Appraising Teaching/Learning English Cultural Studies in LMD System in Tunisia

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Abstract:

Within the context of LMD system, the teaching of humanities and especially English cultural studies has changed its profile in terms of content and methods. Responding to the requirements of communicative approaches of teaching, the learner has been located at the centre of the learning activity. The teacher has become an auxiliary in such activities. S/he has the potential mission of helping learners learn what they need. Aware of this shift of focus, this article attempts to churn out how students can be helped in “getting” what they need from a cultural studies course. It is argued that learners should be instructed how to get knowledge not simply have knowledge given to them in the form of dictated and ready-made semantic chunks. Consequently, LMD system prioritizes applied aspects of the learning process which renders critical interpretive analysis of cultural texts an outstanding priority. In this article, I draw on my personal experience of teaching cultural studies to different levels using electronic platforms within the context of LMD system. The use of electronic platforms (like Nicenet) in teaching students is best suited to the requirements of LMD system. Moreover, through an anonymous online-conducted questionnaire, it was possible to get students’ feedback concerning the content of the course and its methodology. A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches is employed to study the new state of cultural studies in LMD system and the reactions of students to the various ways of teaching the course in question.

Key words: Cultural Studies; learning; LMD system; Nicenet and teaching.

1. Introduction:

LMD system revolutionized the teaching and learning of humanities and especially English cultural studies in Tunisian departments of English. There has been a deliberate move from classical methods of teaching to modern approaches of learning. In response to the requirements of communicative approaches, the learner has been located at the centre of the learning activity. The teacher has become an auxiliary in such activities. S/he has the potential
mission of helping learners learn what they need. Aware of this shift of focus, this article attempts to churn out how students can be helped in “getting” what they need from a cultural studies course. It is argued that learners should be instructed how to get knowledge not simply have knowledge given to them in the form of dictated and ready-made semantic chunks. Thus, a teacher/instructor of civilization has to coach his/her group and find practical solutions to practical problems. Consequently, LMD system prioritizes applied aspects of the learning process which renders textual analysis of cultural documents an outstanding priority. In this article, I draw on my personal experience of teaching cultural studies to undergraduate students within the context of LMD system. I focus on how learners can be helped to get acquainted with various cultural issues and concepts via using novel tools and methods.

The use of electronic platforms in teaching students is best suited to the requirements of LMD system. Electronic platforms (like Nicenet) meet to a considerable extent the communicative needs of learners. Moreover, through an anonymous online-conducted questionnaire, it was possible to get students’ feedback concerning the content of the course and its methodology. Such feedback was critically analyzed and produced a number of interesting findings. Thematically, this article starts by scrutinizing LMD system and its impact on teaching humanities and English cultural studies in Tunisia. Then it focuses on the role of computer-assisted and online teaching/learning in the facilitating the process of learning cultural studies in particular and humanities in general. Finally, a special emphasis is laid on my teaching experience of English cultural studies though the use of electronic platforms.

2. LMD System in Tunisia:

The LMD system was officially adopted in Tunisia in September 2006. It replaced the old Bac+4 regime that was basically inspired by the French educational system (“mairtise”,
“D.E.A” and “Doctorat”). LMD system’s philosophy is based on a number of assumptions and objectives and it has a considerable impact of the methodology and content of higher education in contemporary Tunisia.

2.1. Objective and requirements:

Tunisia decided to move to the new LMD system in September 2006. Such move was a gradual one since the system was fully adopted in 2012. The official web site of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research stated the strategies and the objectives of the System. Moreover, it introduced the various procedures to be taken in order to implement LMD system and get Tunisian academics and students familiar with it. The declared objectives were largely similar to those of many European countries. They can be summarized in the following key phrases: high levels of employability, flexibility, international comparability and compatibility, mobility, progressive orientation, high educational quality, professional aptitudes, and multidisciplinary approach (MES, 2007).

Thus the strategy behind the LMD system is to create “an information and knowledge society”. The declared purpose of the regime is to combine knowledge and technology. Within the Tunisian context, LMD system is supposed to bestow Tunisian universities with a considerable flexibility, and to innovate national educational experience. “The aim behind embracing this system was to provide students with a variety of choices and growing capacities which would allow them to properly face the professional work-frame” (Tunis Times, 2013).

