

University of Abderrahmane Mira, Bejaia

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Introduction

In this article, we are going to present some details about the educational reform at the level of higher education (i.e. University level) taking the case of the University of Abderrahmane Mira, Bejaia. After a year of its application, we aim at mapping out the problems we have met during the last academic year and trying to find out the possible solutions. Our study is carried out in the English Department at the university of Bejaia and the subjects are first year level students inscribed in the new applied system in Algeria, i.e. the Licence/Master/Doctorat system (LMD). Our ultimate objective is to find out how LMD students of English have perceived and lived their new experience under the reign of the LMD system. Moreover, our aim is to establish the link between the efforts done to make this reform a success and the encountered problems which made this task difficult at all levels.

1. Literature Review

This reform is intended to let the Algerian educational system and research go hand in hand with the international ones. Thus, the Algerian educational reform is an example of how our government tries to apply identical systems of most developed countries.

The application of the LMD system in Algeria is considered as a step towards Globalisation because this Anglo-Saxon programme has proved its success and it has, more or less, been adopted by most European countries and even a considerable number of other countries of the world. This system has been applied right from some year ago in Morocco before its application in Algeria. However, it has been included in only the universities that accepted piloting it and

which Bejaia University is amongst.

Here, we need to present some information about the LMD system structure though not much literature is available given its newness in our educational setting. First of all, we shall hint at the decision-making procedure that our government followed prior putting it into practice. Before taking a final decision and drafting an official document, there was a consultation of a large number of teachers of higher education (more than 60) coming from about 10 universities¹. The document has been the fruit of a serious debate of about one year. Most of the engaged partners (where students have been associated in some cases) did their best to make this enterprise succeed just for the sake of encouraging the future well being of the Algerian university. This would permit for the first time in a decade period to initiate considerable changes by first the teachers themselves. The innovation that the Algerian universities are going to apply permits a real re-foundation of the programmes which have been somehow inadequate to the development of the world and science as well.

Of course, because of the newness of this system in the Algerian educational system, it seems relevant to represent some of its key components to help the reader be more included in the Algerian openness towards development. We shall first introduce the three constituent elements of the system. It is made of the Licence with 6 semesters (three years of study and the equivalence of the BA i.e. Bachelor Degree), a Master degree of two years (4 semesters) is the second phase whereas the last period is the Doctorate studies of three years of research (6 semesters). In every semester, students are expected to attend 400 hours in a 16 week period (i.e. 25 hours per week).

As afore-said, before starting this system officially, there has been a long discussion held by teachers of higher education. The decision is the product of more than a year of debate which took place in many universities naming Annaba and Constantine. The aim behind changing the system of teaching in our educational system at university level is to create an overall innovation within the Algerian universities to permit them follow the flow of real foundations adequate with the evolution of not only scientific research and educational techniques, but the world as well. This is, of course, a salient matter for the possibility to speak the same language in similar fields and use the same vocabulary and terminology with other nations.

¹Commission des Programmes Universitaires. (2004) Coursus des Licences en Langues Etrangères. Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche Scientifique, avril 2004, Alger, Algerie

As far as language-teaching is concerned, the field where we are totally included in, it is one of the building stones of the global enterprise of higher educational programmes in the coming years for academic and professional training to reach a final superior quality of products.

In what follows, we aim at presenting the novel elements of the pedagogical management that can be summed up in²:

