

IS THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM WEAKENING? A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PROFICIENCY TESTS

Abstract:

The paper reports on a comparative study of two populations of students in a proficiency test; the first population concerns a sample of first year students we tested in 1996 for first year students enrolled in the English department in 2005, and tested in 2006. Both populations received the same treatment: a our Magister thesis; the second concerns sociological questionnaire, and three tests aiming at evaluating their competence in English. The sociological questionnaire showed that the student body has changed in the intervening time. The results of the tests proved to be enlightening in the fact that the 2006 test-takers performed less well than their 1996 counterparts, particularly in the Cloze test.

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ملخص

يعرض هذا المقال دراسة مقارنة بين نتائج مجموعتين من الطلبة في اختبار حول تمكنهم من اللغة. تتشكل المجموعة الأولى من طلبة السنة الأولى الذين تم اختبارهم سنة 1996. وتتكون المجموعة الثانية من طلبة انخرطوا في قسم الإنجليزية عام 2005. تعرضت المجموعتان لنفس الاختبار، والذي يتكون من مجموعة أسئلة اجتماعية، وثلاثة اختبارات تهدف إلى تقييم مدى تمكنهم من اللغة الانجليزية. ويبين تحليل أجوبة الطلبة عن الأسئلة الاجتماعية بأن التكوين الاجتماعي لمجموعة الطلبة تغير خلال الفترة بين الدراستين. كانت نتائج اختبارات القدرات مثيرة للاهتمام إذ تبين أن طلبة 2005 تحصلوا على نتائج أدنى مستوى من طلبة 1996، خصوصا في اختبار ملء الفراغات.

Introduction

The main concern of this research is to see if such assertion as "the academic standards are declining", an assertion that teachers, educators, parents and the wider social environment have been uttering for many years now, can be rational. The rationale of this study stands on the assumption that with a great dissatisfaction on the part of lecturers of their students entering University, there is a need for research into the processes and causes of this increasing dissatisfaction. If this claim is substantiated, the present research would provide guidance for institutions, instructional materials, national educational policy and curriculum development. As part of the general climate to improve and somewhat maintain quality in Education, the level of students in general and the level of those who chose to study English at University in particular, are becoming of increasing interest, and questioning to the profession and their cause (s) stimulated the present research.

Recent and less recent publications in Algeria ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6]) attest that the level of students does not comply with teachers' expectations, and that the standards are declining. The originality of this article is that despite the so maligned standards referred to in literature, little research in Algeria has been really, and concretely devoted to this issue. For De Queiroz [7], this question itself is as old as school. Baudelot & Establet [8] proposed to refute this thesis by showing that standards are on the contrary on the up. To this end, they applied two parameters: first, the university degrees awarded in France from 1969 to 1998, and second the scores obtained by two generations of conscripts (1967 and 1982) in general tests devised by the army. For the first parameter, because of the inflation of diplomas, they naturally found that the number of people leaving university with a diploma was getting higher through the years. As for the second parameter, they found that the mean score in 1967 was 10 and in 1982 it was 13.5. However, Leger [9] found some disparities in their conclusions founded on a higher number of baccalaureate holders in 1982. Furthermore, Baudelot & Establet's conclusion somehow diverges from their main thesis: the results are on the up but gaps between pupils are getting wider, i.e., privileged pupils are getting better results.

Measurement tools

The present study hypothesizes that performance in English had declined, and aims to test this hypothesis in comparison to a previous study [10] which used a proficiency test and a questionnaire to correlate students' performance with their socio-cultural background. The present study uses the same test and the same questionnaire to check whether the standards have really dropped. Hence, the proficiency test and the questionnaire will ensure that the two populations of learners are tested according to the same criteria and will establish rates of similarities and/or differences in the student composition and the scores. However, some slight changes have been brought to the study of 2006 with regards to the difference in its objectives: the questionnaire's aim is to relate the proficiency to what students know of the structure of English, and to the comparison of their scores to 1996's students.

Population

In the first study which took place in 1996, the test and the questionnaire were administered to a random sample of 61 students, representing 20% of the population (300) of first year students at the department of English. In the second study which took place in 2006 concerned students enrolled for the first time in September 2005, the test and questionnaire were administered to a random sample of 120 students, but only 81 gave back fully answered papers. These samples are considered representative enough in the field of humanities and social sciences as far as they represent 1/5 of the population.

