

Chapter 2

The Making of an English Department (1975–1982): A Personal Account



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Abstract The paper attempts to tell the story of the English department at Mohammed V University in Rabat for the period between 1975 and 1982, a period which roughly corresponds with the author’s three terms as chair. After a brief overview on the general background and the situation of higher education in Morocco, the document focuses on the multiple challenges of building and managing a foreign language department that saw enrolment increase at unsustainable rates. Challenges included the transformation of a French-based department of *études anglaises* to a theoretically based four-year EFL program with specializations in literature, linguistics and cultural studies; dealing with a centralized, politicized system and unwieldy curricula; and ensuring academic standards despite the constraints of insufficient teaching and library resources. It further details, in a highly concentrated manner, how the department met the challenges, introduced and generalized new pedagogic practices and made proposals that impacted the on-going debates on curricular reform, particularly the *license* program and the FF/CEUS 10-year experiment whose graduates from our department now constitute the mainstays of English in several Moroccan universities.

Keywords History of the English Department · EFL · Educational reform · Post-colonial university

2.1 Introduction

The first group of students to enroll in a program leading to a national degree in the humanities (the *licence ès-lettres* delivered by the *Université Mohammed V*) arrived in Rabat in October 1963, nearly six years after the official creation of this institution, on the premises of what had been, since the start of the Protectorate, the *Institut des hautes études marocaines*, a colonial social science and language research institute. This “cohort” had been the first to complete a Moroccan *baccalauréat*, as they had been the first group to study under the post-independence secondary

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school curriculum for the previous five years. From its official creation in December 1957, and the publication of the *Dahir*¹ establishing the *Université de Rabat*, its branches, the degrees it could deliver with their various requirements, and before a national program was gradually put into place (1959–1960), the *Faculté des lettres* continued to offer in parallel the French *licence* as a kind of annex to the university of Bordeaux. Most programs, faculty and the first dean after independence, as well as administrative staff, were nearly all French.

The system at that time was the same as in pre-1968 France, and was based, in the humanities program, on a *propédeutique*, or preparatory year, which all students had to pass, and the successful completion of three separate *certificats*. Course content and textbooks were no different from those in Bordeaux. Alongside other programs in social studies and languages (French, Arabic and Spanish), the institution offered a *licence* in English studies. Post-graduate programs were possible then in all sections for students who could pass what was called a fourth certificate—chosen from a different department—and a test which allowed registration in a *Diplôme d'études supérieures* (DES), consisting of the writing of a thesis, the main key at the time for an academic career. Doctorates could only be completed in France or elsewhere.

2.2 General Context

The 12 years between the admission at university of this first group of students holding Moroccan secondary school completion certificates and the first major reform of higher education in 1975 were characterized by a situation whose most salient features are outlined as follows:

1. That post-independence context was marked by the continuous struggle for power between the monarchy and the political parties issued from the various liberation groups that had fought French colonial rule, a struggle that played out mostly in the university and among the recently created labor unions, themselves projections of these political forces.² Activism and prolonged student and faculty strikes characterized the scene and could only expand with the steady rise in the student population and the creation of new universities in Fes, Marrakesh and in other cities.
2. Higher education was a major challenge for the government as well as for the opposition. For the government, the priority was to train as fast as possible the cadres the country needed in all the sectors (particularly in the education sector) to replace the French who for more than a decade after independence continued

¹Dahir n° 1-58-390 du 15 moharram 1379 (21 juillet 1959) portant création et organisation de l'Université de Rabat (*Bulletin Officiel* n° 2441 7/8/1959).

²The Istiqlal Party and the Union Nationale des Forces Populaires (UNFP), later the Union socialiste des forces populaires (USFP). Cf. *History of Morocco: A Work of Synthesis and Update*, edited by Mohammed Kabli (Rabat: Publications of the Royal Institute for Research on the History of Morocco, 2015, (627–645).

- to head the principal government agencies and to teach in secondary and tertiary institutions. For the opposition, the expanding university was fertile ground to recruit and strengthen their hold on educational institutions, a situation that came to constitute a real threat to the regime on several occasions, with the result of considerable conflict and repression.
3. For almost two decades, heated debates between the government and the opposition, and also among the main political opposition forces, centered on the three catchwords of *marocanisation* (the replacement of French personnel in government and in the education system), *arabisation* (the change from French to Arabic for the teaching of social studies and the humanities courses) and *démocratisation* (echoing French student revolts of May 1968), the call for elections—instead of royal nominations—of all university officials, rectors, deans, directors and department chairs.
 4. The rapid growth of the student population in the existing universities in Rabat and Casablanca (Faculty of Law), and particularly the fact that politically motivated strikes could and did paralyze the entire system for months at a time, led the government to build new universities, first in Fes and Marrakech, and later in all the major cities in Morocco with the result that the same model was now being replicated across the country and all the problems amplified. Demands for higher student grants, subsidized lodging and curricular reform, together with opposition to government attempts to institute any kind of *numerus clausus* to limit access to open-admission institutions, would cause stoppages and threats of *année blanche*, which actually occurred in 1972–1973.
 5. The period immediately preceding the Green March in November 1975 and the resulting political unanimity around the “national cause” provided an opportunity for the regime to end the “State of Exception” and integrate part of the moderate opposition in government. This opened the way for the various compromises and salary increases that enabled acceptance of the first significant reform of higher education. The implementation of the texts of 1975³ and of the various aspects of the reform allowed the first formal elections of university and institutional councils and of the heads of academic departments, of which ours took place in December 1976.

