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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DIDACTICS IN PREPARING STUDENTS TO TEACH EFL

Abstract

The present paper is a study of a hundred and fifty one (151) undergraduate students, focused on inferring the significance and effectiveness of studying didactics and assessing students' background about the teaching profession. It also seeks to show an evaluation of the readiness and capacities of Master degree students, since many researchers claimed that the study of didactics is useless inside classrooms, and that most teachers rely upon their creativity and self-abilities in teaching rather than theories of teaching and learning. The research methodology adopted in this study is a descriptive one. It intended to describe two main variables: Didactics and student's preparation to become EFL teachers. Data had been gathered through a series of questionnaires, administered to a sample of 151 participants and other questionnaire had been delivered to 04 teachers at the English department, Khenchela University. Finally, the results which had been obtained from this study showed that students gained a sufficient amount of knowledge which may serve them well in their teaching career; they consider themselves ready and capable to teach the moment they graduate.

Keywords: Didactics, Effectiveness, Master Program, Preparation, Teaching EFL.

1. Introduction

In recent years, academic degrees (Masters, PhDs) on didactics have fast grown and the field is in great development. The aim behind teaching didactics as a Master degree specialization in the Algerian universities is not only the intellectual development of students, but also training them for their subsequent entry into the workforce (as teachers) and providing Algerian schools with teachers aware of their work domain. This new situation is justified by a strong need to search for an effective, ideal, and a good source of knowledgeable and confident teachers, who would successfully teach students a foreign language (specifically English) in the classroom. Foreign language teaching has a tight relationship with didactics; the more the teacher is aware of this field, the more he can improve his practice. Studying didactics (as a theory of teaching profession) merits a lot of attention since it has a significant role in forming competencies and building a useful knowledge base for teaching. And since it aims to provide students with a solid grounding in teaching EFL, by introducing to them the proper features of teaching methodology and all elements that interact within the classroom, we wanted to explore its effectiveness and impact on EFL students. In this study, our major objectives were: To determine the significance and effectiveness of studying didactics, to assess whether students

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have a sufficient background (grasped knowledge) about the teaching profession, and to evaluate the readiness and capacities of Master degree students. Therefore, the present research may well be a reference to understand the great usefulness of the “teaching methodology” (Didactics) in the teaching of EFL. Secondly, facilitate decisions about individuals who plan to become teachers of English, but they struggle to choose the right specialization in their postgraduate studies by presenting to them the importance of studying didactics. Finally, it may be a source of help for teachers; in order to take in consideration the weaknesses that students feel and prevent them from achieving the goal of their study.

2. Review of Literature

The role of the subject of Didactics of Foreign Language teaching in general and English language in particular is becoming a major concern for theoreticians and postgraduates belonging to this field of study. This growing interest is taking such a dimension because of the importance of the quality of teaching English as a foreign language nowadays. Nowadays, the term didactics takes under its wings a wide range of concepts related to teaching and learning which doesn't only change the individual but also others' view about this field which was neglected and seen as unworthy. Didactics offers a very reliable and useful source for nourishing teachers' knowledge and practice to be relied upon in their teaching profession. Reflections about the teacher, the pupil, learning material, methods, aids, school, educative circumstances, etc. are of importance to didactics.

2.1 General Understanding of Didactics

Gundem (1998: 4) defines didactics as a science and a theory of teaching and learning under any circumstances and in any form. In a similar way, and supporting to Gundem view, a general definition was presented by Bengtsson's (1997), which embraces other ideas then understanding and explaining teaching but also how the didactic research affects the individual's thinking and memory and the relationship between teaching and learning. It means that didactics has many advantages in the process of learning about teaching. Another relevant participation to understand the meaning of didactics is done by Steffensen (2003) from the Danish University of Education in Copenhagen, who has researched into the use and understanding of the term didactics amongst teacher students who are training to become teachers at elementary and middle school in the last decades of the 20th century and he has concluded that the term is primarily understood as the “method of teaching”. We completely agree with the latter views since. Furthermore, for Kansanen didactics is simply the professional and scientific basis for the teaching profession i.e. foreign language didactics can serve well as the professional scientific background for language teachers. (As cited in Harjanne & Tella, 2007).