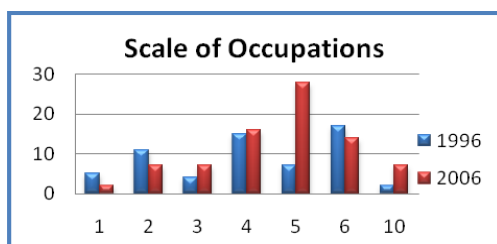
A. Data collection and analysis of the questionnaire

Data collection from the questionnaire determined a number of differences between the two samples of population; in view of the research findings these differences were stated as:

1. The father

1.1. The father’s scale of occupation. The following professional categories¹ were encountered among the students’ fathers.

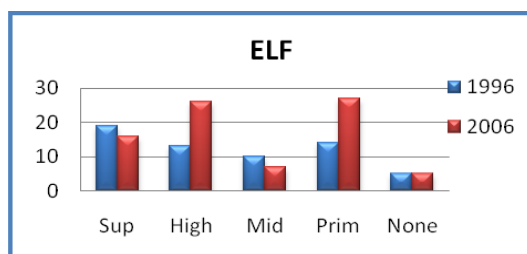
- 01. Liberal occupations (Medicine doctors, lawyers, chemists and entrepreneurs).
- 02. High-ranking occupations—public sector (medicine doctors, veterinarians, architects, engineers with university degrees, magistrates, and university teachers).
- 03. Middle-ranking occupations—public sector:
 - In the field of education (teachers and directors of secondary schools).
 - In the field of administration (directors of administrations).
- 04. Employees in the administration (employees in public administration, public services, army, teachers and directors of middle and primary schools).
- 05. Workmen (team leaders, sea-men, factory workmen and cooks).
- 06. Handicraftsmen, small trades people and small farmers.
- 09. Retired people.
- 10. Unemployed people



In 2006, the scale the most represented is Scale 05, and in 1996, it was Scale 06. However, Scale 01, 02, and 03 were better represented with a percentage of 31% as opposed to 2006’s percentage of 20 (cf. graph 1).

Graph 1: Scale of Father’s Occupation (2006/1996)

1.2. The educational level of the father: The educational level was divided into five categories: superior (the father has a university degree); high relates to the secondary cycle; middle, to the intermediate cycle; primary relates to the primary cycle, and finally none means the parents did not have education at all. Distinctively, two levels stand with higher rates than the other levels in 2006: ‘high’ and ‘primary’ representing 32% and 33% respectively.



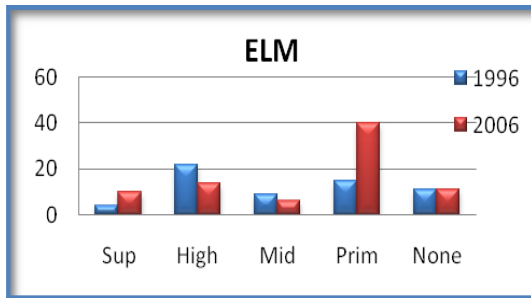
However, in 1996, the most prominent level was the ‘Superior’ one (32%). (cf. graph 2)

Graph 2: Educational Level of the Father (1996/2006)

2- The Mother

¹ The late Pr. Adel Faouzi helped us in the design of the socio-professional scale and the questionnaire.

2.1. The educational level of the mother



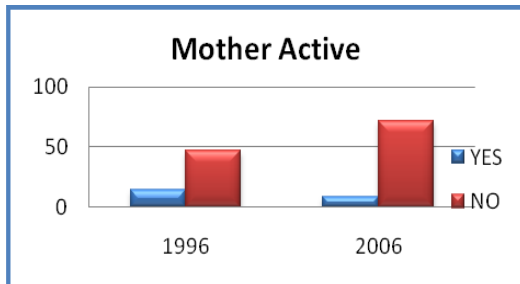
Graph 3: The Educational Level of the Mother

The largest category is the ‘primary’ school level (half the population). If this category is combined with the ‘none’ category, they would make both a much higher rate of 62% than the father’s rate (‘primary’ and ‘none’) of 39%. As for 1996, the ‘high’ level is the largest proportion (36% in 1996, vs. 17% in 2006). (cf. graph 3)

2.2. Mother Active. In 1996, three variables discriminated between students’ scores: the educational level of the mother, the fact she had a profession, and Reading. In 2006, the number of mothers having a profession is not important, only 9 (11%). In 1996, 14