2.3 The Making of the English Department: Challenges on Many Fronts

The election was more like a cooptation with the unanimous decision taken one evening, in the home of one colleague⁴ to choose me as the only official candidate to head the department that had been renamed “Department of Anglo-Saxon Studies,”

³Dahir portant loi n° 1-75-102 du 13 safar 1395 (25 février 1975) relatif à l’organisation des universités *et alia*. *Bulletin officiel* n° 3252 du 26/2/1975.

⁴Assia Bensaleh Alaoui.

in order to include the section of German language and literature that had just been created.

The challenges we faced in that period could only be characterized as immense, and our teaching practice, a constant struggle to deal with countless administrative and pedagogical problems, and the flammable terrain of student activism, where not a week would pass without a handful of students disrupting classes and forcing everyone out.

2.3.1 The challenge of numbers

The 10 years leading up to the creation of the department were characterized by its popularity among students at our Faculty of Letters, particularly because, as has been mentioned, social studies and humanities programs were being “Arabicized.” Thus, each year, the number of students who enrolled in our department increased, often at an unsustainable pace, to arrive in 1976–1977 at more than 1000 officially registered students in the first year alone! Only the opening of several new departments in cities elsewhere would somewhat deflect the steep progression.

2.3.2 The challenge of systemic constraints

Throughout much of the history of higher education in Morocco, and until the advent of the three-year system introduced in the year 2000, where some leeway was legally allowed universities, academic programs leading to national degrees were determined sometimes by government decrees (1975), other times by ministerial decisions (1967), and consisted of lists of required courses, numbers of weekly teaching hours for each subject and rules for exams, particularly whether the subject is part of the category of written or oral exams. For decades, only students who passed written exams were allowed to sit for the orals, which meant there was an actual two-tier system for all departments, whereby subjects for the orals “did not count” and could be, and were often, skipped.

Once published in the official gazette, the *Bulletin Officiel du Royaume du Maroc*, programs could be modified only through the same centralized, politicized process, one which became more complicated as the number of institutions grew and all departments of the same nature had to conform to the same requirements. In addition, any proposed modification in the course or exam lists would be a pretext for multiple student strikes and boycotts. Further complications arose with the opening of new institutions in Fes, Marrakesh, Casablanca and other cities throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. When Rabat was the only university, the decision process involved the dean and the government department in charge of higher education. The dean would consult among his colleagues and propose to the minister in charge a revision of the “*régime des études et des examens en vue de l’obtention de la licence es-lettres délivrée par les facultés des lettres et sciences humaines*” (Program of Studies and

Examinations leading to the award of the *licence ès-lettres* conferred by Faculties of Letters). The dean would have to ram the project through, with or without the approval of faculty members who out of principle opposed any reform they did not draw up themselves (which really meant that it did not get the green light from the political forces represented on campus). With the relative détente following the reforms of 1975, the consultation process was now a little more open, and each academic department proposed its own grids of subjects and exams that the dean would transmit to the minister with amendments possible at any government level (e.g., adding an Islamic studies requirement for students of foreign languages). Not only professors within one department had to agree among themselves regarding what to teach, but all the similar ones rising across the country had to agree between themselves, because they were all legally entitled from day one to confer university degrees up to the doctorate.

2.3.3 *The challenge of staffing*

Unlike Arabic and Humanities departments where all lectures were delivered in amphitheatres, regardless of the number of officially registered students—a situation, to a large extent still prevailing today—the English department, whose purposes, missions and methods were in the process of being redefined, needed smaller classrooms, and limited-seating language laboratories. For our department, we had from the start built our teaching structure on the number of students who can fit in one of the classrooms assigned to us that could seat between 20 in the late 1960s to the maximum of about 60 when new, larger rooms were added to our allotment. Now, because all *baccalauréat*⁵ holding students could choose to register in any department they wished, we would not know the number of students we would have to teach until October or November. With every new academic year, we had to figure how many teacher hours we needed for each course and at every one of the four levels, and the maximum number of hours we could cover with existing staff. And even if we took into account the fact that many of our registered students never attended classes, appearing only for exams at the end of the year, we faced huge teaching gaps at the start of each academic year, especially for the new enrollments, a class bloated beyond capacity by the additional constraint that all the students who failed their annual exams were allowed to repeat as often as they wished. Squaring the circle for us meant forcing colleagues including this chairman to teach 14 h per week, making every one cover a portion of the program in the lower sections, introducing a minimum language teaching load (MLTL) for all lecturers who elsewhere in the institution would accept to teach only in their areas of specialization, relying on adjunct teachers (from secondary schools), and finally, resorting to hiring abroad.

⁵The Moroccan *baccalauréat* was delivered in several categories: *lettres modernes*, *sciences*, etc. Faculties of Sciences and Faculties of Medicine could only enroll students with scientific or technical *baccalauréats*. Engineering schools accepted only students with scientific *baccalauréats* who passed the two-year program and competitive exam of *Préparations aux Grandes Ecoles*. But Faculties of Letters were open to all students regardless of their *baccalauréat* specialization.

2.3.4 *A patchwork of profiles and academic cultures*

An English department that had for about a decade only to follow or adapt the system in force at French universities, and where French lecturers still constituted a majority, now faced a situation characterized by galloping student enrolment and necessity to cover teaching needs for all the registered students, not only within the department but also for all others as well for whom English had become a requirement. Furthermore, a few of us, young Moroccans who started teaching in that transition period alongside our French colleagues, had recognized at once the need to redesign our curriculum entirely, from the system of *études anglaises* that aimed to produce “scholars,” to a language-based program whose primary purpose was to prepare EFL teachers for the expanding Moroccan system, whereby students would need to acquire the necessary language skills in the first two years before taking on specialized courses in literature or linguistics. That meant a sharp revision of the proportion of lecturers with backgrounds in literature (a large majority) to others with qualifications in EFL and applied linguistics. At that time, there was no problem with the provision of budgeted teaching positions and the dean could propose to the Ministry for Recruitment any candidate we identified whose highest academic qualification was listed in the government decree on recruitment (DES, Doctorate or “equivalent” qualifications). Thus we were permanently in search for candidates with the right profile.

