

Foreign Languages in the Algerian Educational System

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Introduction

It is widely approved that whatever may be the drive for acquiring or learning a new language, it remains an advantage. Thus, the instruction of a foreign language is resourceful for any nation because having among its citizens people who know foreign languages, may lead to better relations with foreign countries. This is also true for adversary countries since the citizens will be able to face any threats from enemy nations. In other words, knowing a foreign language entails a better communication between the country and its allies or enemies, especially in this world which is growing smaller and smaller.

The importance of knowing more than one language is not refuted, but the choice of learning one language or another or the shift of interest in learning languages for nations more than individuals could be a sensitive matter at times. Similarly, language planning in Algeria since 1962 has given birth to socio- political and cultural conflicts among Algerians. Political leaders, decision-makers and other 'hidden' powers found in language a weapon to achieve some interests, thus menacing the national interests and unity. (*Taleb Ibrahimi , 1997*) In fact, planning languages in Algeria

has always been more than a pure linguistic problem. Moreover, and unfortunately, language instruction within the Educational System has been greatly affected by the complexity of the situation and has been more ad hoc than planned.

For an effective planning of language instruction , one must understand the real utility of languages and their role in the progress of societies, especially when the importance of Education is neglected and disapproved of . The fact remains that the conflicts observed in the Algerian linguistic panorama are not basic conflicts between languages (*French and Arabic or French and English or even Arabic and Tamazight*). It is a normal and expected outcome of a long colonial period, especially that the French colonial policy in Algeria aimed at eradicating the culture (*and thus the language*) and the unity of its people. However, after Independence, the linguistic as well as the socio-political situation was worsened by the Algerians' unawareness, negligence or dereliction of duty, or may be just the absence of dialogue. For instance, the Arabisation process, which eventually divided the Algerians (*instead of unifying them*), could have been a successful reform, if it were not in the hands of some who considered it as an aim in itself and not as a means for achieving national unity, and if there were not others who considered it as a threat for their personal interests and statuses.

Furthermore, any reform, especially in Education, should be carefully planned and catered for before its implementation to ensure its success. The major obstacles that encountered any former policy or reform emanated from these weaknesses. School is the

social institution that represents reality, and through which Education aims at social progress. Yet, the Algerian school was adapted to what *some* thought to be the purpose of Education. Besides, the criticism of older approaches in teaching leads to changes in preferences or to a shift in emphasis in content, material or methodology. But it is not uncommon that these new merits turn to disadvantages when they become no longer fashionable or when we come to prove theory through practice.

Foreign Languages and the 2003 Educational Reform

The New Reform of 2003 included the entire national curriculum within the primary and middle schools, as well as the secondary schools at a further stage. The Ministry of National Education states that such modifications were unavoidable and necessary because of the deep political, social and cultural changes that modified the philosophy of the Algerian society. And in order to be functional, the Educational System had to adapt its objectives and approaches so as to prepare the coming generations and make them able to take part in the challenge set up by world globalization. Thus, this reform is considered as a revision of the contents and objectives of the former programmes that were becoming obsolescent and which were functioning badly because they were already superseded by the tremendous progress in science, technology and communication.

This radical reform was meant mainly for the first, second and third cycles of Foundation School (*i.e., from the first grade in the primary level to the ninth in the middle school*). There were significant alterations and slight modifications concerning the

teaching of languages . The followings are the major points in the objectives of the programs of Arabic, Tamazight, French and English languages as mentioned by the Ministry of National Education in its publication of April 2003.*

- a – The Arabic language instruction aims at developing the learner's knowledge and skills so as to be able to achieve communication and also understanding of the other subjects.
- b – The objective of the teaching of the Tamazight language, which is considered as a National language, is to relate the learner with the culture of his country and make him able to communicate in his environment and perceive his cultural heritage. And it includes two programs. The first is meant for learners whose mother tongue is Tamazight (i.e. they use it at home and immediate surrounding). Its objective is mastery of the language and communication. The second program deals with Tamazight as a *"second language, and it is intended for pupils who do not know it."* It aims at developing in the learner capacities that enable him to express himself in this language in different situations.
- c – The instruction of the French language, which is the first foreign language, aims at equipping the learner with a tool that permits him communication and expression in different personal and social activities, and a direct access to global knowledge and information.
- d – The teaching of English as a second foreign language aims at making the learner able to acquire gradual linguistic knowledge that permits him contact with the scientific and technologic progress and general culture; since *"it (English) is a global and scientific language necessary for acquiring technology and controlling global economy."*