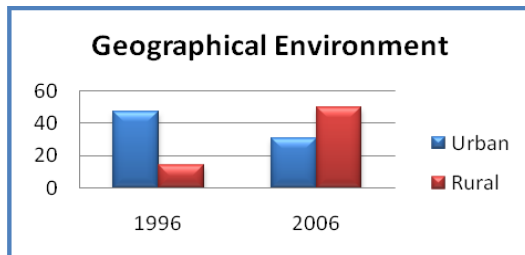
students’ mothers were active, representing 23%. The number and percentage of active mothers is more important in 1996 (cf. Graph 4).

Buchmann [11] found that the mother’s reading habits alone reduce the likelihood of grade repetition, without considering other family background factors.



Graph 4: Mother Active (1996/2006)

3. Geographical Environment:



Graph 5: Geographical Environment (1996/2006)

In 2006, 62% come from rural environment. The ratio has reversed: in 1996, there were more students coming from Urban areas (82%) than from Rural ones (18%). It confirms what Guerid [12] stated about the new student composition. (cf. graph 5)

4. Attitude and Motivation: This variable proved to be most different: both populations showed a high motivation to learn English but 1996 students had a more positive attitude towards culture.

Attitude and Motivation English language	Positive	Intermediate	Negative	Total
Number of students	64	5	12	81
Percentage	79%	7%	14%	100%

Table 1: Attitude and Motivation towards English (2006)

Attitude Target Culture	Positive	Intermediate	Negative	Total
Number of students	45	10	26	81
Percentage	55%	13%	32%	100%

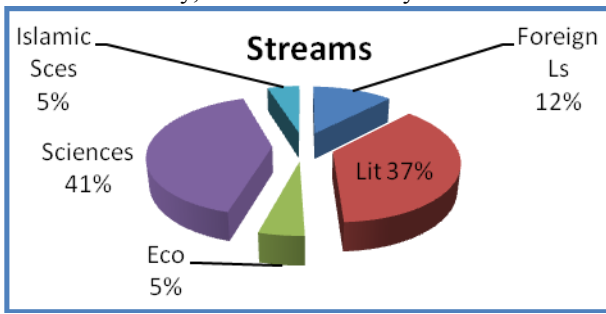
Table 2: Attitude towards English-speaking countries Culture (2006)

It is surprising to find that those students who have a negative attitude towards target culture were among the ones who showed great motivation and positive attitudes towards the English language. Generally speaking, the attraction one may have to a foreign culture(s) incites her to learn its (their) language(s). Otherwise, students' negative attitude may be due to the political events taking place in Palestine and the Middle East, which students relate to the USA. In all of these landmarks (Palestine conflict, Iraq's war, the After World Trade Center bombing) of modern Arabs history, the role of foreigners, and most importantly the U.S.A., has been seen by Algerians, whether rightly or not, as both prominent and hostile to their culture. English is perceived as the language of power, progress, and prestige and at the same time the language of intervention in the Arab culture and political affairs. As regards the importance of knowing English, almost all students responded (95%) 'very important'; this high rate shows that students make a difference between the English language and its culture. Conclusively, these findings determine the students' awareness and distinction they can make between current political issues and the standard of English as an international language. Whereas 1996 students, within the same political context, showed unanimously (100%) a positive attitude towards both English language and culture.

5. New variables used in 2006

The reason behind the introduction of the questions related to streams and the first choice of students for English is that these variables were not as manifest at it is nowadays. The variable related to English as the first foreign language is highly significant since English learning in primary schools started in 1993.

5.1. Streams: On one hand, scientific streams distinctively represent the bulk of the student body, even if the literary streams remain well represented. On the other hand,



the Foreign Languages stream, which is the most qualified to enroll, is rather low (only 10 in our sample). The most qualified to enroll are the least represented. More and more 'scientific' students enroll in the Department. (cf. graph 6)

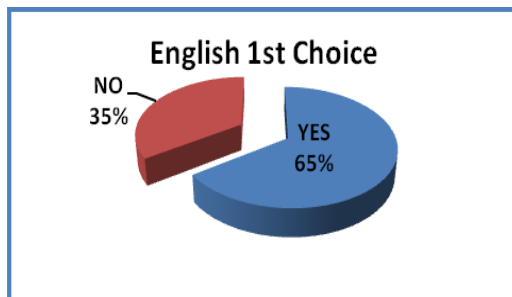
Graph 6: Streams (2006)

5.2. English as the first foreign language: since 1993, English has been introduced in Primary Schools, as a first foreign language in replacement of French. There were only 11 students among the sample and they come from various streams. This low proportion shows that despite the educational policy of encouraging English as 'a first foreign language' at primary school, the learners are still reluctant to consider it so.

