

Lebanese University English Department Curriculum: Keeping up with the Global English and Learners' Needs

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Abstract

English has grown to be the global language used for various purposes, such as educational, economic, political and marketing. English language programs at all educational levels around the world have been updated to cater for the market requirements and learners' needs. The trend has moved from treating the language as a solid entity of linguistic blocks to a flexible functional tool. English departments in the Humanities have been studied to see if they are keeping up with the theoretical and practical developments in the field. The English Department at Lebanese University, as part of the Faculty of Letters, updated its curricula in 2014 and is currently (2019) reviewing them. This research study aims at finding out whether the curriculum of the English Department at Lebanese University has kept up with the global need of English and whether it caters for the students' needs and aspirations.

Key words

Lebanese University, English department, English as a global language, curriculum development

Introduction

English as a global language

Back in 1994, Pennycook (1994) wrote that English was becoming one of the international languages, along with the top oral languages above 100 million speakers. Therefore English was not anymore the property of English-native speakers; English is a global language. In 2006, Crystal reported that there were approximately 400 million native speakers of English, 400 million speakers of English as a second language, and around 600-700 million English as a foreign language speakers. The report was in 2006, so one can assume that those numbers of speakers have grown since then. Crystal (2006) estimated that there are above 1.5 billion speakers of English globally. However, he clarified that the reason a language becomes global is not determined by the number of

people who speak it but by who the speakers are.

Starting from 1997, English has become a global language because of its historical context around the world, its cultural foundation which includes political developments and access to knowledge, and its the legacy- which includes international relations, travel, and safety- the media, education, and communications (Crystal, 2003). With globalization, knowledge of languages should be one of the strategic goals of public and private education. English as well as other languages are not considered “foreign” anymore. They are world languages specially at the time of globalization (Tochon, 2009).

In such a status quo of English, this paper raises the question whether the English department at Lebanese University offers a curriculum which prepares the students to use English as a global language in their future profession.

Review of the literature

The function of education

Education has been identified to have various functions. Parsons (1991) recognized it is a means for individuals training in motivation and knowledge to perform life functions. Durkheim (1992, 1984) emphasized the socialising function of education as vital for continuation and adjustment. Teichler (2000) described the socializing function to construct and shape values, attitudes and social and communicative competence pertinent in different socio-communicative contexts. The function refers to non-cognitive attributes and personal characteristics, such as particular status cultures, i.e. values, attitudes, vocabulary, aesthetic taste, and manners. Teichler (2000) added an educational function: the stimulation of cognitive, intellectual and systematic abilities as well as conveying general cultural knowledge, and a training function which provides specialized knowledge and competence that prepare students for future professional roles. Education in its socialising and qualifying functions is an investment that increases advantages that are expected to increase the individual’s ability to perform satisfactorily in the labour (Nilsson 2007). Parsons (1991) adds the cognitive ability to acquire information, and the moral aspect concerning discipline, appropriate behaviour, and work ethics. He proposed that education brings about the ability to function in a professional role, which is manifested in a higher position. The socialising and qualifying functions of education are not conflicting but complementary (Teichler,

2000).

English departments in the humanities

A question worth posing is whether the above mentioned functions of education have the way paved in the Humanities, and in particular in English departments. Schalin (2015a) reports contrasting ideas about the status of ‘humanities’ in the US. The media declare an escape from the humanities into other disciplines, and the academics deny any idea that the humanities are suffering from any sort of existential crisis. Schalin (2015a) studied English departments and their faculties in the University of North Carolina and reported a retreat from the English major, numerically and in dropping standards. However, he concluded that that the study of great literature that aims to understand its authors will not necessarily die; while many English departments may cater for students who just want any degree, others may continue in to their core to keep the traditional literary canon alive.

Schalin (2015b) contrasted the exposure to great literature in universities, which was considered essential for students in the 20th century to current English departments whose enrollment has diminished or remained stagnant which lead to the loss of their position at the center of the American university. English departments now lost their sense of purpose as ‘trendy’ topics have replaced great literary works. Flaherty (2018) reported a decline in numbers of majors but growth in new tracks, but of the specializations within major, literature is not doing well! Bachelor’s degrees in English majors have decreased 20 percent since 2012, but responsive departments that know how to market their worth to students can find means to flourish.

In Lebanon, the Department of English at American University of Beirut (AUB, 2019) states that it is the focal point of studying language and literature in a context of overlapping diasporas and multilingual traditions AUB . The English Department at University of Balamand (2019) states that the study of English prepares students for all professions. Graduates secure jobs in the commercial and government sectors because they understand social and cultural issues, and are trained in critical and analytical thinking, and acquire writing and communication skills. Employers in this rapidly changing job market, value the flexible thinking, resourcefulness and communication

skills of English graduates.