In addition, didactics can be either general or subject. By general we mean “*the academic theory of teaching and learning in all its forms and on all levels*” Dolch (1967). In other words, it is the most abstract and it is not bound to a concrete and specific teaching situation, but is focused on teaching and learning situations in general. It is often referred to as simply didactics. In contrast,

subject didactics is considered to be the nearest to the outside world since it is connected to a specific subject or subject area (e.g. English language: Didactics of English Language). According to Lorentzen et al. (1998) and Aase (1990): subject didactics consists of all the reflections one may associate with a subject and the teaching of this subject that may lead to increased knowledge about the nature of the subject, the legitimacy of the subject, and increased knowledge about how the subject can be learned, taught and developed.

This makes us understand that both of general and subject didactics offer explanations and expositions of how teaching appears in the everyday life of people, of its nature, the terrain that it occupies and its limits. Good teaching involves the application of the findings of research and the teacher's role is to put research-based principles into practice

2.2 Teaching as a Part of Didactics

Jack C. Richards consider that since teaching is considered to be a science, scientific investigations and empirical researches are the source and the base to practice teaching. Good teaching involves the application of the findings of these researches and the teacher's role is to put them into practice; and that a primary source for teachers' classroom practices is teachers' belief systems, the information, attitudes, values, theories and assumptions about teaching and learning which teachers build up over time and bring with them to the classroom, he continues: *“teacher beliefs form a structured set of principles that are derived from experience, school practice, personality, educational theory, reading, and other”*.

2.3 Focal Elements in Master Programme

English foreign language teachers especially are expected to give their students high quality teaching in English as a foreign language using a sound theoretical framework for language acquisition with the pedagogy for teaching languages. Each English languages faculty proposes a program to be studied through two years according to the specialization to be taught to obtain a Master degree.

English department courses in Didactics of Foreign Languages and Cultures, at Khenchela University, are taught to Master degree students by experienced faculty members in teaching. This specialization aims to prepare and train students (theoretically) to become teachers (However, this does not mean that every Master degree student wants to become a teacher) through exposing them to related perceptions and theories. Students acquire the necessary theoretical skills for English language instruction and curriculum design, each module is taught for one hour and a half per week for a whole semester. Some modules are dealt with during only one semester, some for two semesters and others for three semesters. Lund (2003) sees that didactics refers to any social practice in which learners or teachers are configured around a knowledge domain, and in which knowledge building is made visible by grouping knowledge into educational subjects i.e. the didactics part aims to make students aware of how language, culture and literature can be used in the classroom and knowledge of and skills in planning, giving reasons for, implementing and assessing English language teaching, presented in the courses at university.

Students are supposed to improve their knowledge of how both culture and literature can be taught in the English classroom; Knowledge of how to use language correctly; knowledge of learning strategies, learning styles and learning environments; attitudes to teaching EFL; Skills in written and oral presentations. In support the latter view, Marsh (1982) discussed that much preparation of teachers is explicitly oriented towards developing teachers' teaching skills, especially their classroom practice.

The following table presents all the modules which are dealt with during three semesters (in 2 years); the content of each module is introduced in the table, as well as specification of the semester in which the module is taught.

Module	Content	S1	S2	S3
DTL (Didactique de Textes Littéraire)	Why and how to teach a literary text The use of literary texts The role of literary texts in the language classroom. Selection of appropriate literary texts and some proposed issues which may be faced through.	×	×	
DCL (Didactique de Compétences Linguistiques)	The four (4) skills: Writing, reading, listening, speaking.	×	×	
DLE (Didactique de la Langue Etrangère)	The syllabus. Keeping discipline in the classroom. Blooms' Taxonomy CBA. Description of the Algerian secondary school. Coursework (At the Crossroads). Project work. The use of songs/music in the classroom. Young learners. Adult learners.	×	×	×
Interculturali ty	Identity: who are we? Essentialism versus Non-essentialism. Successful intercultural communication.	×		
Sociolinguist	About Sociolinguistics.	×		

ics	Basic concepts in sociolinguistics. Language use in society. Language variation in society. Language forms in society. Language and sociolinguistic determinants.			
Semiology	About Semiotics. Basic issues in semiotics. What do signs mean? How signs work? Why study Semiotics? Denotation and connotation.	×		
Research Methodology	Important concepts in any dissertation/thesis. How to write a research proposal. Steps to write a Master dissertation. How to prepare a Master viva.	×	×	×
Psycho-pedagogy	About Psycho-pedagogy. Objectives of Psycho-pedagogy. Various strategies of language teaching.		×	
Pragmatics	About Pragmatics. Pragmatics and language structure. Interests of pragmatics.		×	
Culture and teaching languages	Definition of culture. Why is culture? Teaching culture through language. Key consideration in developing cultural awareness in EFL classroom. Stages of acculturation.		×	
LLS (Language Learning Strategies)	About LLS Strategies of language learning (learner-centered) Introducing famous theorists like Chamot Unna, Oxford, O'malley ...			×

