

The Demand for Foreign Languages Learning in Bejaia: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: *The present paper attempts to explore the foreign languages learning situation in Bejaia city, Algeria. It is an exploratory 'case' study that examines the demand for foreign languages learning in the public and private sectors of the city (i.e., in the University and in private schools of languages). The purpose of the study is to expose statistically the current foreign languages learning situation in the city and discover the highly demanded/learned language(s). Besides, it aims to find the plausible reasons behind such demand. The sample of the study consists of Oracle School of Languages & Communication, as a private institution, and the Faculty of Arts & Languages at the University of Bejaia, as a public institution of higher education. The findings of the study reveal that French and English are the highly demanded foreign languages in both institutions. The soaring demand for these two languages in the city is nationally shared and experienced. Potential key factors include foreign investments, travel, intercultural exchange programs, and technological exposure.*

Key words: Foreign Languages Learning, Private & Public Education, Bejaia, Algeria.

1. Introduction

Algeria's outsized geography, stretching out over 2.381 square kilometers, prompted a wide spectrum of local languages to thrive. Also, the nation's past history with Western invasions and the present's economic situation (its entry into a free market capitalism) contributed in implanting foreign languages in the country. Besides the use of the French language, instilled in the nineteenth century under French military occupation, other foreign languages as English, in the vanguard, German, Spanish, and Chinese are studied in Algerian educational private and public institutions; they are included in schools programs as subjects and taught as specialized fields at universities. In particular, in Bejaia city, one of Algeria's largest Kabyle-speaking cities, foreign languages used in socio-professional settings and, even, in everyday communication, and importantly relevant for the city's foreign investment.

2. Statement of the Problem

The economic life of Algeria in the last decades of the century welcomes global capitalism and encourages cultural exchange programs and economic investments. As a seaside town with a large port and an international airport, Bejaia city has greatly felt this economic turnover. Bejaia's people rush toward learning foreign languages, as French and English, to meet the requirements the new market and its cultural and social challenges. The present research work, then, studies the demand for foreign languages learning in the public and private sectors of Bejaia. It is an exploratory study that looks into the foreign languages learning situation in the city, taking

the Faculty of Languages of Bejaia University, a public institution, and Oracle School, a private school of languages in Bejaia, as case studies.

3. Questions of the Study

- What are the foreign languages highly demanded for learning in Bejaia city (both in public and private sectors).
- Which of these foreign languages get a due attention from the students and people in Bejaia city to be learnt?
- Why are Bejaia city's students/people eager to learn foreign languages? Is it out of love for these languages or out of need of them?

4. Hypothesis of the Study

The present researchers hypothesize that foreign languages are highly demanded in Bejaia University to answer the economic and cultural challenges imposed with Algeria's move from socialism to free market capitalism. The researchers also hypothesize that the need is triggered by an awareness (a common belief) of the importance of foreign languages for travel and tourism, and in making possibilities for intercultural dialogues and peace linguistics.

5. Review of Related Literature

Foreign language learning in Algeria or Algerian's linguistic scene as a topic has received a due attention from a wide range of research critics in the field. These research investigations reveal Algeria as a multilingual community which supports foreign language learning and teaching. Nevertheless, up to the researchers humble knowledge, none of studies investigated foreign language learning situation in Bejaia city, one of Algeria's big seaside towns. Accordingly, drawing on Algeria's foreign language learning situation the following review details, the present paper fills the gap by providing an exploratory account of foreign language learning situation in Bejaia and the rational for the this demand.

In his article entitled "Competition between Four World Languages in Algeria," Prof. Mohamed Benrabah (2014) investigates the dominant languages in use and on the go in Algeria at the turn of the twenty first century. The researcher acknowledges Algeria, at the close of the twentieth century, to have hosted four major languages, considered as "worldly languages" (p.38). These include Arabic, French, English, and Chinese. An account of the nation's complex linguistic phenomenon has been accounted for using a historical and a socio-linguistic descriptive approach. The researcher regresses back in time to trace the history of Algeria's linguistic phenomenon, referring, in the vanguard, to Berber as the first language used in Algeria, then to Arabic, which primed under the arabisation and Islamisation of North Africa, to move to the introduction of the Turkish language during the Ottoman empire and also European languages, Spanish and French, under nineteenth century European

explorations of the country. In Benrabah's understanding, Algeria's history of invasions, as explained above, gives birth to multilingualism in the nation— "Berber–Punic, Berber–Punic–Latin, Berber–Arabic, Berber–Arabic–Spanish–Turkish, Berber–Arabic–French, and so on" (p. 43). Importantly, Benrabah highlights that the French colonial institution has deeply affected the Algerian "cultural and linguistic profile" (P.46), resulting in the widespread of French language in the Algerian society after independence with "one million could read it and six million spoke it." (P.46). Yet, some years later, Arabic, English, and Chinese started to secure a place in the Algerian linguistic scene: Arabic is reinforced under the arabisation policy, while English and Chinese come on in the light of the nation's entry into freemarket capitalism.

