

## **The Status of English Departments in Lebanon: Enrolment and Suggestions for Enhancement**

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### **Abstract**

Although English has grown to be the dominant language of the century, recent studies reveal that the percentage of students in the English department has declined. This paper gives an overview of the situation of the English departments in general and in Lebanon in particular. It examines some of the problems they face. It also shows whether college students are interested in studying English as a major or not. The paper also highlights the importance of English graduates in a globalized world. Several heads of English departments of different Lebanese universities are interviewed for the purpose of finding out more about their departments-percentage of enrolment, problems and solutions. The paper also tackles the issue of career possibilities after graduation. More importantly, it puts forward a list of suggestions and some enhancements that could help attract more students in the future without bringing in any serious changes in the material taught.

**Key words:** English as a global language, problems of English departments, enrolment in English departments, English language and literature major, career paths

## **Introduction**

English has become the global language of the century. McCrum (1986) considers it the “first truly global” language since it has invaded almost all sectors and is used for different purposes mainly communication (in McArthur, 2004, p.10). It has become the most favoured foreign language of almost all countries of the world due to historical, political, commercial, cultural, or technological contact (Crystal, 2003, p. 5). Crystal (2012) believes that almost one third of the world population has the ability of communicating in English (in Allington & Mayor, 2012, p. 91). Actually, Graddol (2006) was not wrong at all when he envisaged knowing English as a basic skill (in Allington & Mayor, 2012, p. 91). For Al-Muraqab (2012), the majority of professional job vacancies in Yemen require fluency and proficiency in English whether the skill is needed on the job or not. In addition to being a necessary skill, majoring in English witnessed high enrolment in the 1990s and early 2000. Lebanon, a multicultural and multilingual country in the Middle East, has already noticed the significance of English as a global language. The former minister of Education, Mr. Hassan Diab reported to Annahar that he could not imagine anyone graduating from high school without knowing any English (Raybaudo, 2015). Few decades back, Lebanon was well known for its francophone nature where the majority of students were enrolled in French medium schools. Now, the percentages have changed. According to the statistics conducted by the Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD) in 2018, the percentage of students enrolled in French schools has lowered from 60.24% in 2011-2012 to 56.61% in 2016-2017. As a result, the percentage of students enrolled in English schools has increased from 39.7% in 2011-2012 to 43.39% in 2016-2017 (The Education Landscape in Lebanon 2016-2017, 2018, p. 4). It is worth noting that learners in Lebanon do not study English for educational purposes only; in some cases it is all about ‘prestige’ (Bacha & Bahous, 2011, p. 1321).

## **Statement of the Problem**

Although English is the language of the century, many universities in USA, Canada, and Europe claim that the enrolment numbers in the Humanities and English majors have declined. This research study sheds light on the status of the English departments in Universities in Lebanon and checks whether the number of students majoring in English Language and Literature has declined.

## **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the status of English Departments in Lebanon, to find out whether students are interested in majoring English, to highlight the importance of English in finding career possibilities after graduation

The following are the research questions to be answered:

RQ1. Are English Departments in Lebanese Universities witnessing any decline in enrolment?

RQ2. Are students in Lebanon interested in majoring in English?

RQ3. What are the career possibilities English graduates get after graduation?

RQ4. What are the propositions that could revive enrolment in the English Department?

## **Decline of the English Departments**

Although English has grown to be the dominant language of the century, recent studies reveal that the percentage of students enrolling in the Humanities in general and majoring in English in particular has declined (Brooks, 2013, p. 1; Chase, 2009, p. 1; Klinkenborg, 2013, p. 1; Weisbuch, 2000, p. 1). For instance, the number of students that graduated with a BA in English Literature from Yale dropped from 165 students in 1991 to 62 students in 2012 (Klinkenborg, 2013, p. 1). Between 2011 and 2014, the English department at the University

of Maryland-College Park lost 363 students which is almost 40% drop in student enrolment (Flaherty, 2015, p. 1).