	SILL (Strategy Inventory for <i>Language Learning</i>) and CALLA (Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach).			
Art, media and culture	Art vs. Arts. Multimedia vs. Multimedia. The effect of media on culture. The effect of media on Art.			×
French Language	Basics of the French language.	×	×	×
T.I.C.E (Technologies de l'information et de la communication pour l'enseignement)	About the digital tools and products that can be used in education and teaching and how to use computers in professional way.	×	×	

Table1: Master Degree Modules Taught in Two Years

In the previous table, we tried to bring to light all the important elements being taught to Master students through two years. The modules taught to Master students at Khenchela University serve immensely in training and surrounding them with useful knowledge; modules like Language Didactics, LLS and others are common in teacher education programs in many universities around the world. These modules have showed their effectiveness whenever students shift to the school reality (as teachers).

In regard to the modules introduced in the previous table, the following three elements were dealt with extensively through the entire program:

1- Language Didactics: Courses main focus is on the teaching and learning of English language in a formal setting (institutional). It deals specifically with methods of learning, teaching grammar (morphology, syntax) and vocabulary (connotation, register, pronunciation...), as well as development of language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening). It is concerned largely with linguistic phenomena, characteristics of speakers, strategies of language learning and teaching as well as issues which may prevent the acquisition of English language.

2- Literature Didactics: it is briefly about the meaningful use of literary texts; both as subject and medium of English language teaching. Courses are concerned with the use of literary texts (Poetry, prose and drama), as well as films and new media in teaching English languages. Communicative, literary and intercultural competences are of principal interest, since they all can be strengthened through the use of literature. Also, showing out its significance in educational processes and aims in addition to curricula.

3- Culture Didactics: It concentrates on the acquisition of cultural knowledge and intercultural abilities through the text and its contextualization. It addresses also understanding language as a part of culture, its characteristics are examined in relation to other cultural characteristics through discussions of the concept of culture, the discourse on teaching culture through media, the recognition of the communicative and attitudinal dimension of interculturality as well as the discussion on transculturality.

In a nutshell, from the courses shown in the previous table and as this specialization (Didactics of Foreign Languages) is closely connected to knowledge of learning strategies, learning styles and learning environments...etc, students will improve their:

- Knowledge of how culture can be taught in the English classroom;
- Knowledge of how literature can be taught in the English classroom;
- Knowledge of how to use language correctly;
- Knowledge of learning strategies, learning styles and learning environments in the English language instruction.
- Attitudes to teaching EFL.
- Skills in written and oral presentation in English.

More importantly, all of the preceding elements are included in the lists of types of knowledge, skills, dispositions, and values that perspective teachers or any teacher must have a mastery of, offered by many researchers like Anne Grosso de Leon, Anne Reynolds, Robert Glaser, Hilda Borko and Ralph Putnam, Olugbemiro Jegede, Margaret Taplin, and Sing-Lai Chan.

3. Methodology

3.1 Context

The study took place in the department of English Language at Abbas Laghrour University in Khenchela in the academic year 2014-2015. For the purpose of this study, we opted for descriptive research in order to obtain a picture of second year Master students (Specialization: Didactics of Foreign Languages and Cultures) opinions and beliefs about the study of didactics as a Master degree program at Khenchela University. Our chances in conducting an experimental research were very little, because second year Master students attended classes for one short semester and used to study only two (02) days per week; which did not offer the right environment or enough time for experimental manipulation. In addition, we were not seeking any change in the subjects being studied because our interests is far from manipulating subjects or environment, but we wanted to describe and collect information from the participants as they are. This study was an attempt towards confirming or rejecting what we have hypothesized at the beginning of this research whether didactics as a Master specialty can prepare students to be confident teachers with sufficient knowledge to teach EFL.

3.2 Participants

For the present study, we dealt with a sample of a hundred and fifty one (151) second year Master degree students, from a total population of a hundred

and seventy eight (178) students of the English Department at Khenchela University. The sample consisted of ninety two (92) participants, both males and females, the sample's ages, approximately, ranged from about twenty two (22) to fifty eight (58). However, both variables of sex and age were not taken into consideration in our research. The reason behind choosing to work with second year students was our belief that they are the closest to participate in teachers' job competitions to start working in an official way. Also, they were more likely able to express their ideas and more conscious of their attitudes than first year Master degree students. The entire process of sampling was done in a single step: we brought a complete and up-to-date list of population (178 students) provided by the English department and a new list of students with no experience in teaching was made (Excluding 27 students with teaching experience). We ended up with one hundred and fifty one (151) students. The research project was explained to the prospective participants who accepted to take part in the research.