In another article entitled "Teaching English in a Multilingual Context," Mohamed Miliani(2000) looks into English as a linguistic alternative to the linguistic deficiency in the Algerian linguistic scene, provided that French has been forsaken in many domains and at different socio-economic levels. The researcher argues that contemporary Algerian linguistic scene is characterized by the emergence of English as a surrogate to French, heralded to offer panacea to the educational, industrial, and technological challenges of the century in the nation. The author draws on the introduction of English in the fourth grade in the primary school and the use of the language in airports welcome signs, and also in some certain road-signs. The author's argument for the extension of English in the Algerian educational and administrative settings is the result of the favorable attitude the language gets from its users and non-users. Still,

another leitmotiv comes from the hostility toward the French language and its speakers, what the author calls “Hizb Franca, the party of France” (P.22). Indeed, the 1997 law on arabisation is an indictment of the French-speaking élite in the country and the introduction of English in the fourth grade is purely political and even, in the author’s viewpoint, meant, besides meeting the demands of a globalised and technological world, to end the influence of French inside and outside the school system.

In “Discussing Plurilingualism in Algeria: The Status of French and English Languages Through the Educational Policy,” Mohamed-Amine Chemani (2011) studies the linguistic phenomenon in Algeria since independence (1962). The author tries a hand on a variety of issues at work in the Algerian linguistic landscape, including the phenomenon of plurilingualism, public school reforms, and the recent antagonism between French and English over dominance in the Algerian education and society. The author conducts his investigation on the fourth grade of a middle class in public school in the academic year 2008/2009. The learners involved in the study speak Algerian Arabic and Tamazight, and their schooling is structured in literary Arabic. French is introduced during the third year of their primary school education and English is introduced during the first year of their middle school. The researcher has found that most of the students surveyed (29.7) like to write and speak French, associating it with prestige, status, and the feeling of pleasure. The research also has revealed the promising prospects for the learning of English in the light of foreign educational reforms and aids programs in Algeria. This concerns mainly the making of textbooks, the training of teachers of English, and the introduction of new technologies.

In another article entitled “English for Peace in Algeria ,” Kamal Belmihoub (2015) speculates on the prospects of English for socio-economic welfare and sociolinguistic serenity. Following a hermeneutic approach, the author studies the different cultural programs the British council and the US Embassy offers to advance intercultural exchanges, plurilingualism, and linguistic peace ecology, relying on Friedrich’s peace sociolinguistic theoretical framework (2007). The aim of the study is to see ‘Deethenecized English’ , which the author uses interchangeably with worldly language, as a potential for peace making at the social, economic, and political levels in the country. The researcher argues that since 1995, the need for English in the Algerian society has increased and stimulated by the socio-economic changes the country witnesses. Examples include the rise of oil prices and the move from a socialist economy to free market capitalism, which required and boosted foreign language learning in the country, and also the socio-economic and political cooperative ties with the Western World (USA and Europe) after 9/11 terrorist attacks. In the light of these socio-economic massive changes, the author wonders about the impending role English language plays to potentially reinforce the relative peace of the country, help improve the economy at the micro-level, and facilitate the efforts to foreigners (Arabs and Westerns) for investments. Still, the author also proposes a wide spectrum of theoretical considerations that would help teachers, policy makers, curriculum designers, and researchers ensure a responsible peace-promoting through English. These include Frederick’s, De mantos’, Birch’s , and Freire’s linguistic models.

As shown above, foreign language learning situation in Algeria has been explored by several studies from different

perspectives. Yet, the present study investigates the topic in the context of Bejaia city following an exploratory research design. The present study backs up previous studies' assumptions on Algeria's multilingualism. Besides, following the previous studies, it associates such a multilingual situation with the revolutionization of the Algerian economy at the turn of the 21st century as well as the impending intercultural exchange programs the country recently carries out. However, unlike previous studies which uses historical or socio-linguistic approaches in the investigation of foreign language learning situation in Algeria, the present study, specifically, investigates the topic in Bejaia city, not Algeria, from an exploratory point of view or perspective.

