stated were about the learning of General English, communication in English and English Language as a tool for academic research.

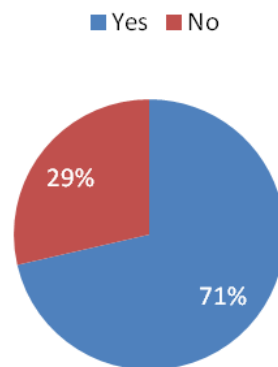


Figure 1: Official objectives: Are you aware of the official objectives?

In addition to answering questions about their awareness of the official objectives, the respondents were also asked to choose which, among a number of suggested objectives, they think are relevant to the teaching of English as a LC module. The results in Figure 2 show that 71.4% of the teachers agreed that the objectives behind the teaching of English LC are mainly to develop oral proficiency and to strengthen the ability to respond appropriately in a variety of situations. In contrast, none of the teachers believes that teaching English LC is either for achieving native-like proficiency or for preparing the students for the job market.

As Figure 3 shows, the most significant challenge for the teachers of English LC at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences is the lack of motivation among students. This is further confirmed during the reflective group discussion. Figure 3 also shows that absenteeism, mixed abilities, and large classes (85.7%) represent a serious obstacle to the teachers of LC English. Lack of teaching materials and class equipment as well as time constraints (42.9%) ranked lower while course content, lack of continuous professional development, and too ambitious content (14.3%), however, are not considered as challenging.

In terms of teachers' attitudes towards the teaching of English, results show that 71.4% of the teachers declare they are quite eager to teach before each class. Their motivation towards teaching English is 57.1%. 85.7% of the teachers believe that their training has helped them in their teaching, while 57.1% think they are effective teachers. At a rate of 71.4%, ELC teachers are satisfied with their teaching after classes. Their view of their students' motivation as impacting their teaching is of 71.4%. Findings also reveal the teachers' perceptions of student absenteeism to be a moderate factor influencing their motivation to teach English. With regards to the objectives, teachers expressed their understanding of the latter at a rate of 57.1%, while most of them agreed that they try to achieve the objectives by the end of each semester at 71.4%. The results show that 42.9% of the teachers think that they are responsible for the achievement of the students.

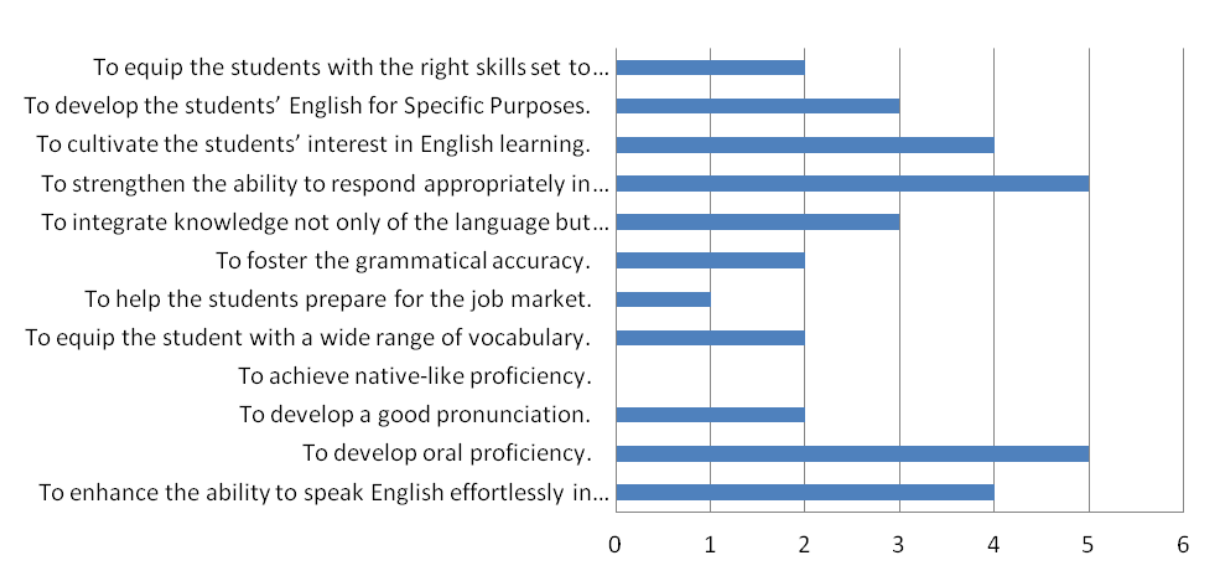


Figure 2: Unofficial Objectives

With regard to the attitudes towards students, teachers have expressed their agreement (71.4%) on the necessity to place students in appropriate levels. This is reflected in their response to the students' level and its impact on the teaching of ELC (58.2%). For an effective teaching, 71.4% strongly agree that students should be put in small groups. Likewise, 71.4% strongly agreed that their students consider that English, as a subject, to be secondary compared to the other undergraduate subjects they are taking.

5. Data Interpretation

Considering the findings collected from the questionnaire and the reflective group discussion, we can conclude that the majority of the teachers are aware of the objectives they think are appropriate for the teaching of ELC. However, the official objectives set by the departments remain ambiguous. The majority also agrees that the sole objective for the ELC teaching is of a communicative nature while expressing at the same time their frustration with the student's level.

