

Language Dilemma in Algerian Higher Education Pre-university schooling in Arabic and medical studies in French

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Abstract: *This paper attempts to show a language dilemma related to higher education in Algeria. The question tackles 'baccalauréat' holders' choice of university courses: though basic knowledge is acquired in Standard Arabic, the official language of instruction in Algeria in high school diploma, a number of university streams are provided in French, only taught as a foreign language. Freshmen interested in medicine, for instance, are faced with learning difficulties if they do not master French. An investigation of a group of medical students, undertaken in Tlemcen, has revealed some of these issues, in particular the low academic achievement from the part of the students. The study also deals with their attitudes towards French, usually positive among those who have a good command of the language, but negative among others. We also touch upon the issue of language policy in the Algerian education system as some students have expressed the desire of pursuing medical studies in Arabic.*

Key words: *Standard Arabic, medicine in French, low academic achievement, attitudes.*

Résumé : *Cet article tente de montrer un dilemme de la langue dans l'enseignement supérieur en Algérie. Le problème traité concerne le choix des bacheliers à l'université : bien que les connaissances de base sont acquises en arabe standard, la langue officielle d'enseignement en Algérie jusqu'à la fin des études secondaires, un certain nombre de filières universitaires sont offertes en français qui est seulement enseigné comme langue étrangère langue. Les nouveaux étudiants intéressés par la médecine, par exemple, sont confrontés à des difficultés d'apprentissage s'ils ne maîtrisent pas le français. Une enquête d'un groupe d'étudiants en médecine menée à Tlemcen révèle en particulier le taux faible de réussite académique chez les étudiants. L'étude porte également sur leurs attitudes envers le Français, généralement positives parmi ceux qui ont une bonne maîtrise de la langue, mais négatives chez d'autres. Nous soulevons également la question de la politique linguistique dans le système éducatif algérien étant donné que certains étudiants ont exprimé le désir de poursuivre leurs études de médecine en arabe.*

Mots clés : *Arabe Standard, médecine en Français, rendement académique bas, attitudes.*

Introduction

The long and complex historical events Algeria has been through mainly because of its geographical position have shaped a complex and quite rich linguistic situation attested in the present use of dialects with all their diversity throughout the country as well as bilingualism,

resulting from a long-term colonization, and diglossia (Ferguson, 1959) that can be seen in every day speech. The educational system is also a reflection of this rich linguistic diversity and has been affected by it and sometimes not without negative side-effects that have created the dilemma which this article tries to reflection on. The present article does not try to present actual solutions to the presented dilemma but mainly to shed light on a given problem some students might have with the coexistence of two languages in the educational system.

1. The Algerian Educational System

The structure of today's Algerian pre-university educational system is a 5 + 4 + 3-year model, five years in primary school, four years in middle school and three years in secondary school. These nine years constitute the compulsory basic education phase. The ministry of education is responsible for the primary and secondary school and the ministry of higher education is responsible for university studies. In the first five years of basic education pupils attend class for 27 hours a week the basic language being Arabic for all domains. French is taught as a second language only from the third year. At secondary school level, French has the same status, as it is taught as a second language.

1.1 Bilingualism and Education

In the traditional conception of language, being a bilingual was considered to be debased, as only classical languages were seen as prestigious and only the language of the powerful was meant to be the standard and the one spoken language in a country. Bilingualism was a trait of only invaded countries and barbarous people. It was also believed that being educated in more than one language was a disadvantage for the learning process as it could slow it down or confuse the learner. Modern linguistics and new investigations, however, have shown that bilingualism can indeed be very beneficent for the learner and for the development of cognitive abilities.

Indeed, it has been shown that bilingual children can perform better than monolingual children at certain learning tasks. Bilingual students have greater abilities in solving problems as they develop their cognitive level, learning things in two different languages can develop flexibility. These are among the multiple advantages bilingualism has in education.