These goals as set up for the National Educational System reflect what has become of the modern linguistic field in Algeria which is torn by the manifestation of different languages. So, it may be a fact that those involved in this new reform, that could be seen as a movement towards a '*multilingually*' or '*multiculturally*' inspired public educational system, are themselves different people of the nation who favour different languages and each of them with different drives has a different perspective for the nation . And to work out a common agreement for these conflicting interests, all the languages were introduced in the National Curriculum with different designations (*L1, L2, FL1, and FL2*) and at different levels. This leads us to the relationship between language teaching and language maintenance, which is a complex and problematic state of affairs.

No one can deny the fact that within the Algerian linguistic scene, the Tamazight language is in danger of undergoing a 'language death situation because first its speakers are a minority in the Algerian society and second they use another language (*mainly French*) outside their community. Therefore, the sooner or the later, they will shift to another language.

"For example, between the seventieth and twentieth centuries, Ireland shifted from being almost entirely Irish-speaking to being almost entirely English-speaking. Shift most often takes place gradually, and domain by domain, with the original language being retained longest in informal family-type contexts." (Trudgill, 1992: 47)

Trying to secure its 'language maintenance', this language community (*Tamazight native speakers*) has attempted through political pressure to obtain a 'place'

in the Algerian Educational System. Such efforts may be successful for the first programme (*with learners whose mother tongue is Tamazight*). However, within the second programme very little can be accomplished mainly because choosing to learn the language of the minority is not common and may even seem nonsensical in this age of Globalization.

Both French and English are termed foreign languages within the Algerian Educational System, though it is a fact that each of them has a different status. It is true that both of them do not have any 'institutionalized' role as they are not used "*as a medium of instruction in schools, as a language of business, law and government, and/or a language of everyday communication.*" (Carter, 1993: 27)

Nevertheless, to give them a similar status would be misleading. On the one hand, French, which can no more be considered as a second language, is strongly bound to the different Algerian communities who understand and use it with different degrees in different settings. On the other hand, it is the learning of English that is more related to the scientific and technological progress. However, this common agreement was reached at the expense of the Algerian child. It is hardly conceivable to expect from a child to learn or at least be taught three or four languages in addition to other six or seven overwhelming subjects in his limited schooling time. Besides, that a language or dialect can be learnt does not necessarily entail that it can be successfully taught in a classroom setting.

In other words, the 'language conflict' situation in Algeria imposed the institutional teaching of each language. It is a fact that the Algerian Educational

System has always been forced to recognize the existence of one language or another by inserting its teaching without realizing if this is relevant or irrelevant, useful or useless, could be successful or just a loss of time and efforts . It is clear that some parameters are urgently needed to decide what the priorities of the Algerian society are, and before undergoing any educational reform or change, all decision-makers, in any government and whatever their interests and inclinations may be, are bound to respect such parameters.

Algerian FL(s) Educational Policy

Approaches to foreign languages teaching have proliferated, and the choice of any approach causes strong implications on the choice of the content of the syllabus and its organization. Basically, some criteria, which affect not only the curriculum content and organization but also the kind of syllabus and methodology implemented in the classroom, will be considered. Within the planning stage of the syllabus, some factors and constraints do interfere. They could be from the outside or from within the curriculum. These interfering issues can be summarized in four major points. First, there are the Government's Educational Policy and the learning goals as perceived and specified by the Ministry of Education. Time and money allotted for the curriculum impose other limits, too. Second, the social and cultural setting influences what needs to be taught and what can be taught. Third, the syllabus-designer's conception of the nature of language and his beliefs about learning languages and how it can be approached. Nunan (1988: 10) maintains that they *orientate* the task of the syllabus-designer and that all considerations in selecting syllabus components

"are not value-free, but reflect beliefs about the nature of language and learning." Fourth, there are the learners' age, needs, interest, educational background, expectations and learning principles.