6. *Methods*

The present investigation intends to statistically expose and show the foreign language learning situation in the public and private institutions of Bejaia city. The two institutions in question include the faculty of Arts and languages at Bejaia University and the Oracle School as a private school of foreign languages learning.

7. *Purpose of the Study*

The main purpose of the study is to get an overview of foreign language learning situation in Bejaia. The emphasis, here, is put on the major foreign languages highly demanded or learnt by Bejaia's students and people at the University and in the private schools of the city. Besides, the investigation provides leitmotifs for the demand for these foreign languages.

8. Population and Sample of the Study

To reach the aims described above, the researchers consider the foreign languages learning situation in Bejaia both at the faculty of arts and languages of Bejaia University and in the private sector. In the faculty of arts and languages is concerned, the faculty students' guide is taken as a reference to have an overview of languages most demanded by the students enrolled in the LMD system in the faculty for the year 2014/2015. Concerning the private sector, the researchers are provided with the statistics related to number of enrolled learners in each language class, the top demanded language(s), as well as some reasons behind such choices (according to the school manager and some learners).

9. Significance of the Study

To the best knowledge of the present researchers, there is no similar study at the University of Bejaia. That is, neither colleagues nor students explore the demand for foreign languages learning in Bejaia. Thus, from this exclusivity and originality, the present study derives its significance. Moreover, the findings of the present study show significantly people's rush toward learning foreign languages in Bejaia city.

10. Results & Discussion

The present research is an exploratory case study worked out in two different settings of Bejaia city; at university and at a private

school. Thus, in what follows, the results and discussion of both the Faculty of Arts and Languages' student's guide and Oracle School's demand for foreign languages will be addressed.

11. Analysis & Discussion of Public School

Leafing through the 2014-2015 Faculty of Arts and Languages student's guide, the bellow figure is drawn, showing the students' demand for foreign languages in the faculty.

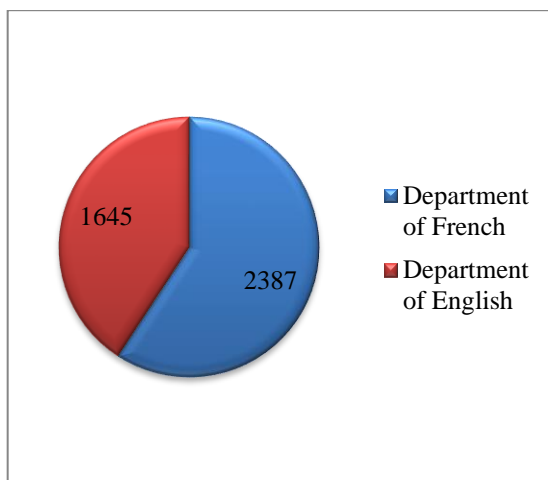


Figure 1. The Number of Enrolled Students in both Departments of French & English.

French studies get the highest score in terms of foreign languages learning at Bejaia University with a total number of 2387

students (1525 students enrolled in B.A. and 862 enrolled in M.A. in different specialties each. Accordingly, the French language is the first foreign language highly demanded by the students at the University of Bejaia. The high score can be related to the wide use of French in the country, in general, and in the city, in particular. Despite the arabisation policy ensued after independence to uproot French and to undo 132 years of French indoctrination, French language couldn't succumb to death (Deming, 2006: 188; Benrabah, 2007:29). By the end of the 1990s, Algeria became the second largest Francophone community in the world after France (Benrabah, 2013: 93); French is taught as a subject in the Algerian primary, middle, and high schools and is held a key language for studies in scientific disciplines in Higher Education, and also a medium of expression in the Algerian administration, mass media, and in some official meetings.

Moreover, the widespread of French in the country is intensified under democratization and globalization. By the late twentieth century, Algeria's economy divorces Communism and enters into a moderately diversified market. The monolingualism policy is irrelevant in the modern globalized Algeria and the need for a bilingual community becomes urgent. In 2000, the then minister of economics, in an article he wrote for the weekly journal *Jeune Afrique-L'intelligent*, has capitalized the role of French to meet the turnover in the Algerian economy under the auspices of globalization. One of his argument is that " French remains a code to have access to technologies" (Benrabah, 2007:30). Accordingly, from 2000 onward, French is heavily re-appropriated in the Algerian linguistic scene as a more of necessity rather than a choice.