At any one time, and through the mid-1980s, faculty at the department included lecturers with a wide variety of backgrounds: the senior French professors who taught upper-level courses until their retirement or up to the time in the mid-1970s⁶ when the system called “substitution-cooperation” tapered away; younger Moroccan graduates from the 1960s and 1970s who had chosen to continue their post-graduate studies in French universities and who came back with a DES (with dissertations often written in French); others who had been offered grants by the British Council or the Fulbright Program to study in the UK or the US and whose Masters’ degrees in literature or linguistics were now recognized by the government as equivalent to the DES; others who showed up with post-graduate degrees from many countries in Europe and Canada; the increasing numbers of expatriates we started hiring in the UK when that avenue was opened by the government in 1976 (even if the salaries proposed were aligned with our very modest ones and considerably beneath the level needed to live on in Rabat); several from countries as diverse as Poland, Haiti and Australia; the occasional spouse of a diplomat that the department was too happy to host; senior secondary school teachers we had invited to join us to “service” other departments and encouraged to enroll in our DES program; and later, the best of our graduates from 1969 to 1979 we had sent on Moroccan government scholarships to

⁶Moroccan institutions of higher education could have as many *coopérants* (paid by both governments) who applied, as they were still needed for positions in science and technology, but also in foreign language departments including English.

study in the UK, and who for the most part took linguistics and applied linguistics courses. Thus the diversity of profiles, lengths of stay at the department (from less than a year to full careers), competencies and abilities, backgrounds, systems of grading exams and motivations for joining provided a considerable challenge for us to ensure the harmony, integrity and continuity we felt responsible for providing.

2.3.5 Redefining the mission of the department

The most important challenge for us in this regard was how to arrive at some form of consensus among the few of us Moroccans now in charge of running our department regarding the principles and objectives that should inform our program. We all recognized that the old French model of a scholarly *licence* in *études anglaises* which most of us had followed (with its emphasis on reading and *explication de texte* drawn from a list of representative works that changes every two years) was adapted neither to the masses we now had to teach nor to the needs of the country. But there were still sharp differences among us on how to proceed with the definition of our mission as an English department. Should we elaborate programs to replicate our own academic itinerary, one that enabled us to get into and succeed in US and UK university Master's and Ph.D. programs with their foundations of scholarship and approaches courses, the emphases on heavy reading, and focus on canonic works from English and American culture including Shakespeare? Should we prepare our students for an ELT career to which at that time nearly all of them aspired, and give them the best tools to enter the competitions required for admission in the *Ecole normale supérieure*, (ENS), the teacher training school that would become in the 1980s the Faculty of Educational Science)? Or should we think "ideologically" or "post-colonially" and make our programs serve the national interest by making our future graduates read works in English on Morocco (and by extension, the Muslim world and Africa), be able to translate them into our language and also be competent in the transmission of our own culture to the English-speaking world?

Despite such conflicting visions and political positions of their proponents, we all agreed on the necessity to provide a solid two-year basic program in English to all our students with emphasis on reading, speaking and writing, before the gradual introduction of courses in literature, linguistics and cultural studies. In these three areas most high-level courses would be taught during the fourth and final year with a research project all students would have to complete and "defend." The difficulties arose about how much to include in these areas of specialization within the limits of teaching hours imposed, and with the scant academic resources on hand. For example, in the case of the upper-level course entitled "The Novel," the late professor Fouzia Rhissassi and I (with the late Professor Mohammed Abu-Talib, the most senior Moroccan faculty in the department at that time) had to propose a reading list which because of numerous factors including all the other courses the students had, and the requirement for a year-long research project, could not exceed two works of fiction

taught by each of us from English and American literature. This was a perpetual preoccupation even if in the end we chose and taught for decades what we considered the major figures behind the “modern renaissance” (James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and DH Lawrence that Professor Rhissassi would teach and William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway and F Scott Fitzgerald that *I* would have to teach changing individual titles every two years). I remember once being invited by the dean to justify my choice of Faulkner’s *Light in August* in a Moroccan, Muslim university curriculum having himself been made aware of the cultural and narrative complexities by a relative of his, a student in the department, had discussed with him.

2.3.6 *The Library*

Heir to the collections that the *Institut des hautes études marocaines* had accumulated over half a century (part of which was unique and attracted researchers worldwide), substantial collections of books, journals and manuscripts not only centered on Morocco naturally but also on Arabic philosophy and related subjects, the library of our Faculty possessed none of the resources necessary for an English department in the modern sense. There were no reference works, encyclopedias, bibliographies or even anthologies of English and American literature. There were none of the resources one would need to conduct even basic research. When my colleagues drafted me in December 1976 to head the department, I checked the library to see what works our students could rely on. Apart from a handful of bilingual dictionaries necessary for translation courses, we found only a few donated paperbacks! Fulbright visiting professors had an allowance for teaching materials they would bring from the United States and leave in the small department office at the end of the year. But these resources, available only to lecturers in that small office called “Room 40,” consisted merely of the two-dozen essential texts the visiting professors would need for each of their course assignments and included titles in American literature and “civilization.” Our students never consulted the central library that was organized in the traditional manner, like a museum. No open stacks, no book loan was possible. The patron would consult the card catalogue, write a request on a slip of paper, hand it to an employee; wait for an hour or more for the book to be located and brought in and then read it on the spot. The whole process ended at closing time at six when the book had to be handed back. From 1963 on, all of our English department students and lecturers used the good British Council library and the smaller one belonging to the American cultural center. Despite the nature of these foreign cultural institutions, one could easily argue that without the assistance of these two institutions, there would have been no English department.