- 1. “Semestrialisation”:** For a better organisation and more flexibility in the system, the division is based on semesters rather than years of formation.
- 2. Teaching Units:** Three main teaching units make up the skeleton of the whole system where other subjects are grouped. They are: *Fundamental Unit* where the rudimentary subjects are grouped; *Methodological Unit* which is primarily destined to prepare learners to acquire skills in methodology, hence, by the end of their formation, they will be able to be an active worker in the field of research; and *Discovery Unit* where students can get acquainted to new subjects in new fields, so they can widen the scope of their knowledge the thing that facilitates the passage from one discipline to another be it one of the facilities offered by the LMD system.
- 3. Credits:** Each Teaching Unit corresponds to a number of credits that can be capitalized and transferred. The total number of credits for each semester is equal to 30 (180 in the licence and 120 in the master degree).
- 4. Domains:** They cover many coherent disciplines including other subjects that lead to other specialties and particular options proposed to the students.
- 5. Course-type:** After the progressive acquisition of the identified competences, students will be oriented to another function according to the project i.e. academic or professional. Hence, the students will benefit from the mobility they gain to other institutions and even countries.
- 6. Tutoring:** This is a new pedagogical activity for the teacher introduced in the LMD system. This element permits a direct relation between the teacher and the student outside the academic sessions i.e. the teacher-learner interaction becomes easier and closer. Hence, instructors will play the role of the guide as he can inform the learners about pedagogical information they may need and get informed about the students’ inquiries. Moreover, the task of the teacher becomes wider here as he is supposed to advise and orient his students throughout their learning process. In a nutshell, we can

² Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de l’Université de Béjaïa (2005). Guide d’Information sur le Système LMD (Licence- Master- Doctorat), mars 2005, Béjaïa

say that this element is a way out to apply the Learner-centred Approach we are expected to use in our educational settings.

7. **A Progressive Orientation:** There is a great tendency to orient the students progressively towards other specialties. The more the student progresses, the more he is oriented towards a new discipline and all depend on his outcomes. Hence, the student's competence is what determines his orientations during the formation period.

Additionally, there is an interesting flexibility in the system which permits the student to move from one discipline to another like the case of Bejaia where the transfer is possible from English to French –in the time being- and vice versa. This is called the System of Transfer of Credits (STC). When students reach the third year of the first phase, they are free to deal either with the academic or “proffessionalising” licence. That is, students may choose to go to work or carry on the process of learning they already started and pass to the second phase i.e. the Master degree.

The LMD system started to be applied in the flow of the last academic year (2004/2005) and not all universities agreed to start it. It is only included in such universities as Béjaia, Constantine and Mostaghanem. Therefore, this experience is a piloting phase of this system and no one can predict its outcomes at least in the next 3 to 8 years where the first group of students finishes the whole process.

This was just a case in point of the Algerian readiness to evolve and develop. Many other fields of course are subject of change in Algeria because Globalisation makes all of the governmental departments go towards one direction. This path is to apply the international norms of every field among which higher education takes part. We also need to hint tat the efforts devoted by our university to make this system successful by the guides prepared to explain what might help teachers and learners get integrated in this new system.

2. Methodology

A. The Setting and Subjects

The ultimate aim of this study is to try to expose the problems our university encountered during the 2004/2005 application of the system. We have tried to group these problems from a teacher perspective through the observation phase and from the students' perspective through the results we could gather from the questionnaire we have administred.

Before starting the study with the population under investigation, an observation phase proceeded to observe the circumstances under which we taught last year. Then, the second phase is what presents the students' experience. They are the population under study and the work is based on their responses.

This work was, then, designed to identify the perceptions of first year university students towards the study of English under the reign of the LMD system. To measure it, we have prepared a short self-completed questionnaire. The investigation tries to reveal the perceptions of a sample size of 100 students surveyed at Abderrahmane Mira University, Bejaia.

Before ever we progress in presenting more details, we need first to state the problem, present our determined hypotheses and explain the usefulness of this work. Here, our focus is made on students learning English at university level enrolled in the LMD system because this latter was applied only in teaching English and French in the last year. Thus, our problem may be stated as follows:

Given its newness, the LMD system encountered a considerable number of problems though the final estimation was positive. Our statement of the problem is based primarily on the misunderstanding of some or non-understanding of others of the system's goals and objectives. Can we relate these problems to the factor of newness?

From such a situation, we can draw our hypotheses which we try to validate by the end of this study. We have two hypotheses that we state as follows:

- i.** Because the LMD system is a new endeavour, the ignorance of the system's structure and rules by students and teachers is more likely to contribute in elevating their hesitation and fear to get integrated.
- ii.** If the cooperation existed between students, teachers, administration and other universities, this system could have attained its best outcomes.

According to the above hypotheses, the newness itself is meant to be a major constituent of this study. We have indeed tried to derive these hypotheses from a number of the problems we have grouped after the observation phase we have gone through during the first semester of the last academic year. These problems will be summed up in our coming sections.