Following the above line of thought, one may say that the high demand for French at Bejaia University is directly related to the deeply engrained role the language plays in society. As a Kabyle-speaking community, Bejaia city has a more friendly relationship with the French language than Arabic due to the arabisation policy, which disadvantaged the Kabyle language. Indeed, one outcome of the Kabyle and French contact, under colonialism and, even, in the aftermath, was the extension of French language and French education among Kabyle peoples. In this context, Willis J. M. (2008) writes:

In the Maghreb itself, the Kabyles were particularly disadvantaged by the Algerian government's policy of Arabisation, which had gained momentum by the 1970s. As the country's most accomplished francophone, Kabyles had initially been recruited in disproportionate numbers into the fully francophone educational and administrative structures abandoned by the French at the Algerian independence... the political difficulty of defending the use of the colonial language, French, meant that many Kabyles chose to present Arabisation as a threat to the Berber languages. (P. 230-1)

The Kabyles' exposure to French language and education under colonialism helped in the development of a "strong migration to Metropolitan France" (231) and accounted for "the high proportion of Kabyles among Algerian students and academics studying and working at French universities" (232) after independence. So, the leitmotivs for the choice of French studies at the University of Bejaia by the city's students have to do with migration, travel, and studies.

Many of the graduate students opt for immigration to France to further studies or look for better job opportunities. Still, as a coastal city with an international airport and a large port, Bejaia is an economic city par excellence. The city's economic and industrial investment is boosted through the port's foreign exchange deals, intensified in the mid 1950s under French investment after the discovery of Saharan petroleum and natural gas (Encyclopedia288).

English Studies also get an important attention from the students at the University of Bejaia with a total number of 1645 students (823 enrolled in B.A. and 822 enrolled in M.A.). The high demand for English at the University of Bejaia is linked to the status of the language as a lingua franca. English is introduced as a foreign language in the Algerian middle school (eighth grade), taught as a subject in all the grades in the high school, and studied as a field at the University. Still, in 1993, the Ministry of Education introduced English in the primary school as a competitor to French. Algerian authorities are aware of the importance of English nowadays. It is the dominant language in many domains as medicine, electronics, technology, and film industry. English, as David Cristal argues, is heard "on television spoken by politicians from all over the world. Wherever you travel, you see English signs and advertisements. Whenever you enter a hotel or restaurant in a foreign city, they will understand English, and there will be an English menu" (2003:2).

English learning seems to gain a momentum in the Algerian society and, particularly, in Bejaia City. A number of potentials account for the importance of the language in the society and the

necessity of learning it. The first key element in this process is closely related to the technological exposure underway in the Algerian society (Benrabah 2013:120). The advent of Internet and the exposure to international television channels encouraged Algerians to be more open to the English language than any other foreign language. International investment in the country has also contributed a lot to the widespread of English in the country. Indeed, with its 10th largest reserves of natural gas in the world and its 16th largest oil reserves, Algeria attracts multinational companies, which consider English to be very important for doing business (Ibid). As a coastal city, Bejaia benefits from the resurgence of trade and the development of the commercial and industrial boom under free market capitalism. The city's economy and commercial activity is boosted under Japanese and Chinese investments facilitated through its port and airport. These foreign companies implanted in the city require English language as a medium for communication and employment opportunities.

Still, the search for better living and job opportunities at home and outside, in foreign countries, is another key element in the learning of the English language. It is probably "employment opportunities," as Benrabah argues, that most motivate Algerian youngsters to learn solid English skills that would "open doors to better career prospects both at home and abroad" (Ibid). After graduation, English students at Bejaia University, and to a large extent a great deal of English students in the national territory, go abroad to further their studies, believing that English would open them chances for better life on the other side of the fence. Others remaining in the country, with an English language credential or diplomas at hand, manage to work in the foreign multinational companies implanted in

the city, while others are integrated into education as English teachers in secondary or high schools. More recently, USA and UK foreign cultural exchange programs and educational reform projects have been a breakthrough. Important initiative structures include training English teachers, making textbooks, and revolutionizing education with new technological commodities (Chemami, 2011: 231). Many students at Bejaia University have benefitted from USA English scaffolding programs UK scholarships.