Although some professors believe that it is difficult to pinpoint the actual factors that contribute to the decline, it can be attributed to choice of “practical majors”, salary gap, high tuition, and parent pressure (Flaherty, 2015, p. 2). According to Whalen and Shelley (2010), as enrolment in the humanities department declines, it increases in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields which Flaherty (2015) calls “practical majors”. In addition, student enrolment in the English department has declined due to salary gap. According to statistics Canada, on average, per year, an engineer, math, or computer science graduate earns \$20,000 to \$30,000 more than an English graduate (Anderson, 2015, p. 2; Chiose, 2017, p. 2; Weisbuch, 2000, p. 1). Moreover, as enrolment percentages in the English department decreases, the federal fund in most countries decreases as well as a result of which tuition fees start soaring. Hence, students think thoroughly and consider all the factors before making any decision about their choice of major. They try to avoid debts that they incur and might not be able to pay after graduation (Chase, 2009, p. 5; Flaherty, 2015, p. 3; Kolodny, 2005, p. 154; Lewin, 2013, p. 3). As a result, parents try to convince their children to go for STEM instead of humanities. Parents of English major students are constantly worried asking themselves and their children what English major is good for (Anderson, 2015, p. 2; Klinkenborg, 2013, p. 1).

### **The Significance of English Graduates in a Globalized World**

What is English major good for (Klinkenborg, 2013, p. 1)? This is a question that people often ask whenever they meet someone majoring in English Language and/or Literature. Steve Jobs answers this question by saying that “It is in Apple’s DNA that technology alone is not enough—it’s technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that

yields us the results that make our heart sing” (in Jackson-Hayes, 2015, p. 1). Al-Muraqab (2012) admits the fact that English has a significant role in today’s global world. Whether columnists, educators, linguists, or government personnel, they all agree that majoring in English offers much more than a degree. Majoring in English grants students and future graduates the skills that they need in today’s demanding job market. In fact, they learn not only theory but also skills. Some of the skills that every English major graduate gains are communication skills, writing skills, research skills, critical thinking skills, empathy, speaking fluently, persuasion, broad vocabulary, meeting deadlines, constructive criticism, grammar, spelling, close reading, analytical reasoning, and many others (Flaherty, 2015; Griswold, 2013; Lewin, 2013; Martinuzzi, 2013). According to Chiose (2017), “Alumni recognize that they gained project management skills, but a student in progress does not always realize what they are acquiring” (p. 3). To sum things up, the approaches adopted by language and humanities instructors and professors provide students with the necessary skills that any employer looks for (Anderson, 2015, p. 2). For example, a lawyer with a degree in English has the advantage of describing their case more thoroughly and using different persuasive techniques. A physicist with an English degree can explain their theory in simpler words and can make it more accessible to the public.

## **Methodology**

The type of research employed in this study is qualitative which mainly relies on verbal data. For the purpose of data collection, two interviews have been conducted: one with university professors using a list of nine questions and another with MA students majoring in English. The conversations with the professors were recorded using a tape recorder. The interviewees were the following:

### *1. Professors*

- a. Dr. Rula Diab: Chairperson of the English Department at the Lebanese American University, Beirut and Byblos. The interview was conducted on Friday, June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018 at 10 am in her office in Beirut. It was 19 minutes long.
- b. Dr. Rula Yazigy: Chairperson of the English Department at the Lebanese University, Branch II, Fanar. The interview was conducted on Thursday, July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018 at 10 am in her office. It was 15 minutes long.
- c. Dr. Hayat AlKhatib: Chairperson of the English Department at the Arab Open University, Lebanon Branch. The interview was conducted on Thursday, July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018 at 11:30 am in her office in Beirut. It was 15 minutes long.

### *2. English Major Students*

- a. Graduates of 2016, 2017, and 2018 of the English Language Department at the Arab Open University, Lebanon branch.
- b. MA students of 2017 and 2018 of the English Language and Literature Department at the Lebanese University, Branch II, Fanar.
- c. Among the English major students I taught during the last three years, approximately 50% have chosen teaching as a career, while the other 50% has gone in different career paths such as animator, waiter, online money transfer officer, personal assistant to the CEO of Atamian company in the head office, author, freelance on the Lebanese MTV English website, editor, community manager at Virgin Radio, social media executive, copywriter, and translator.