Streams	Foreign Languages	Sciences	Literature	Islamic Sciences	Economy	total
Numb	0	6	3	0	2	11

Table 3: Streams of FL1 students of the sample (2006)

5.3. English as a first Choice: For some years, students cannot choose the discipline they want to study but are guided by administration through computerized cards which proceed to their orientation according to the marks obtained in the Baccalaureate examination. This question showed that 35% of students chose another discipline. This factor alone is a serious handicap and may lead to failure. (cf. graph 7)

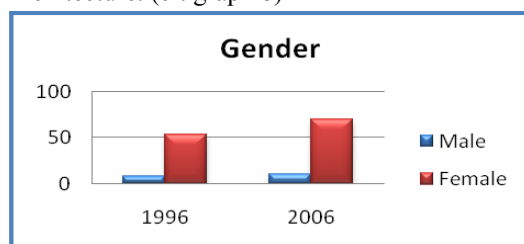


Graph 7: English as a first choice

6. Variables providing similar results for both populations

Noticeable is the fact that in 1996 there were fewer males than females (8 male students, representing 13%). The same is found in 2006, with exactly the same percentage: 13% of male vs. 87% of female students). It reinforces the tendency that girls are more interested in languages or that languages lost the prestige it once had for

male students. An interesting feature is emerging nowadays in that more and more students (girls and boys) are enrolled in the English department preparing at the same time two degrees, the other being in scientific fields. In 1996, one boy was preparing Computer Sciences, and English. In 2006, we encountered four students, two boys and two girls, who were enrolled in Medicine, Pharmacy, Computer Sciences, or Architecture. (cf. graph 8)



Graph 8: Gender of Students (1996/2006)

B. Test design, structure and results

1. Test design

Unlike the study carried out in 1996, the 2006 study was undertaken straightforwardly; there was no pre-testing, no pilot study. The main reason for this rough and ready way of conducting a research was the limited number of objectives to be attained. The first objective was the comparison of the two scores (2006 and 1996 students). One way to ensure that the two populations receive the same treatment is to attempt to present them with the same test, and under the same conditions; the main distinction is that there are 10 years in terms of cohort difference. The second objective of the 2006 study was to compare the two populations in order to find out whether the standards are falling—unlike the 1996 study where the proficient test results were correlated with the socio-cultural background of the learners. The test-taking lasted 45 minutes on average. The aim, the objectives, and the confidentiality of the study were explained to the participants before administering the test. The participants were made aware of the fact that their tests would not be marked and that their contribution would be of great help to the whole study.

2. Test content and structure

The specific test content was administered straightforwardly to the students due to the availability of the University 1st Year syllabus which lists the grammar points to be taught. The testing of grammar is one of the mainstays of language testing. While such tests test the ability to either recognize or produce correct grammar and usage, they do not test the ability to use the language to express meaning. However, it can be argued that a basic knowledge of grammar underlies the ability to use language to express meaning, and so grammar tests do have an important part to play in language programs (Rea-Dickins, 1997) [13].

The first grammar test had a multiple choice format which consisted of fifteen partial sentences that had to be completed with one word or phrase chosen among four options. The second grammar test was an editing task test (sentence correction test): the students were given fifteen sentences containing a number of errors of grammar. The

grammar items were of the same type of those in the first test and the students had to identify the incorrect item. In order to make the tests reliable and valid, a Cloze test was introduced to measure the students' ability to understand the English Structure as well. Researchers [14], [15], [16], [17], [18], [19] and [20]) have demonstrated the concurrent validity of various cloze tests forms, and also evidence in support of their predictive validity or the degree to which the learner's cloze test scores can predict linguistic performance on tests administered subsequently.

3. Results and analysis

3.1. The Sentence Structure Test

The format of the structure test was a multiple choice question which consisted of verb tense, form of adjective, subordinate clause, passive voice, preposition and prepositional phrase, article form, etc.