2.4 The Making of the English Department: Main Contributions

With an exclusive focus now on the period under consideration, the seven years in which all the problems it seems had reached a peak, I shall try to review, from my point of view as one of the actors in the developments at that period, albeit with different emphases and order of presentation, what I think were the principal responses to the various challenges we faced and how we dealt with them, with the understanding that since all the issues were interrelated, a minimal description of the context will always be necessary, often with some relation between the situation before and after, and also, the contrast between us and other departments, with the assumption always that the readers of this document are aware of the basic contours of the Moroccan higher education system.

In this review of the construction of the department, I shall try to outline, within the systemic and cultural constraints we were facing, how we decentralized and took over the administration of own departmental affairs, how we dealt with student numbers and the endemic shortage and unevenness of teaching resources, how we adapted and impacted the centralized system, and how our successes made the government pick among us so many colleagues to lead a number of institutions of higher learning. I shall not omit in this account, even if it is easy to justify at hindsight, what I consider the two major failures in that seven-year record: the appalling attrition rates for students in the first two years and the dearth of published research by members of our department.

2.4.1 *Administration of the Department*

From the start, in the early 1960s, professors at the Faculty of Letters were responsible for teaching their own areas of specialization, dividing the various duties among themselves in a collegial manner, with considerable deference to seniority in lecturing assignments. Under the responsibility of the dean, himself a senior scholar, plethoric administrative staffs were in charge of everything else, from first-time registration of students to timetabling to the organization of annual exams, all the way until the results were published and the degree certificates signed by the Secretary General. With the multiplication of students, came the multiplication of problems, relating to courses that might go unfilled for most or even for the whole year and particularly the problems of candidates contesting exam results. If a scheduled slot with no one assigned to teach it would rarely matter (the tacit understanding being that a subject not covered is a subject that will *not* be “drawn” for the final exam, in effect a reduction of the study load), it was notorious that the integrity of the entire exam process was more than questionable.

In the English department we took complete charge of all the administrative aspects of running our own department, except for first-time registration and issuance

of students' ID cards. We used English (instead of French and later Arabic) to communicate with our students, about every matter concerning them, from first and second-year assignments to "groups," to course and language laboratory schedules, to the required textbooks they all had to have (compared with the *polycopiés* current in most other departments).⁷ We took responsibility for course distribution among ourselves using a different approach, one that was student-oriented, matching the offer with the demand, for example requiring all colleagues to teach courses outside their areas of specialization, among other reasons, to fit with our common objective of building English language competence among all student in the first two levels before introducing them to various literature and linguistics courses.

We listed students in uniform groups for the first two years, assuming that about half the repeaters will not attend classes, particularly after the government decided to stop or halve the grants if the students failed in their exams. We made sure that if on paper the numbers of registered students ranged from 40 to 50 per section, we would have in actuality only about two dozen in each, enough to provide adequate tuition and considerably fewer than all the other humanities departments for whom the capacity (200–500) of the lecture hall was and still is the only measure. We dealt with any questions or requests (and with frequent intermediations) about transferring students from one group to another (for timetable convenience or the sometimes erroneous perception that a colleague is too lenient or too severe in grading or has a good reputation or otherwise), proving quite inflexible in not upsetting the fragile balance we tried to maintain at all times, and the fact that each of the many groups taught by so many different colleagues, with a single exam for all at the end of the year, would have its own mix of good and bad time slots and rooms, native and non-native speakers of English, senior and newly hired professors, and a host of other considerations.

2.4.2 *Course description and coordination*

In a break from current practice, where the rule is one professor, one subject, one mark for the end-of-the-year exam, we mandated close coordination between all lecturers sharing the same course assignments. We instituted a practice that did not exist before, the writing of detailed course descriptions of each of the headings listed,⁸ including

⁷Course materials in medicine, sciences, social sciences and the humanities were typed on stencil and bound into booklets under the professor's name and sold in dedicated shops. In some specializations, these *polycopiés* were the only resources available for students, who all considered at that time that the sole requirement is to memorize the contents.

⁸Examples of headings from the text in effect between 1974 and 1981: "Deuxième Année (second year)/Comprehension and grammar 5/Essay and précis/Translation 2" etc., in Arrêté du ministre de l'éducation nationale n° 297-74 du 3 chaoual 1398 (3 octobre 1973) portant réorganisation du régime des études et des examens en vue de la licence ès lettres (*Bulletin Officiel* n° 3207, page 606).

content of weekly units, reading and writing assignments and periodic quizzes and so on. As the groups continued to increase in numbers and the base of the pyramid was getting wider and wider—a single grammar course came to be taught by up to 12 of us, each assigned an individual group—we realized the importance of coordination and continuous adjustment of our criteria and pedagogic practice. To make sure the intractable scheduling will not prevent any colleague from attending these meetings, we freed everybody from teaching duties one afternoon per week, a Wednesday, reserving that time slot for unifying our approaches, developing and testing teaching tools. In time, these sessions grew into weekly continuous training seminars for all of us considering the unevenness of profiles we represented.

