



Competing Foreign Languages in the Algerian Learning Context

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Abstract

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The effects of globalisation have affected all countries in the world, including Algeria. In this globalized era, English has become the dominant language used worldwide. As for Algeria, an Arabic-speaking country, French, a colonial legacy, has for a long time been the dominant foreign language. However, in the last few decades, English is gaining ground and seriously challenging French. The coexistence of the two languages has engendered complementarity and competition among Algerians. This article examines Algerians' attitudes towards French and English. A group of 50 participants were asked to complete a questionnaire consisting of a few questions about learning foreign languages. The results show that almost all participants are in favour of learning foreign languages in different ways (public/private language schools or alone). The findings also reveal that they have different attitudes towards French and English, the latter being the most important language to learn for most respondents. Additionally, the results disclose that learning a new language is unproblematic for most of the participants.

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1. Introduction

Bi/multilingual education in the global era should consider the complexity and at the same time the importance of learning other languages than the mother tongue (L1). Thus, being a bilingual (the term is also used to refer to multilinguals) is seen as an opportunity for people in need for an additional language for different reasons including travel, education, business, etc. Nowadays, English is the dominant language in business, technology and science in general. In some countries, other languages than English are dominantly used in many domains. As a former colonial language, French is still prevailing as language of modernity, science and social mobility. Though bilingualism is a linguistic reality in Algeria, it did not receive, through time, much attention, especially on the educational aspect (second/foreign language acquisition). The discussion below is centred on the importance of learning foreign languages in Algeria, particularly French and English.

2. Bilingualism

The term bilingualism has been defined in different ways by different researchers. Baetens-Beardsmore rightly assumes that “bilingualism as a term has open-ended semantics” (1982, p. 1). The term has been used in different situations. While Bloomfield (1933, p. 55) posits that a bilingual may be someone who speaks two languages perfectly, and thus, has a “native-like control of two languages.”, Macnamara (1967a) argues that a bilingual may possess a minimal competence in only one of the four language skills (listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing) in a language other than his mother tongue. The intricacy of the situation has led researchers to take into

consideration social, psychological and cultural factors that may contribute in shaping bilingual competence.

3. Bilingual language development

There are different ways in which the individual becomes bilingual. If the most common place to learn additional languages is the school, there are other situations where the individual grows up in a bilingual environment. Globalization has fostered people to learn more foreign languages to better fit the requirement of a world increasingly depending on multicultural and bilingual skills. Thus, an individual growing in a bilingual environment usually acquires both languages simultaneously and effortlessly, a view supported by Meisel (2004, p. 94) who explains that it is “normal for bilingual children to develop grammatical knowledge, in each of their languages, not qualitatively different from that of the respective monolingual children.”

If it seems obvious that bilingual language development is more successful when both languages are introduced early and simultaneously, specialists agree on the fact that there are two major types of bilinguals in relation to age. Simultaneous bilingualism occurs when both languages are acquired at the same time. During language acquisition, it is common that words and inflections from both languages are mixed in a single sentence. Their competence in both languages is reinforced during the different stages of language development. With time, they start distinguishing between the two languages and use them separately depending on the context. On the other hand, sequential bilingualism occurs when the individual uses previous linguistic knowledge to acquire a second language. In such cases, the first language may influence the way in which the second language is learned.

4. Method

A group of 50 participants were asked to complete a questionnaire consisting of 4 questions about learning foreign languages. The survey examined the participants' perception of the importance of learning foreign languages and more particularly French and English. They were also asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statements on a 4-point Likert scale which ranges from 1=strongly disagree to 4=strongly agree. The data were calculated in terms of the percentage on every statement.

5. Results and Analysis

1. Do you think that it is important to learn different languages?

The first question aims to know whether the participants are aware of the importance of learning other languages than their L1. It is worth mentioning that in Algeria at least three languages coexist: Arabic, Berber and French. In addition to that, English is progressively gaining ground in many domains of life of the Algerians under the effect of globalization.