English Department at Lebanese University

At Lebanese University (UL), there have been attempts to update the curricula in all UL faculties to function parallel to higher education worldwide. The earlier program up to 2008 offered a four year program towards a degree of teaching English (License d'Enseignement) which was based on one academic year, a Master program of one year and a research project, and a doctorate degree based on research only (Lebanese University, 2013). The new system (Lebanese University, 2004) aimed to update: the degrees system, teaching methodologies, course description and student evaluation systems to parallel those in other countries, specially the European. The guidelines were French as many students choose to continue their higher studies there (Lebanese University, 2004). The hierarchy of the new European system offers three degrees: bachelor (license) of 180 credits spread over 6 semesters, Master of 120 credits, and PhD (Doctorat) of three years preparation. The L.M.D. (Licence, Master, and Doctorat) is based on the Anglo-Saxon system: Bachelor, Master, and PhD adapted by the European Union in 1999 (Lebanese University, 2004).

The Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences is a big faculty having more than half of UL students. The faculty started developing its curricula in 2004 according to the European LMD system and implemented it starting 2008 consecutively. The strategic change had to suit the advancement in sciences and workplace needs in Lebanon and other countries. New specialisations were initiated to push humanities forward and away from the concept of educational luxury and pure theoretical specialization (Lebanese University, 2008).

Purpose of the study

The different functions of education and the status of English departments in the humanities necessitated the study of the English curriculum at Lebanese University. This paper aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the changes that the curriculum of the English Department at Lebanese University has undergone?
- 2) Has the curriculum of the English Department in Lebanese University kept up with the global growth of English?

- 3) Do the English major students at Lebanese University find that the curriculum caters for the growth of the need for English as well as their needs and aspirations?

The Study

Instruments and collection of data

Three tools were used to answer the research questions. To answer the first research question, the tool was the record of the English Department curriculum at the UL administrative offices.

To answer the second research question, the General Coordinator of the Masters Program at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Dr Hind Adib who has witnessed the upgrading of the curricula at UL was interviewed. The questions were:

1. What were the major guidelines in the 2014 changes in the curriculum?
2. Do you believe the changes are keeping up with the general challenges of education worldwide?

To answer the third research question- whether the English major students at Lebanese University find that the curriculum caters for the growth of the need for English as well as their needs and aspirations- students in one department in one of the 5 branches of UL were emailed a questionnaire of three questions:

1. Do you believe the curriculum of the English Department has kept up with the international need to teach, learn and use English?
2. Do you believe that the curriculum of the English Department has equipped you to build your future career?
3. Do you believe that the curriculum caters for your needs and aspirations?

A representative of the students was contacted to send the questions via email, collect the responses to keep the students' identities anonymous, and to email back the results. The students who responded were: 3 third year students, 4 second year and 6 third year students.

Findings

Changes in the English Department Curriculum

First, the UL records show the following changes in the English Department curriculum. Table 1 presents the courses before 2008, i.e. before the changes were made, and the courses after 2014 after the minor changes were made to the updated curriculum.

Table 1 *English Department course offerings at UL*

Year	2008	Semester	2014
1 st	Novel and Drama Poetry and Prose Phonetics English Grammar and Composition Translation Arabic for Non-Specialists Second European Language Philosophy and Literature	1 st	Modern English Grammar Introduction to Linguistics Arabic 1 Introduction to Poetry General Technology Techniques of Expression and Study Skills
		Electives	Translation I Business English Introduction to sociolinguistics الأدب أنواعه ومذاهبه
		2 nd	Communication Arts Academic Writing Introduction to Drama Arabic 2 Introduction to Cultural Studies English Poetry (up to 1750)
		Electives	The Short Story الفلسفة والأدب الإنتشار الفينيقي
2 nd	Study Skills Romantic and Victorian Literature The English Novel up to the 18 th C. Society and Thought English Grammar and Composition Translation Introduction to Linguistics	3 rd	American Literature (Up to 1900) Phonetics and Phonemics Romantic & Victorian Poetry 18 th Century Novel Autobiography
		Electives	Translation 2 French 1 تاريخ الشرق الأقصى والحديث والمعاصر وحضارته
		4 th	Morphology and Syntax Shakespeare 19 th Century Novel Human Rights Advanced Cultural Studies
		Electives	Applied Linguistics أدب النهضة و المهجر Mythology and Archetypes * Free elective- from any department
3 rd	American Literature English Literature From Spencer to Milton 20 th Century Novel Shakespeare and His Contemporaries Morphology and Syntax Translation Methodology of Language Teaching	5 th	Literary Stylistics TEFL Common Principles of Research
		Literary	World Lit. Literary Criticism (Up to 1900) Modern British Novel
		Linguistic	Language Acquisition Language Change Text Analysis
		Electives	الأدب الشعبي British / American Travel Literature Arab-American/British Writers
4 th	Dryden to Johnson Modern Drama Modern Poetry	6 th	Literary Critical Approaches to Research in Literature Modern Literary Criticism Modern American Literature Special Topics in Literature Modern Poetry Modern Drama

Literary Criticism World Literature History of the English Language Linguistics II	Linguistic	Critical Approaches to Research in Linguistics History of the English Language Schools and Theories of Linguistics Special Topics in Linguistics Language Testing Semantics
	Electives	أدب الرحلات French 2 Images of the East in British/American Liter.