Of course, what we aim to reach is establishing a link between this system and the students' feelings, attitudes and learning strategies in order to find the appropriate solutions. For such a sake, we have taken into account the students' own viewpoints through the data we could gather from the questionnaire we have administered. Here, we would like to attract the reader's attention towards the necessity of conducting research on the LMD system because this will help to identify the learners' problems and the teachers difficulties to avoid in future cases.

B. Design

We have used the questionnaire as an instrument for data collection because it is easier and more appropriate in this case. The reason is that students may find it difficult to reveal their impressions and sincere viewpoints towards a system made by the government and applied by the university they belong to. It is more likely that they prefer an anonymous questionnaire where they feel more secure. Now, we need to have a quick glance to the participants before describing the questionnaire.

Our work deals with new learners of English as a foreign language in an Algerian university setting taking part of the LMD system group.

We have used the self-completion questionnaire as a means for data collection. We have handed a number of 100 copies during the second semester's examinations for a better evaluation of the system's outcomes according to the subjects' lived experiences. The procedure took place in the classes where the students passed their exams. The administration of the questionnaire was carefully held. All LMD students are 369 in number divided into 14 groups.

Five groups contain 27 students each and the remaining number (i.e. 8 groups) includes 26 students each. Thus, we have proceeded as follows:

We have selected 100 students randomly to give a homogeneous chance to every student. The time of this operation was about 15 minutes per group.

The questionnaire consists of nine questions ordered from general to specific with respecting the chronology of the learning process. All items are related to learning English as taught in the LMD system. A mixture of open and close questions is necessary because we aim at guiding the learners in some questions and collecting their impressions and attitudes in others (c.f. Appendix). We have then six close items and three open ones.

C. Results

Before revealing the results we obtained from the questionnaire items and interpreting them, we need to expose the problems we have found through the observation phase we followed during the first semester. These can be grouped in what follows:

- The students' vision of the system was restricted to its form rather than its content as they were not aware of its goals, objective and the positive outcomes it may bring. They rather perceive only its difficulty and the heavy responsibility they have when studying all that large number of subjects.
- The huge number of the students made it hard to control the situation either administratively or academically. The piloting phase needed a more limited number for better conditions.
- Students did hardly attend their tutoring sessions and again, this is more or less related to their ignorance of both the objective of these sessions and their importance as well.

- Many instructors did not change the schedule and the lectures' contents in the subjects they teach though the reform needs more new methods and revised curricula which serve the needs of not only the system but the learners in particular.
- Though the LMD system calls for more cooperation and coordination between the teachers, we have noticed that students have been taught the same module differently. So, the input they are exposed to was not homogeneous the thing that varied the learners' standard and, thus, output.
- The evaluation system during the last year was not homogeneous as teachers use different evaluation techniques where a learner obtained very elevated marks in one subject and very an extremely poor outcome in another. This caused even a great debate and discussion.

After the statistical readings of the obtained results from the students' answers, and after the interpretation of their responses; we have reached a very rich conclusion which goes even beyond our two hypotheses.

In what follows, we have tried to interpret the results we got from the items we asked following the same order the questions took in the questionnaire. However, we are going to relate the items and the interpretation to the corresponding hypothesis. To begin with, the first question asks the participants about their attitudes towards the study of English. Ninety Percent (**90%**) of the answers we got show that *the students like to learn English*. Hence, the fact that the learners have these positive attitudes means that the language at hand does not cause a problem for our subjects. The second question reveals the students' perception about the difficulty of the task of learning English at university before experiencing it. Here **54%** of the respondents *thought that learning English would be easier* whereas **44%** thought that it would be more difficult compared to their previous experience in studying it. The first category of students seems to be motivated and possess positive attitudes towards the study of English at university