These are the results we obtained: (C.A.: Correct Answers)

Item Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Number of C.A.	58	42	29	60	48	64	63	29
Item Facility	.71	.51	.35	.74	.59	.79	.77	.35
Item Number	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
Number of C.A.	20	4	42	55	72	62	62	
Item Facility	.24	.04	.51	.67	.88	.73	.73	

Table 4: Rate of Correct Answers (Sentence Structure Test, 2006)

The obtained results (2006) show that correct answers (C.A.) in the sentence structure test, items 3, 8, 9, and 10 have the lowest rate; their Item Facility (IF) was under .50, and items 2 and 11 are slightly above. The related grammar points are Present Perfect Progressive, Adjective, Preposition and Prepositional Phrase, Article, namely, *have been examining* (item 3), *worthy* (item 8), *despite* (item 9), and to a greater degree *a* (item 10). The other items are Subject-verb agreement (plural form) and Subject-Verb agreement (singular form) respectively, *attracts* (item 2) and *retrieves* (item 11). The items in question are:

Item 3: *For years experts _____ the effect...*
 (a) *are examining* (b) *had been examined*
 (c) *have been examining* (d) *having been examined*

Item 8: *Art tends to be _____ more after ...*
 (a) *price* (b) *worthy*
 (c) *worth* (d) *value*

Item 9: _____ *the light rain, the base-ball ...*
 (a) *despite of* (b) *although of*
 (c) *in spite* (d) *despite*

Item 10: *California, _____ more populous state than any ...*
 (a) *a* (b) *it is a*
 (c) *that a* (d) *is a*

Item 2: *Florida's long coastline and warm weather _____ swimmers....*
 (a) *attracts* (b) *attract*

(c) *they attract* (d) *is attracted by*
Item 11: *Either the goal-keeper or one of the players _____ the ball from the goal.*
 (a) *retrieving* (b) *retrieval*
 (c) *retrieves* (d) *retrieve*

Some above-mentioned items have some correlating features. Table 5 below shows that both samples of population under study have the same most incorrect answers: what is surprising is that not only both groups had a high rate of incorrect answers, but also had the same incorrect ones.

Item	2006	1996
Item 3	Answer (b) 29	Answer (b) 23
Item 8	Answer (d) 35	Answer (d) 19
Item 9	Answer (a) 43	Answer (a) 23
Item 10	Answer (d) 67	Answer (d) 29

Table 5: Comparison (Sentence Structure Test)

3.2. The Sentence Correction Test

The Sentence Correction Test consisted of fifteen items based on the same grammar points as the Structure Test, but the order was modified.

Table 6 below displays the results for the rate of correct answers.

Item Number	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
Number of C.A.	15	43	35	38	51	24	41	46
Item Facility	.18	.53	.43	.46	.62	.30	.50	.56
Item Number	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	
Number of C.A.	53	52	58	48	61	55	29	
Item Facility	.65	.64	.71	.59	.75	.67	.35	

Table 6: Rate of Correct Answers (Sentence Correction Test)

The analysis shows that the most difficult items are (by order of difficulty), 16, 21, 18, 19, and 30. The related grammar points are: Preposition and Prepositional Phrase

because of (item 16), Adjective *mysterious* (item 21), Preposition *at which* (item 18), Countable *a few* (Item 19), and Simple Past Tense *changed* (item 30).

Item 16: *Benjamin Franklin ... because its predatory nature.*

Item 21: *Harold Pinter's... attacked by mystery forces.*

Item 18: *The legal age which a person...*

Item 19: *A little drivers realize ...*

Item 30: *Cartographers did not make... the area changes correctly.*

It is noted that in 2006 the top five errors were 16, 21, 18, 19, and 30. Similarly, the top five errors were prominent in the 1996 study in a different order though. However, the other items had an IF above .67, as it is shown in Table 7 below.

Item Number	21	30	16	19	18
Number of C.A.	19	33	37	40	41
Item Facility	.31	.54	.60	.65	.67

Table 7: Item Facility (Sentence Correction Test/1996)

3.3. The Cloze Test

The passage was taken from TOEFL test books designed for foreign learners. Following Alderson's recommendation [19], particular attention was paid to the selection of cloze passages. The selected text was on a general topic, not requiring specialized knowledge and formed coherent self-contained units of discourse. The deleted items covered a variety of syntactic and cohesive functions and were adequately cued in the text. Rational deletion cloze tests were prepared, with an average deletion rate every 11th word. This procedure resulted in 22 blanks (14 function words and 8 content words) — Chapelle & Abraham [21] found that function words were easier than content words both in the fixed ratio and rational deletion cloze. Special care was taken to ensure that the text was standardized with respect to length and difficulty level.

