

Assessing the State of English Departments in Lebanon

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Abstract

Some studies in the United States (such as Schalin 2015 a & b; Bunch 2010, 2013; Bailey and Butler 2003) reported that the number of students studying English as their major has declined. It is significant to see whether the Lebanese context where English is a foreign language is comparable. All universities in Lebanon offer degrees in English language and literature and expect graduates to become teachers of English. The paper aims at finding out whether English departments at universities in Lebanon are at the risk of witnessing a serious decline, and to what extent is English as a major chosen by high school students. Data were collected to find out recent enrollment in four English departments and high school students' opinions about choosing teaching English as a career. The results are presented and compared to those in the review of literature and recommendations are made.

Key words

English departments, Humanities, student enrollment, future career

Introduction

There have been some alarming reports that English departments are fading away in the field of humanities. Schalin (2015 a & b), Bunch (2010, 2013), and Bailey and Butler (2003) reported that the number of students studying English as their major has recently declined rapidly. Schnapp et al. (2014 a & b) predicted that current English literature departments among other literature and Classics departments will die out soon.

The status quo of English departments in English-dominant countries, specifically the United States, which is generally seen to be in decline necessitated the study of enrollment in English departments in Lebanon. Lebanon is one of the very few countries where foreign language education, English or French, is introduced at the

kindergarten level in state-sponsored schools and the medium of instruction in mathematics and sciences in the intermediate and secondary cycles (Shaaban, 1997). Thus English is taught for academic purposes (EAP) which is defined as “the language used in school to help students acquire and use knowledge” (DiCerbo, Anstrom & Baker 2014). Thonhauser (2000) reported a shift from the preference of French towards English as a language of instruction.

The status of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Lebanon has necessitated the existence of English departments at university level. All the universities in Lebanon have English departments that offer BA and MA degrees to future English language teachers who are expected to teach EFL.

Purpose of the study

Therefore, this paper aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) Is the decline in enrollment true for English Departments in universities in Lebanon?
- 2) Do high school students choose English among other fields as a major at the university level?

Review of the Literature

The enrollment in English departments

Jay Schalin (2015b) wrote that the discipline of English, which he defined as the study and analysis of literature, has witnessed intense changes over the last 50 years which touched every aspect: the curriculum, philosophy, pedagogy and purpose. He added that the discipline has lost its status at the center of the academy and the rate of change is expected to increase in the next decade especially with the competition for high-income jobs. Schalin (2015b) reported that there is 19% growth of increase in English degrees awarded, though it is the lowest among the other majors. He explained that English degree holders earn the lowest salaries (\$25,511 in 2007-8) specially compared to communication majors (\$37,318) who in turn earn less than other majors (\$52,019).

Schalin (2015a) also raised the issue whether the idea of humanities suffering from an existential crisis is all about publicity. He reported that enrollment in English departments is dropping and standards are falling behind despite some points of

excellence. He reported that they are not going to close up soon. At most University of North Carolina schools, there is no decline in the English major, like other universities such as at the University of Maryland where the number of English majors decreased by 40 percent from 2012 to 2014.

Greteman (2014) seems to agree at first that the humanities have been dying for a long time and the earlier source of this idea was Professor Whittemore's statement in *The New Republic* in 1970 "English is going down the drain". However, Whittemore (in Greteman, 2014) reported that the number of BA degrees in 1950 was 17,240, in 1971 the number increased to 64,342, and in 1980s it was 53,767; and 295,221 students per year graduate with humanities degrees. Moreover, Greteman (2014) reported that despite all warnings, most English majors also secure jobs; "English majors had 2 percent lower unemployment than the national rate... English ranks just above business administration as a "major that pays you back... engineers and dentists still earn more than English majors" (p 2).

Marx (2017) claimed that English major graduates acquire skills in communication and writing that are needed for various fields, thus find jobs in teaching, journalism, editing and publishing, and public relations. These graduates learn to present, convince, analyse, argue, debate, write and evaluate. Marx (2017) reported that University of California Davis English graduates- when asked what they can do with an English major- answered that they were journalists, veterinarians, social media directors and teachers- who won awards, and had careers in the U.S. armed forces, medicine and the law. Graduates of English also work in science jobs; "A surprising number of our students head to medical or veterinary school. Medical schools are increasingly recruiting English majors" (Marx 2017, p 5).

There are various reasons for the reported decline in English departments. Regarding economic and job and income security factors, de Courcy (2007) wrote that students nowadays may plan for a career with a good income more than aim to become educated. Schalin (2015 a & b) claimed that in this age students want to secure future employment when new forms of communication are arising. In relation to educational reasons, Schalin (2015 a & b) believed that English departments have students enrolled just to earn a degree. Greteman (2014) viewed the problem in the struggle between traditionalists who refuse to adapt to a changing world and use contemporary media platforms, and digital humanists who adopt new trends.