Nonetheless, according to the decree number 098-122-91, dated on 15 May 1991, published in 'Bulletin Officiel De l'Education', number 355 of September 1992, the National FL policy is clearly facing a more or less *"ambiguous"* situation:

*"The situation of foreign languages is characterized by an ambiguity and non submission to a firm plan. This is mainly due to the **absence** of a clear policy which determines the function of foreign languages in our country and the preparation of programmes. Then, it remains clear that the wise policy in any field is the one which arises from the reality which we deal with and which we take as a reference to fix its goals."*(BOE, 1992:13/14)

Consequently, it is clear that the policy underlying the teaching of foreign languages in our schools is neither well-founded nor operating properly. Some pieces of evidence are the following facts. First, the time taken to achieve the planning, preparation and implementation of any curriculum is not enough. Second, the projects are hurriedly introduced and generalized into schools. Third, most of the projects are not thoroughly 'experimented', there is no feed-back or evaluation implied for its reorientation. Fourth, the official visits, consultations and support from the representatives of the Ministry of Education are not well considered, though *"this kind of support is essential in the early years at least"* (Wilson & Harrison, 1983: 31). Then, not a single reform has

undergone an ongoing evaluation process -since its launching- so as to re-orientate it, to overcome the appearing hindrances and to improve it, until it is declared to be -suddenly- inefficient and hence has to be replaced. Finally, yet most importantly, not a single reform was proposed and initiated from the school; all our reforms are 'imposed'.

Planning Educational Reforms

Planning projects in general, and especially in educational issues is an ongoing process that should not only follow a *clear* and *continuous* policy, but respond to the inevitable changes that should be flexible because the potential problems are unlimited. In addition, discussing and evaluating what is going wrong prove to be useful not only for the success of this project, but any future ones. Unfortunately, this has never been the case of projects and innovations within our educational system where the strategies of constant evaluation and reorientation have totally been absent. Thus, the educational institution must assume its responsibility in the planning, implementing and evaluating of their programmes and reforms.

"Plans of any kind usually look grand on paper, and a readable, apparently feasible, clear plan can help to wrinkle funds from the tightest of purses and co-operation from the strictest of sources. But the proof of the plan lies in the implementing of it." (Hayes, 1983: 25)

Moreover, the social and cultural settings where any reform is to be implemented must be well-

considered. Yet, decision makers who create and develop such educational reforms seem not to be aware of the remote areas (villages and small towns) and their characteristics and conditions, and of the learner for whom their projects are made. In other words, they expect successful learning from a child in a large city like Algiers as from another child in a rural spot some hundred kilometres far away, regardless of the two different social realities, the different social expectations, the different forms of knowledge and education and mainly the different local constraints. One cannot expect from a child to learn a foreign language efficiently with shortcomings and hindrances that already exist in the system, like the total absence of libraries or any extra- reading or listening materials in the foreign language.

In scope, the curriculum is broader than the syllabus as

"It states the kinds of learning experiences, methodologies, underlying theories of learning and testing procedures which will enable learners to attain specific learning objectives."

(Carter, 1993: 20)

Basically, designing foreign language curricula often lacks the effective organisation of the main concerns related to it. These generally include all the factors that contribute to the leaning/teaching situation such as the selection of the instructional materials and the availability of other resources and any other support services.

In his outlined *"framework for the decision-making processes which cumulatively result in a language curriculum"*, (1989: 23) R. K. Johnson proposes the following table(I) about the different steps

in the curriculum development, the different 'specialists' taking role in the decision- making and the 'product' of every step of the development(Ibid; 03).

Developmental stages	Decision-making Roles	Products
1 - Curriculum planning	policy makers	policy document
2 - Specification : ends / means	needs analyst methodologist	syllabus
3-Programme implementation	materials writers	teaching materials
	teacher trainers	teacher-training programme
4- Classroom implementation	teacher	teaching activities
	learner	learning activities

Table 3.1 Stages, Decision-Making Roles and Products in Curriculum Development

According to him, for the curriculum to be coherent, its planning must consist of all these stages and decisions before starting its production and implementation. As far as the projects in our system are concerned, much of these are neglected and overlooked.