A study of Table 1 reveals that the four-year degree has become a three-year degree of six semesters. A closer look at the courses shows that some courses were divided into two courses, mainly to match the time factor which was 8 months per one academic year and became 15 weeks per semester. In the literature domain, courses on American and English literature still exist in all their genres: drama, poetry, novel and story but redistributed as ‘Introduction to Poetry’ and ‘Introduction to Drama’. New courses such as ‘Literary Stylistics’ and ‘Autobiography’ were added. ‘British / American Travel Literature’ and ‘Arab-American/British Writers’ were added as electives. In the Linguistics domain, ‘English Grammar and Composition’ was divided into ‘Modern English Grammar’ and ‘Academic Writing’. Phonetics, Morphology, Syntax, Methodology of teaching, and Linguistics remain to exist. New courses were added: Semantics, Business English, Introduction to Sociolinguistics, Language Change, and Text Analysis.

Two courses related to research were introduced: ‘Principles of Research’ and ‘Critical Approaches to Research’. Likewise, Information Technology gained an important status (2 courses). In the general domain, ‘Philosophy and Literature’ and ‘Society and Thought’ have been replaced by 2 ‘Cultural Studies’ courses. ‘Human Rights’ was added as a general requirement to all UL faculties. The teaching of languages retained its status. Arabic is still an obligatory course and French and Russian are electives among others from the Arabic, History and Philosophy departments. Moreover, the ‘free elective’ fostered the teaching of languages such as, Italian and German.

The rationale behind the changes in the curriculum

Second, the interview with the General Coordinator of the Masters Program: H. Adib revealed that the plan to develop the curriculum at UL started in 2004 but the changes were implemented starting 2008 consecutively, till 2011. Minor changes were

added in 2014 (interview, October 7, 2019). The rationale was to have a curriculum parallel to the European LMD higher education system and to provide better job opportunities for the new generation. The fear was that the UL degrees would not be accredited abroad if they were kept the same. Dr Adib added that there are some changes being currently studied by the committees. The focal point is targeting modern time jobs specially in the Professional Master; these include according to the Lebanese University document 2008: editing, journalistic writing, administering educational activities such as conferences, media and audio visual programs, chairing round tables in book exhibitions, and teaching special English in higher education (H. Adib, interview, October 7, 2019). The coordinator named few problems that faced the implementation of the new curriculum: Lack of space, i.e. classroom supply, and teacher training.

The English major students' opinion

Third, the students' responses are presented according to the students' year of enrollment. Among the first-year students, one of the three students had negative responses to all questions, the second felt it was too early to judge and that students need to know more about the curriculum, and the third wrote that he/she is content with the curriculum and that the courses are 'advanced, some are hard but useful'.

The 4 second-year students expressed their fear that the content of the courses, mainly literature, doesn't prepare them for their future career- teaching, and they would like to know about other possible jobs in this field. Some wrote that the curriculum is 'rigid, not flexible, concise, and limited'. They suggested more practical work in the courses to benefit more in teaching, and one respondent called for creative writing.

Third-year students believed that the curriculum prepares them fairly well for research but advised the research courses to be given in the first year. Few talked about the need for more 'diversity' in the linguistics courses earlier in the curriculum so they can choose what track to follow. They expressed their wishes to have more applied linguistics courses that could guide them better to teaching. One expressed his/her satisfaction in the literature courses but claimed for better benefit from Academic Writing. In general students aspired more content and practice in the courses than they received from the curriculum.

Discussion

The changes in the English Department curriculum show development in the content area where more specialized courses have been introduced. The amendments do not reveal any deterioration in the value of 'humanities'. On the contrary, each epoch and literary genre now has a specific course for a limited period of time: a semester, instead of its being combined with others.

Moreover, the changes were made to secure more job opportunities for the graduates of the English department, especially at the Master level where the professional Master was introduced. As the current head of the English Curriculum committee, I can say that the members and I aim at incorporating new trends in English, such as suggesting 'modern' courses: digital humanities and digital linguistics.

The students acknowledged positive aspects in the major courses though they had some criticism to the way the classes were carried out. Maybe this requires some professional training to the professors in these departments.

Conclusion

Finally, the choice of educational profile is a significant choice an individual makes. Education today is the most important determinant of how far an individual will advance in society (Brint, 1994). Higher education is a necessity for acquiring certain social positions in society and practicing some professions. Humanities should be a vital source to respond to the current international professional and social requirements of a world where English is the global language. English departments specifically have to correspond to respond to the student' need to incorporate in all the current professions. The English Department at Lebanese University has set preliminary steps in keeping up with the worldwide educational and professional development and still has to keep striving.

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