The applied aspect of the academic formation has been a top priority within LMD system. Applied or professional degrees were created in sufficient numbers to accommodate
eventual two thirds of the flow of students. A skills-development-oriented approach was adopted in order to facilitate future professional insertion of graduated students.

However, what looms large in such system is rather empowering students to acquire both knowledge and technology. The use of computational tools and software contributes to the originality and success of the system. Also, it allows students to be self-reliant; it propels their critical and researching capacities.

2.2. Academic impact of LMD system on English cultural studies:

Academically, English cultural studies witnessed dramatic metamorphoses under LMD system in Tunisian departments of English. The changes were both epistemological and methodological.

Epistemologically, the focus is no longer confined to British and American cultural studies. The introduction of Anglophone cultural studies has been a major innovation in teaching civilization in Tunisian departments of English. The cultures of countries like Australia, Canada, India and South Africa have been central in English license. This paved the way for the diversification of culture-related programs and curricula. The Anglophone cultures-based courses are designed to acquaint the students with the socio-cultural and political experiences of major Anglophone countries, thus expanding the horizons of the so far restricted double tracks of British and American studies. Moreover, special courses have been dedicated to cultural concepts. Such strategy, I believe, would help students get an adequate grasp and mastery of various civilizational and cultural concepts which makes it easier to develop students’ critical and researching skills. LMD regime standardized curricula at a national level that is likely to both lessen academic differences between various universities and to guarantee quality of content.
Methodologically, there has been a growing focus on textual analysis. Such tendency develops creative capacities and competences of students. Textual analysis is basically a creative interpretative process that allows a considerable amount of personal and critical analysis and appraisal. It is a methodology that allows students to understand other cultures by examining and scrutinizing their textual productions. Alan Makee (2003) affirmed that textual analysis is a methodology—"a data-gathering process"—for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live. Textual analysis is useful for researchers working in cultural studies, media studies, in mass communication, and perhaps even in sociology and philosophy (p.1).

Textual analysis can be an auto-learning activity. It is basically done during tutorials. A considerable amount of interaction between the instructor and the students and among students themselves is expected to take place. Reading into the official syllabus, it is crucial to notice the richness and diversity of cultural studies courses. Moreover, the applied side of academic formation is promoted. For instance, it is three tutorial hours to a theoretical one for first year students, the same for second year students while it is two to two in third year. Thus the number of TD hours (tutorials) is twice that of lectures which is indicative of the applied nature of LMD system even in basic license ("license fondamentale"). The below-stated figure clearly reveals the domination of the applied sessions over theoretical ones.
As Figure 1 shows, applied sessions are given absolute priority in the formation of students in cultural studies. The overall number of cultural studies-related hours is 24 during the undergraduate academic career. One third is devoted to theoretical courses while two thirds are allocated to applied, practical ones. Thus, there was a need to cope with this aspect of LMD system. Teachers have to proffer novel tools in their teaching that are considerably learner-oriented. Those tools and methods should develop practical skills in cultural studies’ students. The use of electronic devices and applications is one of the most paramount tools that can enhance such practical and learner-centered skills.

3. Online teaching/learning tools:

As suggested above, the use of electronic tools has gained momentum with the advent of LMD system in Tunisia. Internet-based learning has been considered as essential in most contemporary academic activities. Online teaching/learning includes a number of computer-
assisted instruction methods. Also, it has a number of features that render it so adaptable to the needs of learners. It can be synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous aspect means that teachers and learners are engaged in real-time forms of interactions via chat and audio-visual conferencing. Asynchronous interaction is more flexible in terms of time and space. It takes the forms of emails, news groups and bulletins (Driscoll, 1998 and khan, 2006). Those features among others bestow online teaching/learning with a number of advantages for both teachers and learners as well. Pradeep Kumar Misra (2012) confirmed that:

Two parallel processes take place in a technology enhanced learning environment: students become more active, reflective learners and students and teachers engage in learning through the use of technology and become more familiar with technology by using it. (p. 238)

Generally speaking, LMD system can be deemed as the product of modern “information society”. It is vital to integrate modern technological tools in this system in order to cope with what is widely referred to as the “digital revolution” (Wessels, 2007). The adoption and adaptation of technology and electronic applications has become a central feature of present day methodology of teaching or learning. Whether in Tunisia or abroad there has been a constant effort to employ electronic applications and platforms so as to facilitate learning. For instance, the platform MOODLE (an acronym that stands for modular object-oriented dynamic learning environment) has been targeted by the Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research as the future electronic platform to be used by national universities in order to digitalize a number of courses. It is expected to guarantee higher degrees of flexibility and dynamism so that learners can manipulate online courses the way they like, when they like and where they like.
4. Case study: the use of Nicenet application in teaching and learning cultural studies:

I draw now on my personal experience in teaching cultural studies within LMD context. I argue that LMD system is in many respects a response to recent developments in languages learning theory with its increasing emphasis on the centrality of the learner in the learning process. According to the communicative approaches in language teaching, learners have to be just guided to learn not taught what to learn. Learners “were expected to take on a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning» (Richards, 2006, p. 5)

Thus textual analysis of cultural documents stands as the best activity to help students help themselves.

As argued above, LMD system is based on some fundamental and interrelated concepts notably those of flexibility, communicativeness and learner-oriented-ness. All necessary tools and methods should be provided in order to reach such aims. Thus the use of electronic software for educational purposes is the environment which best combines and promotes those concepts. It enhances peer-to-peer communication and collaboration.

The electronic application Nicenet helped in providing students with new spaces for asynchronous learning. Nicenet which I use in teaching civilization is a virtual learning environment that is mainly used in teaching humanities. It is designed to support teaching and learning in an educational setting. It is an Internet Classroom Assistant that brings powerful World Wide Web based conferencing, personal messaging, document sharing, scheduling and link/source sharing to a variety of learning environments. It is vital to highlight the communicative facilities and opportunities offered by Nicenet application. However, it is important to stress the fact that such electronic platform cannot replace the physical real classroom. As its very name suggests Nicenet is an electronic assistant and auxiliary to real classrooms. The founders of Nicenet affirmed that “[t]he system was designed not as a
replacement for the classroom, but rather as a supplement allowing greater communication and sharing of information among students and between teachers and their students” (2008).

Yet its benefits are multifarious. It assures a considerable degree of flexibility and communication in learning via the tools of e-mailing, chatting and distance learning. Actually, such application overcomes some traditional obstacles of knowledge acquisition. Self-motivated introvert learners who work better alone can find it of great help as it helps them take advantages of peer-to-peer contact. I have noticed that some students preferred to remain anonymous yet they could ask numerous questions and overcome their negative affective factors or filters. In addition, Nicenet, becomes a simulacrum to the real classroom. All real life activities could be equally performed in such virtual class. Students can communicate with each other and with their instructor concerning the content of the courses. The conferencing facility is a forum that allows collective exchange of ideas and attitudes. Private messaging and emailing allows personal contacts to take place. Documents and link sharing help guiding students’ readings and researching activities. Scheduling option allows the instructor to assign homework activities and get the students’ feedback online. The figure stated below is a photo of the home page of the electronic class entitled “cultural studies”. It was created to third year students of cultural studies. The figure shows the various facilities and links that Nicenet offers to learners.
Figure 2: The home page of the Nicenet class of third year students of cultural studies in ISEAH Gafsa, University of Gafsa, Tunisia.

However, using the asynchronous aspects of Nicenet, it was possible to conduct a questionnaire with students from different levels and to get their attitudes and suggestions concerning the teaching and the learning of cultural studies at the Department of English. The questionnaire was sent as a Link Sharing to students. Google Documents application was used to design such questionnaire. Each student has the possibility to evaluate the course anonymously. Such anonymity helped to lower down the affective filter of students and they felt free to appraise the course without being monitored by their instructor.