1.2 Bilingualism and Language Planning

One primary aim of language policy is to attempt to unify a country to create a monolingual nation, in particular when the state in question was under colonial rule, as is the case of Algeria and the whole Maghreb, for example. The objective, of course, is to establish the most prestigious language as the official language and to implement it as the language of administration, national administrative sectors, and most importantly as a medium for education. Schiffman (1996:i) writes in this regard: “*The language policies and rules that nations draw up dictate which form of language will be taught in schools and used as the official tongue of the nation*”.

It is in the nature of language, as modern linguistics has already proved, to change over time influenced by social and geographical factors. But as nations are geo-politically limited with borders, and as a nation is usually faced with the challenge of unifying its various communities and ethnic groups under one national identity, this determination to distinguish one’s identity has pushed over time politicians and decision makers to impede the natural tendency to change, which language possesses, and to select a unifying form of the language which becomes the country’s standard.

Throughout history, great nations and empires have always had policies for their languages in order to keep a solid nation’s identity or when colonizing other areas to spread their languages and power. As a matter of fact, language policy is present in virtually every country whether it is monolingual or multilingual, as expressed by Schiffman (1996): there’s ‘no such thing as no language policy’. Language policy is always present as all nations are in search of identity and unity, to have control over its people’s language and over language in different institutions.

In multilingual settings, it is essential for politicians to decide which languages represent the country, or which language is official, or how many languages can become official. In general, it has always been government and decision makers who decide about language implementation in a given multilingual country. Even in the apparent monolingual settings, language policy is present as those countries might be called monolingual but they actually possess a lot of dialects and a standard form of the language.

In France, for instance, Parisian French, the prestigious dialect of Ile-de-France was codified in its spelling grammar and vocabulary and decreed by François the 1st by mid-16th century as the only official language and for the sake of standard use. That variety used in the King’s Court was imposed on the whole nation, while all other French dialects were excluded from formal uses and education. This form of

standardization was undertaken through the Académie Française (1635). Standard English, also the dialect of the King's Court, did not go through the institution of an academy. Another form of codification occurred in the case of Arabic as we shall see below.

The point is that it is the nation's language policy which favours a given language or language variety, usually the one used by the powerful, to become the standard form of the country. Such policy leading to language planning - or 'language management', as Spolsky (2005) prefers to call it - may be explicit, written down in the form of texts or laws, or implicitly established by the authority. In this regard, Spolsky (2004: 8) says that

Language policy exists even where it has not been made explicit or established by authority. Many countries and institutions and social groups do not have formal or written language policies, so that the nature of their language policy must be derived from a study of their language practice or beliefs.

We believe that the language policy in Algeria has been established implicitly, and this is precisely the nature of language decisions in the Arab world, taken on the basis that Arabic is the language of the Qur'an, the sacred book of Islam. Thus, it is the so-called modern form of Classical Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which has become the official language of the 22 Arab countries.

Language policy is also important in post-colonial countries, mainly to decide whether to keep the colonizer's language or to recover the native language. Indeed, a number of countries formerly colonized by the French and the British have maintained the language of the colonizer as the official language; e.g. French in Senegal, English in Nigeria, etc.

Language policy, in general, can simply be stated as the actions undertaken by the government to promote a national language or to favour or discourage the use of a given language or dialect. Language planning is often associated with language policy, though it can be undertaken by non-governmental organizations. It has been defined by Cooper (1989:45) as "deliberate efforts to influence the behaviour of others with respect to the acquisition, structure and functional allocations of their language codes." Language planning exists in two forms, 'status planning' and 'corpus planning', the former meaning the change of the function of a language or a variety increasing or decreasing its status; the latter involves developing a variety of a language or a language in order to standardize it.

2. Medical Studies in Algeria

The Algerian educational system includes learning French from the third year of elementary school as it can be beneficent for the future of some learners due to the fact of the massive existence of the French language in administrations and scientific domains. However, it is worth noting that in the Algerian educational system French is not learned side by side with Arabic which would imply learning all matters in both languages, but it is rather added to Arabic as a second language. What we obtain in this sense is a subordinate bilingualism. The aim in this article is to wonder if this language policy serves all students and if learning French as a second language may help developing cognitive abilities and if it serves learners in their future careers.