Our sample of teachers were those teachers who taught modules tightly related to didactics to the Master degree students, so this needed no selection since there were four (04) main teachers.

3.3 Procedures

In order to obtain both students and teachers views, questionnaires were designed. The large number of students is the reason behind choosing a questionnaire as data collection tool. We also opted for questionnaire with teachers instead of interview due to the difficulties which faced us to plan interviews with them. The questionnaires were directly administered to students and teachers of the English department at Khenchela University after the examinations of the 3rd semester 2014/2015.

3.3.1 Description and Aim of Students' Questionnaire

The questionnaire which was administered to second year Master students at Abbas Laghrour University, aiming to collect students' impressions and attitudes about the significance of didactics in preparing them to teach EFL, consisted of twenty (20) close-ended questions organized in eight (08) sections as follow:

-Section one, from question 1 to question 3: general questions about student's age, gender and their enjoyment in studying didactics.

-Section two, questions 4 and 5: students' view about the participation of didactics in preparing them to teach and to understand the role of teachers.

-Section three, from question 6 to question 8: number of approaches, methods and techniques which students have learned.

-Section four, questions 9 and 10: about the effect of didactics on students' way of thinking and personality

-Section five, from question 11 to question 13: students' background about key educational and psychological concepts as well as characteristics of their future students

-Section six, questions 14 and 15: students' opinions about language didactics, culture didactics and literature didactics

-Section seven, question 16 and 17: students' readiness to become teachers

-Section eight, from question 18 to question 20: Students 'difficulties and suggestions about Master program

3.3.2 Description and Aim of Teachers' Questionnaire

Teachers' questionnaire consisted of fourteen (14) close-ended questions. It was given to four (04) teachers of "Didactics" in the Department of languages at Abbas Laghrour University in Khenchela in order to obtain teachers' views of didactics, and at the same time of their students' perceptions and attitudes. The questionnaire included five (05) sections as follow:

-Section one, from question 1 to question 4: includes general questions about teachers' experience in teaching in general and teaching didactics in specific.

- Section two, questions 5 and 6: asks about the effects of didactics, generally on students' personalities and specifically on their beliefs about their abilities as prospective teachers.

- Section three, from question 7 to question 9: teachers' main focus while teaching didactics to Master Degree students.

-Section four, questions 10 and 14: inquires about teachers' view of students' background and understanding of their future role as teachers of English as a Foreign Language as well as the readiness of students to teach English the moment they graduate

- Section five, consists of only one question about teachers' point of view about didactics as a Master specialization.

4. Results and Discussion

As a global understanding of students' questionnaire results, it was clearly noticed that students' answers on the whole were very positive. This is because when looking globally to the different sections, it is directly understood that their opinions and attitudes towards the statements were entirely supporting the previous hypothesis concerning the significance of didactics in preparing students to become teachers and about their readiness and abilities. The majority agreed with almost all the statements which confront our hypothesis. Each section's results will be interpreted as following:

Section One: Collected data revealed different ages, the majority of them swung between 22 years and 30 years old, female dominance is also obvious. The third point was slightly connected to the research inquired about students' enjoyment in studying the field of didactics with two high positive responses: enjoy it very much and a lot.

Section two: A large number of participants declared that didactics participated in the readiness of students to teach EFL. With a similar high

number, they confirmed their understanding of the role of the teacher in teaching EFL.

Section Three: In this section, students fairly admitted that they know from 2-5 approaches, methods and a larger number of techniques of teaching English language.

Section Four: The participants stated that the study of didactics had a great effect on their attitudes which also made them think that theory based methodologies of teaching made teaching a more interesting career.

Section Five: Most participants declared that they have an acceptable or a high psychological concept of learning about didactics. Surprisingly, students almost had an equivalent share of background about classroom management, methods of teaching, facts about students, syllabus and lesson plan and problem solving. They had also admitted their awareness about their future students' characteristics and the variations among them.

Section Six: The teaching of Language Didactics, Literature Didactics and Culture Didactics in combination was generally considered helpful for students. Though, Language Didactics had more impact on students either as being students or for the future as prospective teachers.