## **Results of Interviews**

### *Heads of Departments*

In response to the question about the enrolment in the English department, Dr. Rula Yazigy, reported that enrolment numbers have not changed. The only difference is that they cannot be as selective as before. Previously they chose 100 candidates from 250 applicants; now they take all 100 applicants (R. Yazigy, personal communication, July 2, 2018). Dr. Rula Diab stated that although the number of enrolment is low compared to other departments such as Business and Science, they still have a good number of students enrolling in the English department (R. Diab, personal communication, June 22, 2018). Nevertheless, Professor Hayat AlKhatib informed that enrolment has decreased (H. AlKhatib, personal communication, July 2, 2018). She believes that students nowadays are less committed to what they do. She believes that students are more focused on earning a degree than building a career (H. AlKhatib, personal communication, July 2, 2018). In fact, the negative attitude students have is towards learning in general and not the English Department in particular. They are less mature and responsible than they used to be (R. Yazigy, personal communication, July 2, 2018).

Regarding the question about the students' attitude towards English courses in general, Dr. Diab explained that it is those who come from other departments that have a negative attitude towards the English classes. She explained that the English department does not only present courses to those who specialize in English Language and Literature, but also to those who major in other disciplines such as Medicine, Business, Marketing, Psychology, etc. During those classes, students are taught skills that are considered essential and fundamental in writing any research paper such as paraphrasing, summarizing, using the APA format, etc. In order to avoid that negative attitude, she believes that the skills they learn in the English

classes should be enforced in the other major classes as well (R. Diab, personal communication, June 22, 2018).

As for the question about why students in Lebanon refuse majoring in English, the interviewees agreed that they are the same reasons that students face in other parts of the world mainly low salary compared with other degree holders (H. AlKhatib, personal communication, July 2, 2018), attitude of parents, cultural restrictions, and “waste of money” (R. Diab, personal communication, June 22, 2018).

Regarding the question about the importance of English graduates in today’s globalized world, Professor AlKhatib, Dr. Yazigy, and Dr. Diab all agreed that in today’s globalized world English language graduates are extremely important. Dr. Diab stated that the world needs the skills that English graduates possess. For her, the skills students learn in the English class such as skimming, scanning, analyzing, speaking, writing, researching, etc. are skills that they are going to need regardless of their major or future work since they will always have to communicate effectively in English (R. Diab, personal communication, June 22, 2018). Dr. Yazigy suggested that English graduates are needed to teach those who are not professionals in the field (R. Yazigy, personal communication, July 2, 2018). Professor AlKhatib added saying that if the world needs English, then it should be taught professionally at all levels (H. AlKhatib, personal communication, July 2, 2018).

Concerning the question what English major students can do after graduation, the interviews revealed two controversial opinions. While Professor AlKhatib and Dr. Diab responded saying that English graduates are capable of more than just teaching (H. AlKhatib, personal communication, July 2, 2018; R. Diab, personal communication, June 22, 2018), Dr. Yazigy stated that that is only possible at the B.A. level. She believes that the higher students go into specialization in the English field itself, the harder it gets to do something else. Hence, they can only teach (R. Yazigy, personal communication, July 2, 2018).



### *English Major Students*

During a conversation with Myriam, the freelance on the Lebanese MTV English website, she has stated that TV stations hire lots of language graduates because of their fluency in the language, grammar, language rules, and skills. They hire not only English graduates but also Arabic and French. Hence, studying languages is considered highly essential.

In addition, Charline, another English MA Professional student with a B.A. in Translation, states that as she sees it, if people have a reasonable knowledge in any language and have studied English, they can easily work as English Translators since the job requires a deep understanding of the source language only but strong writing skills in English.

### **Suggestions for Reviving the Discipline**

For the purpose of anticipating any serious problems that the Humanities in general and English Departments in particular might face in the future and for the purpose of attracting more students, some proposals and ideas are suggested hoping that they could be useful and helpful.

- Redesigning the department webpage. The university/department website is the first thing that students encounter. Flaherty (2015) suggests that making it less information-based and more of a recruitment tool.
- Reconstructing the curriculum. Flaherty (2015) and Sabrowsky (2018) suggest redesigning the courses offered and making them more “career marketable” and “recruitment-oriented”. Dr. Diab has informed that LAU has already started doing that. Two years ago they made big changes in the curriculum. It includes courses that are more skill based rather than theory such as writing critique, literature review, etc. They have also created and included other “timely” courses such as Language in the

Media, Language and Gender, Creative Writing, and Script Writing (R. Diab, personal communication, June 22, 2018).