"Until the last years, the elaboration method of school programmes has been sloppy. After that the most fundamental options have been taken by

*power holders, it was left to some groups of 'specialists' – kept at respect to these options and having often internalized them to the extent of not being conscience of them – to assemble them or to organize a teaching situation which does not put them in question. We have traditionally considered as specialists either scholars or teachers who have acquired a long experience in teaching. They have certainly deserved the title of specialists in their domain, but not in the field of school programmes construction." (G & V DeLandsheere, 1998:62)**

Therefore, the foundations of our national educational policies are tremendously suffering from basically two 'wrong' practices. One lies in a policy-making which is widely influenced by the ups- and- downs of the socio-political matters, and easily controlled by the 'needs' and drives of the policy makers or other groups who have special interests and who are able to make pressure. On the other hand,

"A state-of-the-art of curriculum planning and syllabus design practices shows a very institution-centered control of these matters. The trend since independence has been a top-down approach to these processes, which means that planning, implementation and evaluation of teaching programmes do rarely take into account the clients' (the learners) profile, needs, motivation, interest, etc." (Miliani, 2003: 26)

In fact, the wide participation of teachers, learners, parents and other practitioners in educational innovations and reforms may be not much welcomed because it entails extra-work and budget. Yet, the main weaknesses in such top-down approaches to FL

curricula is that they assume that there is only one super-efficient possibility for learning a new language, and thus, "...provide a set of principles and procedures, which must be more or less faithfully followed by the classroom practitioner." (Nunan, 1996: 129) Consequently, syllabi and teaching methodologies are handed over as packages to teachers, who - in most cases- are not prepared to handle this external material, and to learners, whose needs, interests and abilities do no match.

"Our assessment of curriculum plans, syllabus outline, material production and methodological procedures is that all of them are delivered by experts as a package deal to teachers who are trained neither to implement nor to adapt them to their context. This externally-produced self-contained pedagogical package is outdated (at all levels: content and method-wise), but has, in the long run, developed in the minds of teachers, at least, a very prescriptive approach to teaching geared towards ideal learners with a homogeneous way of learning, despite real mixed-ability EFL classes. This is then a far cry from the real context teachers usually face." (Miliiani, 2003: 26/27)

Conclusion

The study of the social and linguistic factors that participate in and tremendously affect our educational reforms is one of the prerequisites of success. The imposing status of French language in the Algerian linguistic reality is a fact. The challenges that World Globalization imposes on us, and which cannot be refused or even neglected, are another salient fact. Yet, the low achievements of our educational system at all

levels (*and especially as a final product: the Algerian University's graduates*) are another undeniable fact. Some would attribute the 'failure' of our educational system to the use of a language or another. Yet, even if this may be true, things are more complicated than they seem to be. In fact, the failures or low achievements of our educational system may also be due to its ossified educational policy. There are important factors within this policy that makes the 'newest' reform a fiasco.

This work is not meant to be censorious or hypercritical to anyone. It is hoped to be helpful in realising how complex and controversial the problem of languages in Algeria is. The situation may be more or less confusing because each group keeps neglecting the strong existence of the others and considers himself as holding the Truth. Yet, if each of them faces the reality and becomes more aware of the smallness of his ideologies in front of the greatness of the National Interest and Unity, there would be much greater mutual understanding and more concessions.

Moreover, most of us take some facts for granted while we must be aware of two major points within the foreign languages instruction issue. On the one hand, the fact that any bilingual/ multilingual teaching, within our educational system, is strongly associated with the same language, French, should be questioned or better reconsidered. It may be safer for us, and our future, to include other languages (*not only English*); may be through choice (*a policy that was opted once by our government who considered it a necessary step with the advent of Globalisation*). Some other languages –like Chinese or German – may take over from French -or even English- as the international languages of science and technology. In fact, this

reality shows again that our policies have not learnt from old mistakes as it keeps on basing its orientations and priorities on political issues in a backward 'progress' instead of foreseeing future needs and planning future steps. On the other hand, the Algerian society has always been uninformed of educational issues because the decisions are made at an administrative and bureaucratic level where the involvement (*or at least the information*) of the public opinion has not a place. Thus, the motives and purposes underlying educational reforms or changes are not shared, or understood, and the society becomes suspicious about their infallibility. Therefore, it is not sensible to keep educational issues hidden from the concerned groups and individuals. For instance, any reform that is arranged at a higher level and imposed on classroom teachers will be unwelcome or face a declining enthusiasm. Reforms are processes, and not products, in which the teachers' involvement must be politically and institutionally ensured, thus, creating a favourable image of the innovation and developing a sense of commitment by minimising critics and oppositions that are based on misunderstanding and lack of communication. Moreover, there should be no hesitation on the part of decision-makers and administrators to involve the society's representatives (*of teachers, parents...*) in any curriculum reform because they hold precious and reliable information about the teaching/learning process and the feasibility of any objectives. This participation must be done at all the stages of the reform: investigations, planning, implementation and evaluation.

* Translation Mine

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