Moreover, Pulizzi (2014) believed that the status of literature departments would be less significant as long as they hold on to printed texts. Schalin (2015b), added that technology, which in its rapid progress, is erasing the uniqueness of literary study, especially in educational institutions that do not distinguish between English and communications departments. According to Schalin (2015a), much of the decline of the English discipline is self-inflicted as it moved away from the centre of the greatest works of English, American, and European literature, either to attract students or for political reasons. Schalin (2015a) explained political reasons as a destructive force in the humanities though activism is not supposed to enter into a college classroom.

The Study

To answer the research questions stated above, three means of collecting data were used: (1) records about the enrollment in English departments from four universities, (2) a high school students' questionnaire, and (3) an interview with Humanities high school students.

Instruments

To collect information about the status of English as a major in four Lebanese universities, a count of student enrollment in English departments since 2008 was obtained from Lebanese University (UL)- the only national university- second branch, Notre Dame University (NDU), Arab Open University (AOU) and American University of Beirut (AUB).

To find out EFL high school students' interest in majoring in English a questionnaire of ten questions was constructed after reading the literature.

The interview was used to find out five Humanities/Socio-economics (SE) students' attitude towards their field of study and the reasons for choosing it. The questions were: 1) Why did you choose to be in the SE section? 2) What do you see your future profession to be? 3) Would you consider to major in English?

Participants

Participants in this study were a total of 75 volunteer students in grades 10, 11 and 12. They were 38 males and 37 females and their age ranged between 14 and 18. They are students learning EFL in a private school in Mount Lebanon. Grade 11 is composed

of 2 sections: Humanities and Sciences; Grade 12 is composed of three sections: Socio-economics (SE), General Sciences (GS) and Life Sciences (LS). The school in which the participants were enrolled is a typical average private school in Lebanon. The school does not offer a Humanities section. For some common and untrue educational and social beliefs, the society, including parents and learners themselves, as well as some educators consider the scientific sections- GS and LS- for the bright students. Consequently below-average students are channeled into the other two sections.

Findings

Enrollment in English departments

The following figure shows the number of students enrolled in the English departments in the four universities between 2008 and 2017.

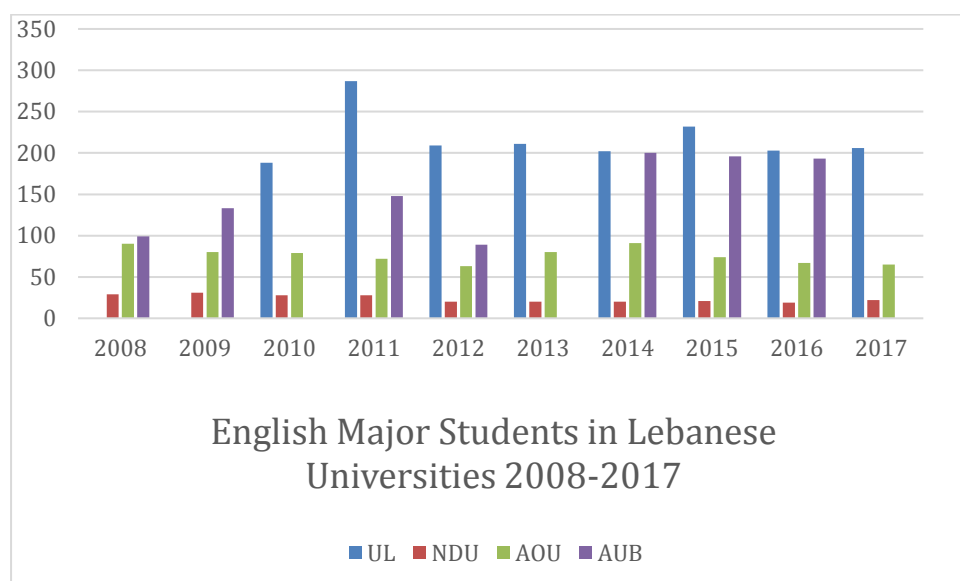


Figure 1. The number of students majoring in English departments in universities in Lebanon between 2008 and 2017

In UL- Second Branch- the number of students enrolled in the English department between 2010-2011 and 2017-2018 ranged between 202 as the lowest and 287 as the highest in 2011-2012; however there is no sign that the number has decreased as it was 188 students in 2010-2011 and 206 in 2017-2018.

The number of NDU students enrolled in the English department between 2000 and 2017 ranged between 19 as the lowest and 38 as the highest in the years 2003 and 2004; there is a decrease in the enrollment between 2000 (27 students) and 2017 (22 students) but may not be sharp.

The number of AOU students enrolled in the English department was 22 in 2002, kept rising to reach the highest (104) in 2007, and declining till it reached 63 in 2012, but then fluctuated till it reached 65 students in 2017.

The AUB count shows that the number of students enrolled in the English department between 2008-2009 and 2016-2017 increased from a total of 99 students to 193 students.

In general, the number of enrollment in English departments varied according to universities and years. There may be a decline in students' enrollment in some years but there is no clear pattern.