Both the exact-word and the acceptable-word procedure were adopted whenever possible. Brown [22] found the acceptable word scoring method to be more reliable and valid.

Item Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Number of C.A.	31	22	14	14	30	14	39	18
Item Facility	.38	.27	.17	.17	.37	.17	.48	.22
Item Number	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Number of C.A.	78	64	61	47	9	51	23	60
Item Facility	.96	.79	.75	.58	.11	.62	.28	.74
Item Number	17	18	19	20	21	22		
Number of C.A.	11	70	44	45	22	22		
Item Facility	.13	.86	.54	.55	.27	.27		

Table 8: Rate of Correct Answers (Cloze Test/ 2006)

Table 8 displays the rate of correct answers and shows that the items where the IF is the lowest are three function words and one content word, (items 3, 4, 8, and 13) namely *to*, *and*, *school*, and *as*. This is how they appeared in the text:

... Seeking better farm land, they went by covered wagon to Missouri in 1869, then on *to* (3) Kansas the next year, returning in Wisconsin in 1871, *and* (4) travelling on to Minnesota....

... From age thirteen to sixteen, she attended *school* (8) more regularly, although she never graduated...

... Serving *as* (13) agent and editor ...etc.

The exact-word procedure was applied to items 3 and 13, whereas the acceptable-word procedure was used for items 4 and 8: words such as *then* were judged as acceptable in place of *and*; and for item 8 responses such as *classes* instead of *school* were accepted. The distribution of responses for these items is as follows:

- **Item 3:** the incorrect responses included answers such as *the* instead of *to*, for which we labeled response (b) in the table and which were surprisingly widespread in students' sheets. The correct answer is (a).
- **Item 4:** the most distributed (incorrect) answer was *she* instead of *and* which appears as (b) in the table. Another very frequent incorrect answer was *they* (10)
- **Item 8:** the most discordant answers appeared at this point, where a number of responses such as *to be*, *the*, *to*, *a*, *with*, *it*, *for*, *to*, *with* etc. were recorded. Hence, no 'perfect' incorrect answer was given consideration.
- **Item 13:** this item had the lowest rate, only nine students answered correctly. The others, though making great efforts, were unable to find the correct answer; the most frequent incorrect answers were articles (27) and prepositions (19), shown in Table 9 below as (b).

But there were other items, too, where students had difficulty. These words were three content words and two function words. These are detailed below by order of difficulty:

- Item 17: the most frequent answer was *are, was, were, is* (b) in Table 9 below. Its number reached 43. The other answers were *had, had been, had being. ... they have remained popular...*
- Item 6: answers included words such as *condition, travelling, voyage*, etc. the number of omission was high: 34. *Because of this constant moving...*
- Item 2: *she, he* were the most frequent. *Seeking better farm land, they went ...*
- Item 21: *programme, show, and in*. As far as the two first words are concerned, the students' answers are semantically acceptable, but what for "in"? *... a weekly television series ...*
- Item 22: here the most frequent answer was *serie*; this is an outstanding result because most students, who answered here *serie*, did not do so in the previous item. *... based on the stories from the Wilder books.*

Item	2006					1996				
	(a)	(b)	Other	Omission	Total	(a)	(b)	Other	Omission	Total
Item 3	14	29	18	20	81	8	37	11	5	61
Item 4	14	38	25	4	81	15	20	21	5	61
Item 8	18	///	///	14	81	8	12	30	11	61
Item 13	9	27/ 19	17	9	81	17	20	21	3	61
Item 17	11	43	17	10	81					
Item 6	14	30	3	34	81					
Item 2	22	48	8	3	81					
Item 21	22	31	19	9	81					
Item22	22	28	6	25	81					

Table 9: Most frequent incorrect answers (2006/ 1996) (The correct answers are boldfaced).