- Gathering data/information about the graduates. Weisbuch (2000) claims that universities do not know where their graduates get jobs. In fact, some of them prefer not knowing since they are incapable of providing them with job opportunities.
- Making personal career plans. Ma (2011) believes that students who join the English department with a clear career plan in mind find jobs easier. These people know what they want and look for accordingly.
- Integrating practice into course design. Ma (2011) suggests that it is essential to provide students with some internship experience where they can practice the language and the skills they have gained. It also gives them the chance to be discovered by potential employees in the society. Through my experience as an instructor, many students have expressed their frustration saying that only Education students are asked to do internship.
- Giving certificates for skills students have mastered. Chace (2009) believes that this is a good step towards better employment. Students can carry those certificates to their job interviews hence presenting proof for the skills they have worked hard. For example, in some universities, “Teaching Methodology” is a course requirement for graduation. Nevertheless, they have no certificate that proves it. Consequently, they are constantly asked to do a “Teaching Diploma” (TD) after graduation in order to get a teaching position.
- Inviting English major alumni working in other fields/disciplines to share their experience. Those talks in most cases are considered as motivation boosters and inspirational.

- Including more practical courses. In addition to theory, it is considered helpful if students are given courses that teach skills such as copywriting, editing, education based information technology (IT), script writing, etc. During the interview conducted, Dr. Yazigy informed that for that purpose the English department at the Lebanese University (II) has the MA Professional Program where all the skills and courses mentioned above are taught. It facilitates students being employed in career paths other than teaching.
- Bringing in job fairs that hire English major students such as publishing houses, newspapers, social media managers, online papers, United Nations, printing houses that prepare brochures and posters, media representatives, advertisement companies, training companies, etc. On more than one occasion, my English major students have complained that other departments are given more attention than theirs. They can rarely find company representatives that are interested in English graduates.
- Having a career officer at the university that finds jobs for students after graduation. These officers can be the bridge between students and institutions. They can visit schools or their websites all the time and check their vacancies.
- Organizing workshops during which students learn new skills and how to integrate them in other careers.
- Offering tenure-track job opportunities. Most universities offer MA/PhD scholarships; however, very few offer tenure-track jobs (Kolondy, 2005, p. 156). Chiose (2017) states that universities avoid hiring tenure-track faculty members to replace the retiring ones. They hire seasonal instructors whenever there is demand. This feeling of instability enlarges the gap between the potential students and the English.
- Organizing campaigns. Such strategies attract students by devising short promotional videos, going to schools, using social media especially Instagram since Facebook is

kind of “obsolete” for younger teens, holding open houses and participating in educational expositions (R. Diab, personal communication, June 22, 2018; R. Yazigy, personal communication, July 2, 2018).

- Organizing summer camps and speech writing competitions. LAU offers tuition discounts as a prize incentive.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Based on the interviews conducted with all the personnel mentioned above, while some believe that Lebanon does not go through the same decline as in USA, Canada, and Europe, others have a different opinion. For the general public, the misconception is that what English graduates do is teaching. In reality, there is much more than that. Actually, Meyers (2016) believes in “connecting the skills and mindsets of literary analysis to diverse career paths” (p. 2). According to the websites of the University of Cambridge in UK and University of Nebraska in USA, those who have majored in English can be journalists, editors, grant specialists, speech writers, publication managers, research analysts, personal managers, information officer educators, secretaries, copywriters, and librarians. They can also work in the fields of marketing, advertising, and public relations.

In conclusion, no matter what people do or study, they always need a language to help them express their ideas. As members of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, knowing English has become a must. Mark Edmunson, a columnist in the Chronicle of Higher Education states, “Becoming an English major means pursuing the most important subject of all-being a human being” (in Gregoire, 2017, p. 4). His point of view was also stated and assured by all three interviewees. They have admitted the fact that the human aspect of teaching English and the relationship between society and language have been their greatest motive to study English.

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