12. Analysis & Discussion of Private School

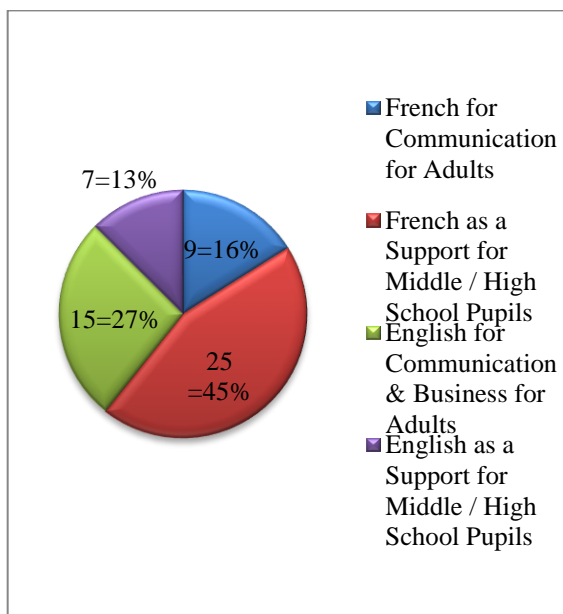


Figure2. The Number of Enrolled Learners in both Classes of French & English.

Like in the public school, French is the highly demanded foreign language to be learnt in the Oracle private school. As the figure 2 shows, there are two types of schooling of French at the school; French for communication, mostly demanded by adults, and French course support for middle and high school pupils. As a course support, French learning is estimated to reach a considerable percentage 45% compared with French for communication, which only amounts to 16%. In the previous years, the school's manager clarifies that French language, other than any other foreign language, has always attracted the attention of a great deal of learners and, thus, primed in terms of foreign language learning. The language, he justifies, is used as a medium for communication among the city's people and employed in the city's professional settings. Parents feel the importance of teaching French to their children at an early age provided the prospects the language presents for the future. Learning French, the manager adds, is associated with modernity and openness. His argument concerns a number of Arabic speaking families, newly settled in the city, feel marginalized as their children do not speak French the way kabyle children do. Learning French in Bejaia city, following this line of thought, procures the feelings of belonging and integrity, and rules out racism. As far as French for communication is concerned, the school manager suggests that, it is targeted mostly by some students, who failed to learn the language as children or during their public schooling. Examples include students whose studies structured in standard Arabic, like the students of law, Arabic, and sociology.

English is the second foreign language, after French, highly demanded in Oracle school of Bejaia city. As is the case with French, English learning in the school has two types; English for communication and English as course support. English for communication (27%) is targeted by students, businessmen and doctors, the manager says revealing the identity of the learners. English as a support course, figure 2 shows, mostly demanded by middle and high school pupils (13%). Parents want their children to learn English simply because it is the “ language of the day,” meaning a lingua Franca , believing it to offer better job opportunities at home and to serve in travel and migration issues. Businessmen of the city are also keen on learning the language for commercial purposes. The manager cites the example of a businessman, who hurries to the school, demanding an intensified English course because his job requires him to travel to China and has to learn English to cope with the situation. The manager also speaks about some graduated English students who come to the school to better practice their English speaking in order to have more access to jobs and also of those students, who have been selected in USA Green Cards, or DV Lottery Immigration Programs.

13. Conclusion

Bejaia city is home to foreign languages learning. The high demand for foreign languages in the city, both in the public and private sectors, reveals the need for a plurilingual policy making over a monolingualism approach. Key potential factors behind the need for foreign language learning and teaching in Bejaia city are, to a large extent, nationally shared or manifested. Global market’s needs,

immigration, better job prospects, and travel all combine to appeal for foreign languages learning and mastery to do the purpose.

Bejaia's foreign language learning situation show French and English vying for dominance. The blurring line between the demand for French and English by the city's inhabitants is too thin and threatens to disappear. In the case of French, the city's inhabitants' conceptualization of the language moves it away from being the old master's lingo to a necessary trump to service present day cultural and economic challenges. Indeed, despite the state's efforts to cast away the French language's shadow, through the arabisation policy and, later, by bringing English to the fore as a surrogate, French could not be deracinated in the city and the country as a whole. The language has a deeply-seated history in the city, which regresses back to the French colonial times, when the language has been learnt and used by the city's inhabitants. It has also been recently intensified out of need to meet late capitalist challenges in terms of technological and economic breakthrough. English is the second foreign language highly demanded for leaning in Bejaia. The rationales for learning English in the city are worldwide common; English is the present day lingua franca and the language of communication technologies, global market, and scientific research to a large extent. Also, the city's coastal geographical settings permit it to welcome foreign investment, which requires English as a medium of communication between people with different native languages. Still, Bejaia city, mainly at the level of the public school, benefitted from of variety of foreign cultural scaffolding as PhD scholarship to UK and USA Full Bright programs, which, in a way or another, aims at bettering English learning and use in the city's socio-professional milieus.

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