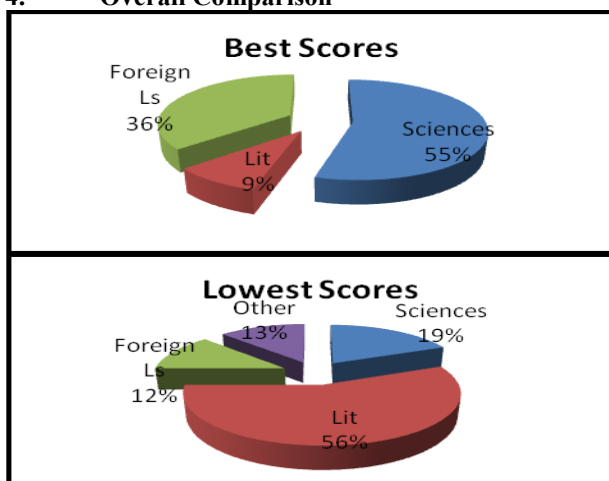
The last distinctive point concerns the students of English as FL1 whose scores would be of great interest, as mentioned at the beginning of this article. They were naturally expected to score higher since they had nine years of English whereas those who studied English as FL2 had only five (cf. table 10).

Student's Number	Part One	Part Two	Part Three	Whole Test	Rank
3	8	9	14	31	22 nd
15	6	10	7	23	50 th
30	10	14	17	41	4 th
36	6	9	8	23	51 st
38	8	10	6	24	47 th
52	9	12	11	32	20 th
61	7	13	11	31	25 th
72	11	12	16	39	7 th
76	12	11	14	37	11 th
77	12	12	12	36	12 th
79	5	6	5	16	76 th

Table 10: Scores of EFL1 students (the best scores are bold-faced)

These are the most surprising results obtained so far, because it is difficult to explain the fact that students who have less time of exposure to English score better. Is it a presumed political issue which has not been backed up by pedagogical considerations, and as such, things were not ready to ensure achievement? In the light of the results obtained by the students, it is assumed to be the case.

4. Overall Comparison



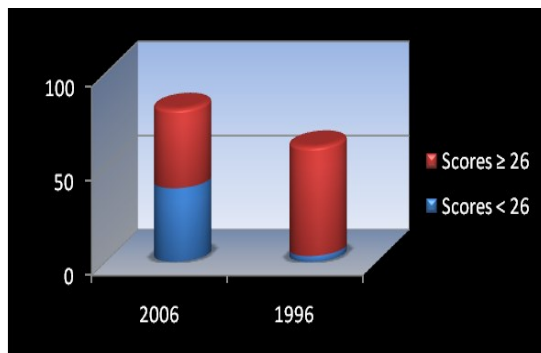
Graph 9a : Correlation Best scores/Streams Graph 9b: Correlation Lowest scores/Streams

The overall comparison of highest and lowest scores shows that the sciences stream students get more than 50% of the best scores (cf. Graph 9a) while the literature stream students get more than 50% of the lowest scores (see Graph 9b).

A final comparison of the mean score (displayed in Table 11 below) of each test for each group of students shows that the correlating percentage of scores remains inferior to 26—the mean— for both populations (cf. Graph 10).

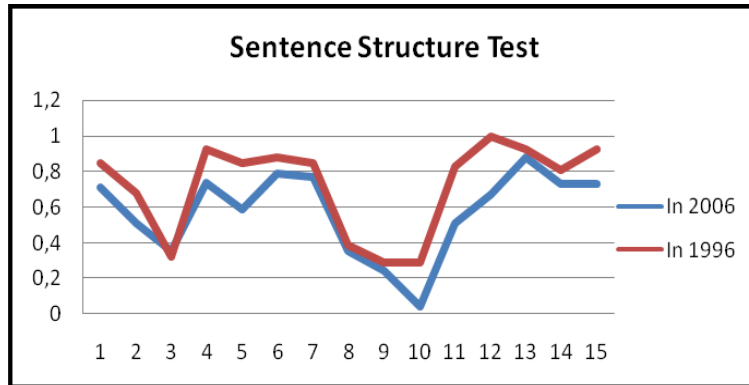
	2006	1996
TEST ONE	8.7	10.9
TEST TWO	8	10.6
TEST THREE	9.5	13
WHOLE TEST	26.4	34.6

Table 11: Mean Score (2006/1996)