2.4.3 *Exam administration*

As mentioned, the conditions and requirements for the administration of exams leading to the award of national degrees were all defined in the relevant published government documents. For each program, a list of exams, divided between written and orals, was fixed. The regulations stated that only students who passed the written exams were allowed to sit for the orals, that the pass mark was the average of 10 out of 20 on the combined courses and that only the mark of “Absent” or 0 out of 20 was *éliminatoire* and would disqualify a candidate. (This meant a student could theoretically pass the session if s/he obtains 1 out of 20 in one course, 19 out of 20 in another and 10 out of 20 in a third one). Also, the examination “regime” stated that the proposed subjects would be submitted to the dean who alone can choose which questions will be “drawn” for the two exam sessions and which will remain in his safe for a spare in case of a leak or a material emergency that come during exam time. Not even the lecturers involved knew whether the subject they proposed will be “drawn,” with the result that in some departments the rule was if a professor’s exam question was selected he would have to read and grade hundreds of exam papers, whereas others could be allowed an early vacation! The entire process had to be carried under the personal supervision of the dean and the vice dean, with a small measure of confidential consultation with the head of the department, but only if he so chooses, during the selection of exam questions.

For more illustration, according to the current rules, each of 10 colleagues or more would have to submit to the dean’s office three sealed envelopes, each containing individual proposals for an exam, say for the 3-h course entitled “Grammar.” The dean would select three papers and print only one during exam time, leaving another for the second session and one as a spare. Centralization and anonymity were part of the system. From the beginning of the 1970s, the department started to do some of the preliminary work and have all colleagues teaching the same subject agree among themselves before submitting the three proposals. In time though, with the numbers of groups and colleagues teaching in the first year rising from about four to six to twelve (just before Casablanca opened its campus in 1981 and eased some of the

pressure on us). It is during these meetings in which colleagues had to submit to their peers their proposed exam questions and agree on what a correct answer should be that the department found its direction as it were. According to current practice, the exam question could have consisted, for example, of a one-line sentence such as “The Past Perfect.” It could also be a 10-sheet package with students required to fill in blanks, answer yes-and-no or multiple-choice questions, or write short paragraphs, the standard fare of ELT handbooks we were using. If the first was like a Russian roulette, the system we had pursued and developed aimed to test most of the language items taught throughout the year. Pre-testing all three proposed exams before submitting them to the dean became a priority. Preparing examination questions for a whole year and for all “written” subjects in the first two levels became a course in curriculum development for all of us and extremely useful to all, with few contesting the time spent or pointing to the colleagues elsewhere who were “sovereign” in whatever they taught or how they examined their students, no matter the grading inconsistencies.

Also, because none of the dean’s staff in charge of typing and duplicating exam questions in a kind of safe room could do so in English, we did our own typing, proofreading, and everything else, all on stencils, ready for duplication by the dean on exam day. We were all required to invigilate, whereas elsewhere only the professors whose subjects were “drawn” would need to. Even when numbers had reached unsustainable levels, we continued the requirement of double grading all exam papers to avoid discrepancies. During the deliberation process, in which all exam papers were to be unsealed—at that time exam papers were anonymous—we entered the marks in an official *procès verbal* (PV) or ledger with the columns of student names and tested subjects. Once this phase was completed with all the marks collated, averaged and entered, the deliberations could start. All students with a cumulative 50% and above were *admissibles* automatically and could take their orals about two weeks later. All those with marks below 47% of the possible total failed that session and could go home to cram for the next one. All borderline cases had to be discussed individually by all the teachers of the level, and if there is no disagreement on “giving them a chance,” conditionally admitted to take the orals, provided they make up the points needed for their overall averages. I mention all these details to say that all of us had a say on all matters involving the fate of our students for any of the four levels and tried as much as possible to avoid arbitrary evaluations. To forestall the kind of problems endemic elsewhere, we did our own collating of student grades, typed the lists of *admissible* or *admis*. Everyone was aware that the more time between “jury” deliberations and the announcement or posting of the results, the more possibilities for clerical or intentional errors and the less reliable these results. We struggled to maintain 100% credibility at a huge cost to those of who ran the department, including 16-h days when we took responsibility to ensure students heard the results directly from us on the days marked for deliberations and not see them posted on a board a day or more after the “juries” had filed out of the meeting room.

2.4.4 *Fourth-year research papers*

Two years before the reform of 1975, the government had instituted the obligation for students in their final year in all the departments to write a “30-to-50-page” research paper consisting of a lengthy piece of scholarship, under the supervision of a lecturer or a full professor.⁹ It was up to the individual supervisor to submit a mark on the paper, at the end of the year, a mark officially entered in the oral exam column. Standards and requirements for these supposedly yearlong research activities varied wildly from one department to the next, and often within the same department. I remember looking at announcements whereby a professor was informing his 60 supervisees about a deadline for submitting their final papers! Individual meetings with students varied from once a month to once a year and often took place in corridors or the central courtyard since there was no office space at the time. Plagiarism and the “recycling” of topics were rife. Also, students would flock to a few supervisors but would shun many others according to individual reputations for being generous or stingy graders. There was apparently no problem with a professor supervising just one or all of 60 students in the same section. Cronyism and grade inflation on this supposedly major exercise affected most *licence* programs and contributed to the general weakening of academic standards.

What our department introduced was the concept of the seminar. On the basis of detailed, written proposals we selected among our lecturers and full professors the topics that we could supervise in literature, linguistics and cultural studies, topics that would change from year to year, to avoid “recycling” papers. We validated these collectively in the department, creating student sub-groups with minimum and maximum number of slots. We printed the descriptions of these seminars in a booklet (without providing the names of the supervisors) and opened registration for all the sections offered—not only after the academic year had got underway in late October, as was the case for all the others, but immediately after the final exams, to allow our students to do the recommended preliminary reading over the summer, and also for us to be able to order from abroad whatever textbooks or resources would be needed. Only after the students had signed up for their seminar that they would meet their supervisor who would provide guidance and urge the students to study as much as possible before the full academic year begins and all the heavy courses. We instituted weekly two-hour meeting requirements and assigned a time slot in the official schedule and a room for these small group meetings. Since we did not have any formal meeting space for these seminars—the department itself had just one room for the chairperson and another for the secretary—we had to find a solution, which, we did by persuading the dean to add to our list of 16 allotted classrooms a small facility we had identified as a possibility, if it could be repurposed and redone.¹⁰ The dean agreed to our request and we used that room, which we tagged XL, to host up to 10 afternoon seminars sessions per week, and to conduct other department business in the mornings.