Section Seven: The participants declared their readiness to start teaching EFL the moment they graduate. However, they believed that this shift will be a bit difficult.

Section Eight: One of the difficulties which students had faced and stood as an obstacle for them, was the lack of "application" or what is known as the practical training. They suggested that more studying hours should be added, organizing more conferences as well, and include other modules in order to study this field deeply, and lastly to engage more technology in their classroom. Finally, the research participants stated that they are luckier and have more chances to be good teachers than other students who are studying other specializations.

On the other hand, as it is previously stated, the purpose behind teachers' questionnaire was to obtain professional perceptions towards what is being undertaken in this research. The experienced teachers in TEFL in general and didactics specifically claimed their comfortability with the teaching of this field. Even though some teachers found that the program is not doing well, some others confirmed its acceptable effectiveness. Results from teachers' questionnaire strongly emphasized that the students have positive beliefs about their abilities as prospective teachers as well as the positive effect of didactics on their attitudes. Teachers focused mainly on the knowledge being transmitted to students as prospective teachers. Even though the teaching of Language Didactics, literature Didactics and culture Didactics in combination is helpful, teachers had mostly focused on language Didactics. More importantly, in section four, some teachers thought that the students have a good background about teaching and that they understand their role for the future; whereas some others think the opposite. All teachers claimed that they prepare their students for the shift from theory to application, part of them made it clear that their students are

ready for the shift and able to teach when they graduate. Finally, teachers strongly agreed with the opinion which says that studying didactics at university gives students more chances to be effective teachers comparing with other specializations.

Both teachers' questionnaire and students' questionnaire helped a lot in gaining the required data to confirm our research hypothesis, and to shed light on the field of didactics (the program itself) which is taught to Master degree students, as well as the suggestions of both students and teachers and the surrounding difficulties. Another promising finding was that students show a good understanding of the value of theories and principles for foreign language learning/teaching; and their capability for independent and critical evaluation of methods, forms of instruction and teaching material. This ensures the idea that students' cognitions and conceptions about the science of teaching are sufficient and that both of the proposed program and the faculty teachers served well in students' preparation for the shift to become teachers of English as foreign language. In addition, students' many-sided knowledge and their whole background made them aware of teacher's role, and are considered to be able and ready to enter to the work place and start teaching; agreeing with Kansanen (1990:17) who finds out that didactics is regarded as the professional and scientific basis for the teaching profession

We ended up with the following suggestions and recommendations:

- The lack of application is considered as an obstacle preventing students from acquiring more knowledge about teaching profession. Therefore, the learning environment should not be 'charged' only theoretically, but allowing students practical trainings with professional teachers are needed since it is an effective way to acquire (practical) knowledge.
- English language department should engage and work hard to put in use more technology throughout the Master program; to help students in many sides in their learning process.
- This research can be conducted (Experimental research) on experienced teachers (at least 3 years of teaching) who have Master degree in Didactics of Foreign Language and currently teaching EFL; to see the extent to which they find didactics useful in their teaching process, and if they rely upon its theories.

5. Conclusion

Our interest is in highlighting the positive effect of studying didactics and its role in preparing Master degree students to become EFL teachers, at the same time focusing greatly on students' evaluation of themselves, motivated the study presented here, with an emphasis on how a group of 151 undergraduate students in a Master degree program observed didactics and its role in teacher preparation. To that end we approached the context of the program taught focusing on the modules, as well as both students and teachers' opinions. Through this estimation of the data obtained, the results that we end up with are in accordance with our review of literature and in the direction of our research hypothesis; the results permit us to create a representative picture of the role of didactics in teacher preparation, bringing us to the three conclusions below.

The first is that the study of English language Didactics significantly provides practical guiding theoretical concepts through the empiric research of contexts concerning teaching and learning language. It also makes an important link between the scientific education at the university and the occupational field school.

The second conclusion is that the study of didactics proposes important theoretical knowledge and insight; which do play a significant part in understanding well the domain of teaching. Moreover, didactics is necessary for the prospective teacher to be made aware of his vocational responsibility and put him into the stream.

We finally concluded that Didactics of foreign Language introduces all the necessary elements and concepts which serve students to become effective teachers in the future. Moreover, students good understanding of the value of theories and principles for foreign language learning, their capability for independent and critical evaluation of methods, forms of instruction and teaching material made us ensure the idea that students 'cognitions and conceptions about the science of teaching are sufficient, and that both of the proposed program and teachers served well in students' preparation for the shift.

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