It is obvious that bilinguality can have a positive effect on the learning process. But does it have a positive effect in an educational system where French is only taught as a second language while all other matters are taught in Arabic? Meanwhile, once at university in all scientific fields, French is the only language used. Is the way French is taught, as a second language, beneficent for all students, or do some of them have difficulties? These are some of the questions that we try to answer.

A series of questionnaires have been distributed to a group of students in medicine to establish whether learning everything in French was an advantage or a disadvantage to them, more exactly if this sudden switch in the language of education has a negative or a positive effect. It has been established that learning in two languages can have a positive effect on the cognitive development; however this sudden switch can be harmful for some students as their answers have shown.

The questionnaire was administered to a group of students to determine their different skills in both Arabic and French, their preference of use and the language they prefer to use in their daily life as well as the language they think they master or understand better.

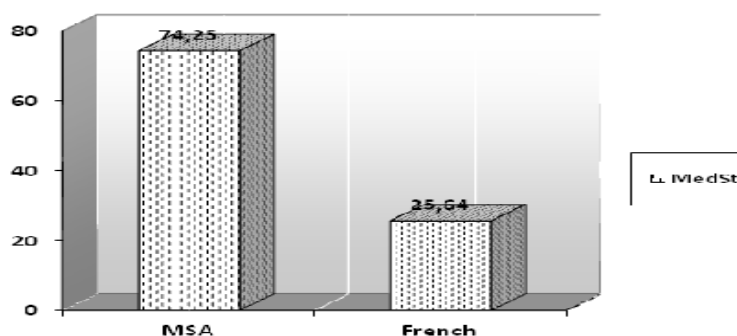


Figure 1.1 The speaking skill in MSA vs. French

Among 100 students, 74% affirmed mastering MSA and only 26% said they mastered French more. These results are quite obviously due to the nature of the Algerian education system in which all the studies are in MSA before university while scientific fields are taught in French at the university. As for those who state that they speak French better, they are probably encouraged by their parents who wish their off-spring to become doctors, and thus are likely to have higher motivation for learning French.

However, such language mismatch is indeed a problem for so many students who struggle to have an acceptable level in their studies. In the questionnaire, we gave the students a question to check whether they actually suffer from the language they study in.

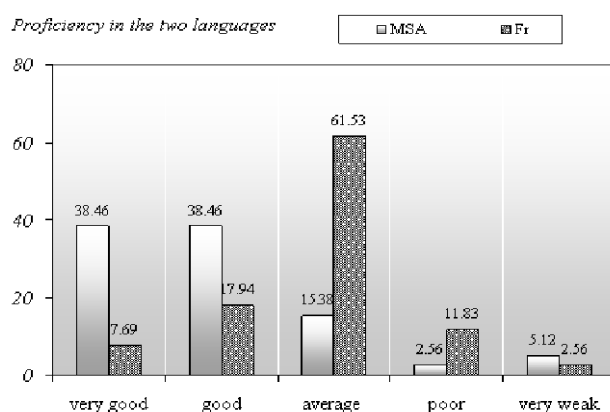


Figure 1.2. Students' proficiency in MSA and French

One aim of the research was to discover whether the students favour learning medicine in Arabic rather than in French. Indeed, the

proficiency results in the table above show that 77% are more proficient in MSA and only 25 % are good in French, the language in which more than 14 % are poor. Thus, the acquisition of intellectual development would be better if he lectures were delivered in Arabic. As a matter of fact, almost 57 % of the students stated that they would prefer medical studies to be given in Arabic.

Conclusion

This article is an investigation into the extent to which Algerian bilingualism in the educational system can help or be a difficulty for Algerian university students in some scientific branches. The question asked was whether all students were equally ready to the sudden switch of the language of education from high school in MSA to university studies in French. The results have shown that not all students were ready, as for some students, the use of French in their courses was a major difficulty that had serious negative effects on their academic level. Other students, however, were ready and needed no more lectures in French as they mastered it quite well. Some of them even thought that it would be preferable to study a scientific branch in the French language while others proposed that it would be helpful to study medicine in Arabic. This shows the dilemma in the use of bilingualism in the Algerian educational system and raises some questions on the possibility of some changes in this system.

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