⁹ Arrêté n° 297-74 *op cit*, p. 606.

¹⁰ XL for “ex-loo.”

I would conclude this item by stating that thanks to this seminar system (copied later by other foreign-language departments), we managed to teach the small groups of 7–12 students the rudiments of expository writing and scholarly research, and approaches to literary criticism, linguistics and cultural foundation courses through focus on a common topic, reading lists, and, most importantly, weekly homework, and would evaluate their progress from first draft to a final paper ready to be “defended,” in front of two examiners, whereas most supervisors elsewhere would only see the 40–50 page work in its final form at exam time. This enabled our better graduates to make it to some of the most sought-after Masters’ programs in the US, the UK and Canada. There was enough of a pool of qualified applicants when we managed to ram through new FF (post-graduate) program in 1982.¹¹

2.4.5 *Impacting curricular reform*

As pointed out, the 1967–1968 reform toward the four-year curriculum had seen the shift from the traditional French-inherited system of *études anglaises*, with emphasis on content around the three main “pillars” of Philology, Literature and “Civilization,” to an EFL program with up to 18 weekly student hours devoted to speaking, reading and writing skills in the first two years. The next phase before the implementation of the provisions of the 1975 *Dahir* saw curricular revisions that had been imposed in exceptional circumstances that included “aberrations” we had to deal with when we re-structured the department in 1976. For example, the course entitled “Composition,” had been placed in the “orals” category. How could we examine our students’ writing orally? There was a slot labeled “Islamic civilization,” which was supposed to be taught in English with no one in the entire university with the linguistic ability to teach it. We had no option but to insert instead courses like “Introduction to Literature” and then test our students on their writing skills in a written exam under a different heading. Those decisions entailed acrobatics, such as keeping the official Arabic title on the exam ledgers and entering marks on the subjects we had actually taught throughout the year. The students’ grade transcripts we issued in English corresponded to what we taught, whereas the official PVs had different headings. In hindsight we were fortunate that not a single failing student or parent—and failure rates then, especially in the first 2 years were abysmal—knew enough about the law to sue the university in the administrative courts in order to annul the results of several exam sessions, simply because what we did had not been in entire accordance with the relevant ministerial *arrêté*.

During the several years after 1976, and amid all the discussion about the “reform” and “reforming the reform,” and how to adapt curricula, all departments in Rabat and the other cities where new institutions had opened (Fes, Marrakesh, Oujda,

¹¹CEUS. Décret n° 2-82-435 du 16 rebia II 1403 (31 janvier 1983) fixant le régime des études et des examens en vue de l’obtention du certificat d’études universitaires supérieures en langues et sciences humaines. *Bulletin officiel* n° 3666 du 18 rebia II 1403 (2/2/1983).

Casablanca and several others later), had to discuss government propositions for a new structure for the four-year *licence*. Each department debated among their members every detail of course content, teaching loads, the introduction of new “options,” the re-distribution of courses at the four levels and many other considerations. At the same time, and from the angle of their own backgrounds, each was trying to impose their own individual academic vision and practice to the proposed program architecture. One rare item of agreement was to unify the number of courses and the total number of hours for each level across all departments, and ensure that students had the same number of exams (written and oral) for each session. These had varied widely, from section to section and often generated frequent problems. Another concerned the degree of detail in the definition of the course headings that would become enshrined in the *décret*. Should one slot for example be “The Novel: 3 hours,” “The Modern Novel: 3 hours,” or two separate courses “The Victorian Novel: 1 and a ½ hours,” and “The American 19th Century Novel: 1 and a ½ hours.”

Throughout years of having to live with flaw-filled programs while trying to influence the upcoming reform, our English department had focused on offering more EFL courses, a freer labeling of headings and the elimination of the irrelevant distinction between *Cours magistraux*, *Travaux pratiques/Travaux dirigés*—a distinction that impacted teaching loads—in order to give all student contact hours the same weight.¹² This also was the time of the introduction of new subjects like African literature, cultural studies and literary survey courses.

Our contribution to the debate was further complicated by the fact that across the three working languages of Arabic, French and English, terms and concepts meant different things to different departments. Between the concept of “course” in English and *cours* (lecture) in French, and between “course” and *madda* (discipline) in Arabic the differences were more than linguistic. The habit for program setting had always been focused on the broader “discipline” with little guidance on actual content. “Philology” or “Literature” or “History” could mean anything the individual lecturer wanted it to be, which in the end did not matter too much since as we pointed out, the professor was “sovereign” in lecturing on whatever topic within the *madda* and examining students on that content.

The compromise curricular “architecture” we contributed to implementing, after months of argumentation and debates, horizontal (across various disciplines) and vertical (involving lecturers within the same or a similar department), was finally built on a series of extraordinary compromises in which it would be the departments who would ultimately define course content and determine the respective importance devoted to each component. There would be 10 units (courses/*matières/madda*) for each department at each of the four levels. Departments would be allowed to reserve each unit to a single course, or divide it in two or even three sub-units. Within the agreed-upon cap of 22 h per week, a unit could be covered in 1–4 h per week and would be subject at the end of the year to either a written or an oral examination

¹²Most institutions used the formula to distinguish between lectures delivered in amphitheaters (*cours magistraux* by full professors) and *travaux dirigés/travaux pratiques* taught in smaller rooms and laboratories by *assistants* and *maître assistants*.

depending on its rank in the list. All 10 subjects had to be ranked from 1 to 10, the first 5 being reserved for the written exams, and the others to be evaluated in oral tests. In this category were placed among others ancillary courses like languages for the Humanities, and some Humanities and Arabic language courses in our foreign language departments. Here also, and for all the programs, the not-too-reliable mark given on the final “30–50 research paper” was listed in the orals category and weighted to count for half of the exam, hence it contributed to the level of *mention* or “distinction” on the degree certificate from *Passable* (50% average), to *Très bien* (80%). In the English department, we evaluated the students’ papers by both the supervisor and another colleague and those of our students with “*Bien*” or “*Très bien*” were usually admitted on this basis in post-graduate programs here and abroad.