Students' responses to the questionnaire

To the question *What field of study do you choose to specialise in at the university level?* the highest number of responses was for Engineering for the three grade levels- 37 out of 75 (49.3%) and males showed more interest in this field. The lower numbers of responses for other fields (Natural science=18; Humanities & Arts=14; Social Sciences=13; Economics=12; Policy=6) can be explained by that few students choose to be in the Humanities sections in Grades 11 and 12. Students in general prefer to be in the GS and LS. In Grade 10, the number of responses is more spread to other fields probably because there are no sections at this level, i.e. students are not divided into Humanities/Sciences nor GS, LS, SE.

To the question *What career do you choose?* responses were similar to those in the earlier question. Science/Technology came first in the students' choices (40 out of 75). Business and Health came next (21 and 16). Humanities fields came last (Government/ Non-profit= 11; Law=3; Education=2; Other: Pilot, Fashion design/art, Journalism/ media=4). It is worth observing that male participants had more responses on Science/ Technology than females. This may be interpreted as a social expectation which allocates scientific fields for men and social communicative fields for women. Students' response to the question *What are the reasons for your choice?* indicated that financial security came first (38); job security comes next (24) , and last were

Social prestige (5) and Parents' influence (3). It is worth noting the difference in Female/Male difference in the choice- Male participants had more responses to the first- Job security- than females who had more responses in the second- Job satisfaction. This is explained by the fact that the males expect to be responsible for the family and thus want to secure a stable income while the females are not expected to be the breadwinners.

To the question *What is the importance of English for your future career?* and 8: *What is the importance of English for social communication?* students perceived English as important for their future career as well as social communication. The numbers of choices were much higher on the scales 4 and 3 (Extremely important and Important) versus Neutral and Not important (Q 7: 62 vs 9; Q8: 59 vs 10). Male respondents reported more positively on the two questions than females. The students' awareness of the importance of English is expected to serve as a motivation for students to study the language, perhaps for instrumental reasons such as passing a course or securing a job opportunity, and not as a major.

To the question *Would you choose English language and literature as your major?* the students' response with 'No' (Grade 10= 20; Grade 11= 21; Grade 12= 17) was much higher than those with 'Yes' (Grade 10= 7; Grade 11= 3; Grade 12= 2). Some explained that they consider English important in helping them in their careers but not as a major. There was no difference in the responses according to gender.

Students' responses to the question *What job(s) do you see fit for students who major in English language and literature?* varied and came in the following sequence: Teaching came first in the three grades 35 times; Translating came first 12 times; Journalism came first 9 times; Copywriting came first 8 times; Editing came first 5 times. The results may be a reflection of the old and common stereotypical view of what a graduate of a language department- specifically here the English departments- may have as a career. Translation and Journalism are well-known majors, editing and copywriting are parts of other degrees such as professional masters in English.

The students' response to the interview

The five students in Grade 12, SE section who volunteered to respond to the questionnaire also volunteered to be interviewed. They all reported that they did not

choose to be in this section as their grades did not allow them to be in the scientific sections. Two of them aimed to become teachers- though did not know in what subject- and one showed interest in becoming a preschool tutor. The other two were not sure what they wanted to be. As to their interest in English as a major, two reluctantly said 'maybe'. The two others preferred to major in Arabic and the third expressed interest in becoming a bank clerk. No one reported that they thought of becoming translators, editors or journalists if they major in English! The five respondents reported they wanted to make a 'good income' to survive, but they did not have much choice in their major either because of their grades or because of the location of the universities; they opted for nearby faculties.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings above allow the answering of the two research questions.

1) Is the decline in enrollment true for English Departments in universities in Lebanon?

The number of students enrolled in English departments fluctuated in four Lebanese universities across the years but has remained at a similar level. The fluctuation may be a reflection of economic and political factors- such as the raising enrollment fees and the instability of daily life situations. This may probably keep affecting the future of English language teaching at local and regional levels. So, the enrollment in English Departments at least in Lebanon does not seem to be decreasing in the manner that was presented in some research studies.

2) Do high school students choose English among other fields as a major at the university level?

In general, the respondents revealed their interest in scientific fields to maintain a certain financial income and secure a 'good' future career. They realise they need English for different purpose in life- career and social, but are not interested in English as a major.

Recommendations

The critical question is how to maintain and enhance enrollment in English departments. First, the Humanities discipline in general may need to be revived in a way to attract the attention of more students to major and maintain interest in related

fields such as English language and literature. Second, the curriculum of the English departments needs to be examined to see if it provides a challenging content. If not, educators have to consider amending it to attend to the students' needs but not to lose its essence. Parallel to this is to investigate whether the methodology and techniques of teaching and learning materials meet the students' learning needs. Students nowadays have access to a huge amount of sources via different means. Third, high school graduates are to become aware of what the content of English degrees and need to be consulted what they expect it to be. This can be done by school orientation sessions that channel the students in different fields of study and not only scientific fields.

Greteman (2014) wrote: The Humanities? It's alive. With more research in this educational field, educators can offer English academic programs that ensure the enrollment of more students as well as involving them in the learning process and maintaining their interest.

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