Such questionnaire yielded some fruitful data about the teaching and learning of civilization. It was a kind of students’ evaluation of the course and its objective. Evaluation thus became reciprocal: the teacher evaluates his students’ understanding of the course while
students evaluate his/her conception and delivery of that same course. It is a kind of co-
evaluation of the cultural studies course. The questionnaire was made up of eight questions;
six of them were multiple choice questions while the other two were information questions
(see appendix). What is noticeable is that the majority of students preferred the applied and
practical aspects of the cultural studies course. Only 20% preferred theoretical courses while
80% preferred tutorials (TDs). Asked about their motives for their preferences, students
stressed the importance of group work in class. The majority of students preferred tutorials
(TD) since they could participate in class and exchange attitudes with their instructor as well
as among themselves. This is compatible with LMD system’s emphasis on applied degrees
and practical professional formation.

Based on their selected preferences, students were also asked about the possible
suggestions to ameliorate the methods of the delivery of the course. My qualitative analysis of
their responses produced the following findings. Students suggested the use of electronic
applications and computer-assisted tools to make the process of learning more interesting and
motivating. Also, some of them suggested the use of various audio-visual devices as a
medium of course delivery. Moreover, they thought that textual analysis done in small size
classes should be given priority vis-à-vis lecturing and theoretical courses delivered in large
amphitheatres.

Remarkably, students provided their feedback about the use of Nicenet as well as about
the questionnaire itself. The anonymous and the flexible features of electronic spaces
encouraged students to be more relaxed and more candid in answering those questions.
Moreover, the use of unreal pseudo names encouraged learners to provide data that is free
from any possible forms of control. 77% of the respondents believed that Nicenet was very
useful, yet 13% thought it was useless. Also, 13% responded that the questionnaire was poor
while just 47% thought it was comprehensive. This “frank feedback”, I believe, would not
have been possible if students had been asked in conventional and traditional ways; their affective filter would have been so high. As a result, the use of electronic platforms is necessary to lower the affective filter of learners and provide them with more motivating and friendly environment of learning.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the use of electronic and web-based applications and platforms best fits the methodological requirements of teaching cultural studies in particular and humanities in general within LMD system. Such education-oriented software like Nicenet combines knowledge to technology that is crucial to present day literacy. Also, internet has become an influential source of information and Nicenet being an internet-based tool allows students to master computing and surfing while trying to get the information they needed. Then the virtual electronic spaces met almost all the requirements and objectives of LMD system in Tunisia. They secured considerable degrees of flexibility, reliable levels of practicality and satisfactory skills of computing. And that is, I believe, the essence of LMD system: getting knowledge while acquiring new practical skills and aptitudes.

References:


* MES. (2007). “Objectives of LMD reform ». Available at


* Nicenet (2008). “Our philosophy”. Available at


**Appendix**

**Online-conducted questionnaire**

**1) How far are you satisfied with the civilization course?**

a) Very satisfied: 20%

b) Satisfied: 60%

c) Unsatisfied: 20%

**2) Which course nature do you prefer?**
a) Lectures: 20%
b) Tutorials (TD): 80%

3) Why do you prefer lectures or tutorials?

There is a tendency to stress the importance of group work in class. The majority of students preferred tutorials (TD) since they could participate in class and exchange attitudes with their instructor as well as among themselves.

4) Would you suggest ways of improving the delivery of civilization courses?

Students suggested the use of electronic applications and computer-assisted tools to make the process of learning more interesting and motivating. Also, some of them suggested the use of various audio-visual means as media of course delivery. Moreover, they think that textual analysis done in small size classes should be given priority vis-à-vis lecturing and theoretical courses delivered in large amphitheatres.

5) What do you think about the electronic class Nicenet?

a) Very useful: 77%
b) Useful: 10%
c) Useless: 13%

6) Do you think that the character of the teacher is important in the learning process?

a) Very important: 53%
b) Important: 33%
c) Not important: 14%
7) What is your sex-group?

a) Male: 47%

b) Female: 53%

8) How do you find this questionnaire?

a) Comprehensive: 47%

b) Average: 40%

c) Poor: 13%