One other set of compromises inspired by the English department’s needs for more leeway in designing examinations was the imposition of the 3 + 2 exam subjects. Across all the departments, all lecturers responsible for “units” listed from 1 to 5 would have to submit three exam proposals (“chosen or composed”) from the first five and 2 marks for the five oral subjects even if that process involved “drawing lots.” The average pass mark for the written would be 30 out of 60 and 50 out 100 after the oral session when the marks on these subjects are figured in.¹³

It must be added here that that reform also witnessed a revision of the system of exam administration: From the two sessions in June and October that would in time and with the steady student increases take up anywhere from 4 to 6 weeks to oversee and administer manually in that pre-computer age. The total amount of time needed to administer exams came to equal or take up more than that spent teaching! The awkward compromise proposals that were finally accepted kept two sessions still, one “written exam” session in early May, followed 6 weeks later by a second written session, and a common oral exam period for all *admissibles* that would be scheduled as soon as the results of the second session were published and would continue through the entire month of July. Another compromise allowed the students with general averages under the *admissible* level to keep the marks on the course or courses they would have passed, marks that would be recorded for the June session.

Although awkward and constraining, this curricular architecture allowed the department to define precisely the English-language competence all our students needed to master in order to move from one level to the next, and we had built as pointed out, the two higher-level options around the general objective of enabling any of our graduates to acquire the knowledge and linguistic skills that could get them accepted in an MA program in the UK or the US, with more specialized courses and considerable written work during the seminar. The consequence was failing students who could not reach the minimum academic level we considered necessary.

¹³Décret n° 2-82-472 du 16 rebia II 1403 (31 janvier 1983) portant réforme du régime des études et des examens en vue de l’obtention du diplôme de la licence ès lettres *Bulletin Officiel* n°: 3666 (02/02/1983).

2.4.6 *The new FF program*

That period of vertiginous expansion of higher education in Morocco, and after the political class had retreated on several timid attempts to channel enrolment and allow departments to decide how many new students they could admit based on their available resources, the government had no choice then but to continue expanding the map of higher education, with new faculties of letters being built or planned for opening at the rate of one or even two each year. Where the existing minimum three-year DES program could only produce a trickle of qualified lecturers, and nearly none in English, the Ministry mandated our Faculty and the one in Fes (the two “senior” faculties at the time) to elaborate and propose a new program that could “guarantee” the “training” – hence the French term of *formation des formateurs* (FF) applied to the program – of a number of graduates with the minimum academic skills to teach in the institutions soon to receive students.

After endless convoluted debates again, arguments and counterarguments with government legislators for whom the proposed program to be introduced, since it will lead to the award of a national degree that automatically entitles the holder to enter government service in universities, it had to confirm in all ways to their current standards and criteria. Generally inspired by our experience of the universities in the US and the UK where we had done our work, we designed and proposed an entirely new architecture that would apply to all the other departments as well. Here are the main outlines.

For “political” reasons, the DES would remain the principal degree for hiring assistant lecturers or *Maîtres-assistants*. That qualification had always been equivalent to the French *Doctorat de 3ème cycle* of which the main requirement was a one-year lecture course with a final written exam at the end of the year that enables the successful candidate to officially register the topic of a thesis under the supervision of a full professor. There was no limit to the number of years for submission and for the defense. The DES diploma allowed automatic hiring in any institution of higher learning and needed only approval of the dean, who may or may not have to consult the department in question.

However, the compromise DES that we proposed would now have two separate tracks: the first would be to maintain the old bottle-neck open-admission CEC that could produce at the end of the long line only a trickle of qualified candidates for academic positions, two or three per year at most for the larger departments, and only one in the entire period under consideration for our English Department. The second, because government planners insisted on providing a minimum number of *assistants* for all the institutions being build, would be a totally different, full-time, two-year program with the award of a certificate we conceived as roughly equivalent to the UK/US Master of Arts we named CEUS (*Certificat d’études universitaires spécialisées*) to distinguish it from the CEC.

The new two-year avenue would differ from the *licence* and run the full course before a new cohort is enrolled.¹⁴ No student would be allowed to repeat and the average pass mark was raised. Each program would have a different disciplinary emphasis to allow for some diversity, under the professorship of a senior, highly noted academic. The purpose was to alternate fields and areas of research and cover some of the range of fields in the official programs. Admission would be based on a highly selective national competition that any holder of a first degree who aspires for an academic career and who commits to the objectives of the program would need to pass. Most importantly, the national competition for entry into the program would allow each section to select a maximum number of students (from 15 in our department to about 25 for the larger ones of Arabic, History and Geography).

As far as content was concerned, our department proposed to move away from discipline-based headings to new curricular designations based on course classifications common to all disciplines in literature and the humanities: There would be foundations courses, review-of-the-literature courses, approaches courses, specialized topics courses, genre courses, research methods courses, a thesis-supervision course, as well as other types, and we knew the government legislators would not accept a “shell” without a precise definition of content for each and every academic discipline. In the end a single table was published in the *décret* of 1982 with a list of articles outlining rules for *all* specializations. It would be up to each section to elaborate specific programs and adapt their precise contents to the new strictures.