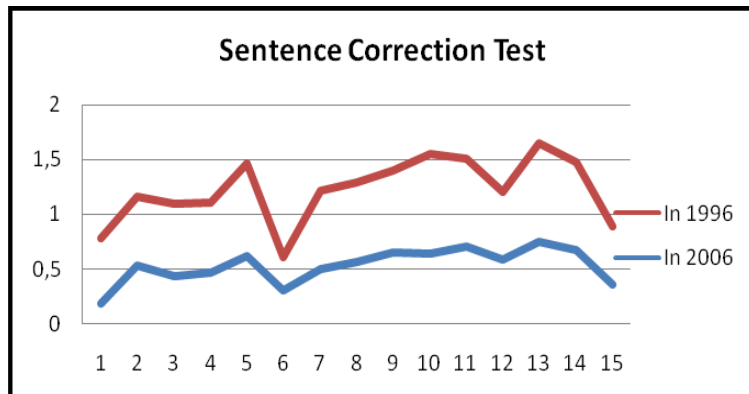


Graph 10: Low scores (2006/1996)

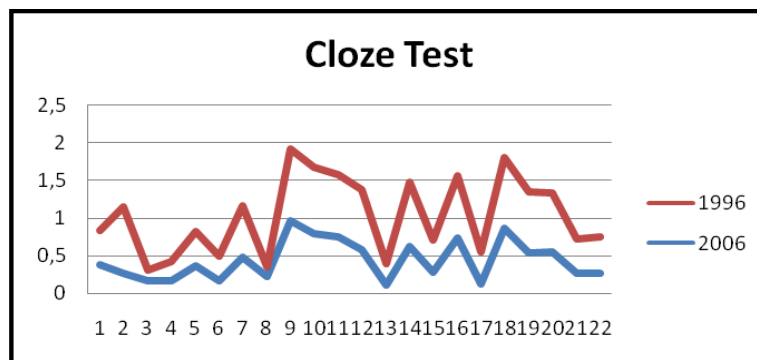
It is unquestionable that students of 1996 had better scores in the test than those of 2006. However, as previously mentioned, and shown in the following graph, it is extraordinary and at the same time enlightening to see that students at ten years difference share so many features, either of easiness or difficulty. The curves in the three graphs are almost parallel. (cf. graphs 11, 12, and 13).



Graph 10: Comparison 2006/1996 (Sentence Structure Test)



Graph 11: Comparison 2006/1996 (Sentence Correction Test)



Graph 12: Comparison 2006/1996 (Cloze Test)

This indicates that both population groups had similar scores of deficiencies but the 2006 population group had a more declining level in comparison to the 1996 group.

Conclusion

In terms of this investigation and test results, the conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that the standards of language proficiency have actually declined over a period of ten years among the students’ population. Such an assertion can only be backed up by some factors which have shaped the university population:

- The dethronement of English from a privileged first foreign language to a second one, in intermediate and high schools (French losing ground in the educational system and therefore gradually becoming a real foreign language has pushed English aside),
- The population which enrolls in the English Department: we saw earlier that the largest proportion is represented by the Sciences streams, closely followed by the Literary streams; whereas Foreign Languages, though the most qualified represent a small proportion,
- The gap between the university and the high school curricula,
- The interlingual transfer: students naturally refer to Arabic in the learning of English. The analysis of the errors made by students in test enables us to suppose that students were operating a transfer from their native language, a negative one in this case. There exist writing difficulties which are mainly due to morphological and syntactic differences [23] and rhetorical differences [24] between English and Arabic,
- The lack of interest in English on the part of students, particularly those from Arabic Literature and Sciences streams, whose primary concern when they were in high schools was either Arabic literature and culture for literary streams or sciences and mathematics for scientific streams,
- The discrepancies observed in the time allocation distributed to the different streams: Literature and Sciences are given three hours a week, whereas Foreign Languages are given four, though English as a university discipline is open to everyone, (cf. table 12)

Stream	Sciences	Literature	Foreign Languages
Number of Hours/week	2/3/3	3/3/3	3/4/4

Table 12: Time allocated to English in Secondary schools. (1st Year/ 2nd Year/ 3rd Year)

- When students reach university they lack linguistic competence (reading, writing, and oral) and cultural awareness of the foreign language, because of factors such as the textbooks not responding to their needs, level, and interest,
- The students do not meet their teachers’ expectations, particularly in terms of autonomy, responsibility, and study skills,
- When students enroll in the English Department, English is not necessarily their first choice; thus some of them may lack motivation.

To these features, we may add the specific university context which does not comply with the general norms, as for example, the learning conditions, and library facilities. These are some of the features which combined with each other contribute to the decline of standards.

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