The data have also exposed the challenges most teachers encounter, the major ones being lack of motivation among the students and absenteeism. In fact, the respondents explain these phenomena as being the result of the students' perception of English as a subject to be

secondary compared to their major undergraduate subjects. Their interest in learning English is poor since their focus is mainly drawn to the subjects of their majors of choice. It is important to highlight that these are solely teachers' perceptions. The latter also find that large classes with mixed abilities students are very challenging in the sense that they make the teaching of the language practically impossible. This again impacts not only the teachers' motivation but also the possibility to cover the entire syllabus and involve all the students in classroom activities. Consequently, it creates disequilibrium at the level of students' achievements.

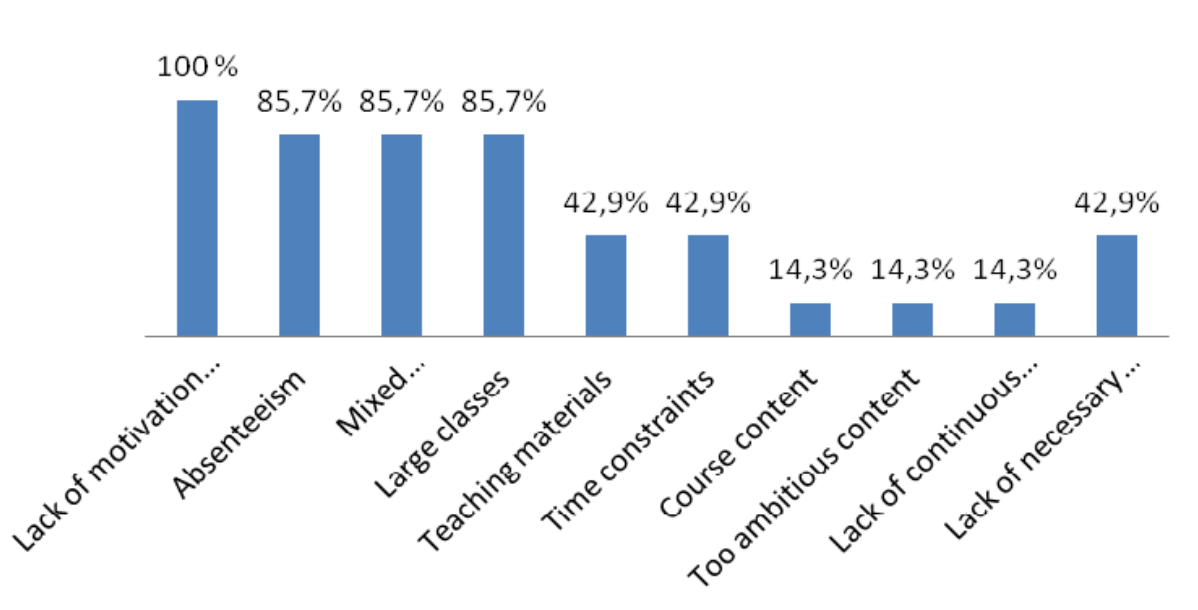


Figure 3: Challenges LC Teachers face

The respondents also expressed their concern about the time allotted to the teaching of English as an LC element. They assert that two hours a week for twenty four hours a term are definitely not enough to cover the four skills, finish the syllabus, and meet the objectives set. Also in cumulative terms, two semesters of English is not enough to improve the students' mastery of English very much, let alone to enable them to use it in a communicative way. Shortage of teaching equipment and facilities, which include access to internet, language laboratories, computers, speakers and boards prevent ELC teachers from performing their job effectively. A case in point is the poor quality of the boards which frustrates both students and teachers. Also when some equipment, such as speakers and laptops, is needed, teachers often have to bring their own. On the other hand, course content and continuous professional development do not present a serious challenge for the teachers.

In addition, the data reveal that the participants perceive their teaching as quite effective and that is thanks to the training they previously had as well as the experiences they acquired in actual teaching. They do not hold themselves responsible for the (low) achievements of their students and they especially stress the fact that their students' motivation significantly affects their (the teachers') own motivation, thereby influencing their teaching practices. Thus, teachers' attitude towards their teaching of English as an LC element is fairly positive. Per contra, their attitude towards their students is negative. Put differently, students' lack of motivation and interest in learning English leads to a high rate of absenteeism as it is a

complementary, hence secondary, subject. This frustrates the teacher especially at the end of the semester when students who have been absent throughout the semester show up for the final exam.

The fact that the students with mixed abilities are put in the same class presents yet another challenge for the teachers. They find it very hard to deliver the lessons at the same pace for both pre-intermediate and beginner levels. This dilemma is also depicted in the design of the exams meant for evaluation. The teacher has to design an exam that caters for both levels, resulting in pre-intermediates finding it fairly accessible and beginners hardly answering the exam questions. As a solution, teachers have proposed that students be placed in small groups within appropriate levels so as to guarantee effective language learning and teaching.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

To conclude, teachers of English Language and Communication at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in Rabat are reported to be dissatisfied with the current situation; they are facing numerous challenges which reportedly hinder their teaching performance and thus affect the students' learning. Students' absenteeism and lack of motivation have a great impact on these teachers' attitudes followed by insufficient teaching hours and lack of ICT equipment. Their dissatisfaction is justified by the fact that the teaching of English as a Foreign Language at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in Rabat is unstructured. It is given the least importance on the ground at a time when the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research publicly stresses its importance.

Such an apparent contradiction is inexplicable and calls for questioning the current reform *per se*; teachers at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences in Rabat are lost between the Ministry's policy and the actual implementation of the reform. Therefore, they urge policy-makers to take the necessary measures to improve the teaching of English not only at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences but also at all other open-access higher education institutions in the country. They also urge them to re-evaluate and modify the reform to make sure that the declared official objectives are met on the ground with the appropriate actions.

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