level. Yet, the aim of this item is to compare the motivation students have and their perceptions towards learning English before attending LMD classes and after. That is why; our third item asks the participants explicitly about their view after experiencing the LMD system classes. Statistically speaking, **22.52 %** of the subjects *found it easy*, **33.33%** said that *it was more difficult than expected* and **42.34%** related its difficulty to other reasons. If we compare the results to the second question's ones, we notice that the 54% decreased to 22.52% the thing that shows the effect learning English under the LMD system has on the students' perceptions. In the third item, we have been able to delimit the difficulty to the students' lack of preparation in times, to lack of the needed means in this new system and to the newness of the content for others. This was the content of the 47 subjects (**42.34%**) whose difficulty was dependent on the afore-mentioned elements. These results back up our first hypothesis. Again, when asking the participants about the effort they spend to understand in the classroom, we got the following numbers: **5%** always seek explanation, **53%** do it occasionally, **28%** hardly seek understanding and **10%** never do that. Of course, some of the responsibility is put on the teachers' shoulders, some of it on the system but most of it is put on the learners themselves. The fact that the majority opt for occasional contributions in the classroom (i.e. 53%) is a traditional state of the students in FLL settings. This means that the difference does not really occur comparing traditional classes and LMD classes. The LMD system invites the students to be active participants and high input generators. They are expected to guide the course themselves, but this has not been found after its application. Of course, through this rate, we can argue that our hypotheses are also relevant here because the students' ignorance of the system's objectives together with the lack of cooperation between teachers and learners as well led them follow the same way of teaching for teachers (i.e. Teacher-centred Approach) and students adopt the same way of learning by just receiving what the instructor gives without implementing himself. For more understanding, we have asked the subjects to justify, but only quarter of the population did. That is, only **25%** of the learners have given a justification. These students related their passive

participation in their classes to a number of reasons. Some participants related it the group dynamics and the classroom atmosphere which was inappropriate for their learning to take place. Others have a problem in their personalities because they cannot perform in front of an audience though they feel the need to do so. They also revealed their fear of the peers' and teachers' negative evaluation. A number of students evoked the teachers' feedback problem. According to them, some teachers do not take into account the students' questions by refusing answering them or ignoring them totally. Here again, our participants possess a negative attitude towards some teachers and this is a sign of lack of cooperation i.e. lack of teacher-student interaction which our second hypothesis emphasises. More precisely, the coming item asks the students about the cause of their lack of motivation if any. The choices we have provided are explicit enough and asks directly about the reason guiding them towards the needs and the objectives of the present study. A rate of **17.92%** relates this lack of motivation to the group, **16.98%** to the teacher, **50.94%** to the system and **14.15%** did not give an answer. First, the no answer can represent the students who did not experience any kind of lack of motivation. What attracts ones attention is the majority of the answers. If 54 students (**50.94%**) of the subjects relate their lack of motivation to the system means that they did not find what they expected. That is, our participants might have met difficulties in this system which led to the decrease of the level of their motivation. Of course, the **16.98%** of the respondents who related their lack of motivation to teachers should not be ignored and these results are good indicators that validate our hypotheses. After diagnosing the reasons of their decrease of motivation, we have asked our respondents about the level of interest they had before attending their LMD classes and after experiencing it. Only **32%** of the subjects said that they maintained the same level of interest and 65% revealed that it changed. Of course, we need to go back to the 90% of the students who were motivated before attending university classes among which 32% remained motivated. The 65% of the learners whose motivation decreased linked this change of interest to : fossilisation (no perceived progress), external problems which did not help them to learn adequately and to

the system in which they felt lost. For the students, a reticence characterises their answer on the last item which asks them about their viewpoint on the LMD system. Only quarter of the population answered this question and most of the answers include negative attitudes. We can be best served by the students' answers. Here are some extracts from their responses:

“Being here is different from secondary school because we are learning many new things. As you know, the LMD system contains everything interesting”

“I find my teachers good as they do their best to help their students and they try to reassure us from this LMD system to get included in it.”

“The question is very important. I think that the problem at hand is that we have to do with the LMD system. Normally, we should have specialized teachers...why should we have a great deal of subjects without specialized teachers...?”