Graduates of the CEUS would be assigned to one of the newer institutions as *assistants*, and would be named full *maîtres-assistants* as soon as they completed their DES thesis, for which a maximum period of three years for completion had been instituted. For most, the research undertaken in the first two years would have already prepared them the completion of a substantial piece of scholarship in a much shorter period than usual, because many of the needed academic resources and the daily presence of a supervisor had been provided. Further motivation was the substantial salary increase that would come with the higher rank.

For the “horizontal” cross-department dimension of the program all sections would have the same weight, that is, the same number of units and number of weekly hours, and configurations of courses as outlined above. As far as our English department was concerned, this FF program was a historic opportunity that enabled us to select among hundreds of candidates for a number of years beginning in 1982–1983 the best qualified students, further motivated by the fact that most of them had been teaching English in provincial schools, and the prospect of a university career in a major city proved a powerful magnet.

Needless to say that when the CEUS programs were published in the *BO* considerable objections arose throughout the system and other departments needed considerable persuasion. Only the fact that the professors in charge of the first cohorts had unquestionable credentials and were highly respected in academia, that the process

¹⁴The competition for the CEUS program would be open every two years, with no concurrent classes whereas registration for the *licence* is done every year.

went through and the institutions managed to graduate several generations of scholars most are now the mainstays of higher education in Morocco. It must be added here that the role of the Minister was crucial at the time because he had just been promoted head of government (while keeping the education portfolio) and put the bureaucracy in front of the impossible choice of either approving the revolutionary architecture or face the prospect of tens of thousands of students without lecturers.

2.5 Conclusion

I shall end this personal account of the making of the English department in Rabat with a highly condensed, naturally subjective and partial assessment of what may be considered from a backward glance over four decades our main successes and failures suggesting at the same time how the former explains or justifies the latter and vice versa.

Beyond impacting the *licence* and FF reforms at the end of the period under investigation, and the planting of many seeds that would find their way into general acceptance by the system over three decades, the first and obvious success lay perhaps in the continuous popularity of our department, even after several others had opened elsewhere during that period, and the government had imposed restrictions on admissions based not on the students' secondary school record but on the city where they had sat for their *baccalauréat*. As the pressure of numbers kept growing throughout the 1970s and 1980s we tried at all costs to maintain the academic level (and the perceived value) of our diplomas. Sadly enough from our perspective now, the standards we fought to uphold could only be achieved at the huge cost of failing so many of our students, especially in the first two years. If we consider in rough terms the fact that about 20% of our students could and would achieve the desired competence in four years, and the bottom 20% never made it past the first level, the mass of students in between, those 60% or more who kept repeating and trying until they graduated if ever after 6 or 8 years, I believe we should have done more for that category of students who were victim of the open-admission system, and our own rigid criteria, particularly since equivalent-level students in other universities kept graduating and benefit from all the advantages afforded by the degree certificates.

On another level, the manner in which observers perceived the work of our department, how we dealt on a daily basis with a complicated machine handled by so many different operators, or to use another expression, how we sustained the unsustainable, all led to the positive perception of our department. We relied on collective effort, organization and demonstrated fairness and objectivity, and the results of our examinations were considered by all as "credible." Even if the highly "politicized" system could not allow it, the perception was that this department, if given the opportunity, could come up with innovative solutions for the reform of the entire system. Also, in the course of that decade we came into contact directly or indirectly with all the constituencies that mattered, which gave us considerable understanding of the "terrain" and experience in problem-solving. As a group, we were considered hardworking,

dedicated and able professionals. Graduates from our department had no problems passing entrance examinations in teacher-training schools, or finding jobs outside the secondary school teaching track, and many of the top ones were competent enough to receive grants for higher studies abroad. Paradoxically again, all this was the reason the government, looking for individuals with considerable organization and managerial skills who would be capable of starting a higher education institution from scratch, and running a complex half-academic, half-administrative organization, selected so many of us for nomination to higher duties. In the decades of the 1970s and 1980s a high proportion among us were “promoted” as vice-deans, deans, directors, university presidents, ambassadors and even government ministers.¹⁵ The paradox here is that the department was gradually depleted of its most dynamic elements even if it continued to live for decades on its past achievements. All of us had no choice in accepting such responsibilities because we knew that from these positions of influence we would have wider impact.

Finally, we could argue that the collective achievements of the English department in Rabat in the 1970s and 1980s happened at the expense of our own individual academic research, with most of us unable to publish much in our field after our Ph.D. dissertations. It is easy enough now to justify that by the lack of library resources, especially in literature (which until the advent and generalization of the internet and the availability of on-line resources) were close to nil as mentioned. The efforts required by heavy teaching loads, all the hours spent on coordination and administration, the fact that we pursued a policy of allowing colleagues accepted in prestigious Ph.D. programs three or four years’ leave (taking on their teaching loads) and the higher responsibilities we could not refuse to assume just made it impossible for us to advance our individual research pursuits. One source of satisfaction is that once the department had reached its cruising speed as it were, and the system stabilized in the final decade of the century, it became possible for a younger generation of faculty to produce respectable research in areas where they made notable contributions in cultural and popular studies, linguistics, and in comparative literature, and for a few of us, in the field of higher education research.

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¹⁵Assia Bensaleh Alaoui, Mohammed Dahbi, Said Graiouid, Lahcen Haddad, Bouchaib Bouyahaoui Idrissi, Abdelkrim Kriem, Abdelhamid Lotfi, Mohammed Laamiri, Hassan Mekouar, Nagib Mokhtari, Driss Ouaouicha, Mohammed Saleh Tamek, Fouzia Rhissassi.