“I feel afraid, anxious and worried because it is the first time I pass exams at university, and I imagine that they are more difficult in the LMD system in which we just have very few information”

“...there is a kind of instability of the schedule in the LMD system”

“The LMD system makes me feel afraid”

“Generally, students today suffer a lot from the actual situation. The reason behind is that most first year students of English in the LMD system attend more than 14 modules and with unknown teachers who we don't see often. How can you imagine that the student is not at a risk in a system such as this? However, I am proud to get my licence degree under this new system which I hope to succeed and I wish everything to be serious”

“He [teacher] makes us feel scared of the results of the LMD system. He always makes us feel worried. He diminishes our self-confidence and mainly causes fear, fear, fear. I feel insecure when I am in front of Mr. X.. ...we are afraid, afraid, afraid and insecure in the LMD system”

D. Implications

Of course, one can notice that we could reach some useful remarks concerning the use of the LMD in Bejaia University the thing that we consider as a positive point. Nothing new starts in a perfect way and research always aims at diagnosing the problems and finding solutions.

In this section, we will suggest some solutions though the administration has already started doing some of them. This is the proof that it has not been totally divorced from the scene of teaching settings.

These suggestions are grouped in what follows:

- Whenever the university receives students enrolled in the LMD system, days of information are necessary to orient fully the students. This has already taken place many times and the present conferences are the evidence.
- When a given specialty starts out the LMD system, it would be better to limit the number in accordance to the available means.
- Students did not attend their tutoring sessions. Hence, more consistency is needed for such a sake. If students choose the teacher they wish to have as a tutor with prior explanation of its necessity and usefulness, students will ask themselves about their tutors rather than finding teachers waiting in vain.
- For every teaching unit, one teacher is needed to be the head. Again, more precisely, for every subject, one teacher should be the chief element of the subject. This is to have one unified curriculum with homogeneous teaching material, and hence, homogeneous evaluation and standard. Thus, we will have the cooperation the system has focus on.
- Coordinate doctors and professors who come from other universities are to be invited to help other teachers in the host university. For such a sake, we suggest regular meetings of the teachers teaching the same teaching units to gain from the former's experience and knowledge.
- We also understand through the system the necessity of continuous evaluation. Here, we also suggest the inclusion of quizzes, attendance to courses, the students' participation in the class and the final exam marks as the pre-requisites of the overall evaluation of the student. This is required in discussion groups' sessions where the instructor can be an observer in his class.

Conclusion

For us to lead this research project towards its completion we have gone through a full description of the concepts included in the LMD system and, then, we have tried to reveal what the students think and feel about it through the experience they lived just a year ago. After data collection, an interpretation and analysis of the students' responses have been analysed and computerized for a statistical analysis of the questionnaire. The results we got authenticated the two hypothesis and our objectives have been reached. That is, the problem we have stated was a salient contribution to identify the problems teachers and students lived. However, this does not mean that the evaluation of the system is negative. We need to diagnose the problems for a better achievement in the coming experiences and for a better result with coming generation.

One cannot ignore the efforts our government spent to make this reform successful. On cannot further ignore the willingness our university has to take this heavy responsibility though the available means are very limited especially with the problem of the specialised teachers we need for tutoring and supervising our students.

References

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Appendix

Dear Students:

We would be highly honoured if you could answer sincerely and frankly the following questions behind which we aim at getting some information about your feelings as new learners of English enrolled in the LMD system. In addition, suggestions from your personal experiences on the system are welcome for your viewpoint may be very useful to the problems to avoid when applying this system in the future.

Please, put a tick in the appropriate box, or give a full answer whenever necessary.

1. Do you like to study English as a foreign language?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. Before you study it at university level, did you think that...
 - a. learning English would be easier?
 - b. learning English would be more difficult?
3. After experiencing learning it within the LMD system, do you find it...
 - a. easy?
 - b. difficult?
 - c. It depends on.....
4. How often do you seek explanation from the teacher ?
 - a. Always
 - b. Sometimes
 - c. Rarely
 - d. Never
5. Please, explain why.....
6. If it happens that you are not motivated to work, is it because of:
 - a. the group?
 - b. the teacher?
 - c. The system?
7. Do you think that your level of interest is the same before you come to university and now after learning under the LMD system?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
8. Say why, please.....
9. What do you think of the system?.....

Thank you for your cooperation and help.