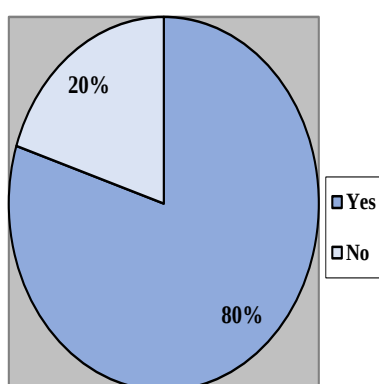


Fig. 1: Importance of learning different languages

The results show a large discrepancy. If the large majority (80%) of the participants agrees that learning different

languages is important, 20% believe it is not important.

2. Where are these languages learned?

This question intended to elicit the settings where languages can be learned.

Table 1: Learning environment

At home	Public schools	Private language school
8	30	12
16%	60%	24%

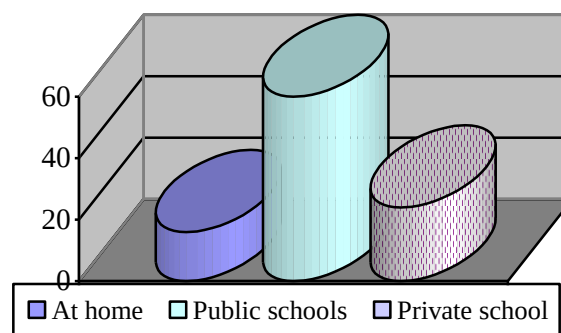


Fig. 2: Learning environment

The majority of the respondents (60%) say they learned additional languages in public schools. However, 16% declare they have learned them at home and 24% in private language schools.

3. What is the language you wish to learn?

The third question tries to know the most important languages.

Table 2: Languages to learn

French	English	Other
15	42	3
30%	84%	6%

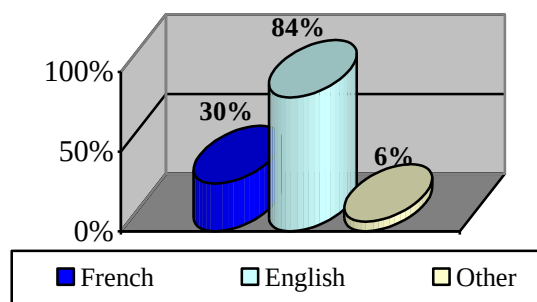


Fig. 3: Languages to learn

In this multiple-choice question, the majority of the participants (84%) believe that English is the most important language followed by French (30%). Finally, 6% say they want to learn other languages.

4. How do you consider learning a new language?

The fourth question aims at bringing out the perception of the learners regarding the degree of difficulty or easiness of learning a new language. The results are represented in the table below.

Table 4: Perception of the learners regarding the difficulty of learning English

Very difficult	Difficult	Slightly difficult	Easy	Very easy
5	10	20	6	9
10%	20%	40%	12%	18%

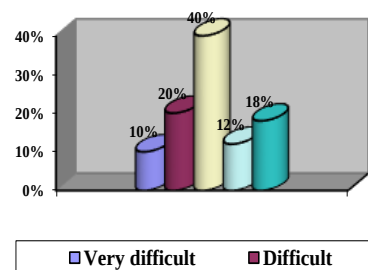


Fig. 4: Perception of the learners regarding the difficulty of learning English

The results show variety in the respondents' views. For 10% of the participants, learning another language is 'very difficult', while it is 'difficult' for 20% and 'slightly difficult' for 40% respectively. Finally, for 12% learning another language is 'easy' and 'very easy' for 18%.

6. Discussion

In general terms, it seems that the importance of learning foreign languages in the Algerian context is salient. Obviously, most of the participants show growing interest in learning English and French. The results show great enthusiasm towards learning other languages than L1 because it is becoming more and more important to know additional languages in education and in the social life as a whole for many Algerians.

If for a long time, French was the dominant language used for international communication and trade, it is now progressively challenged by the English language under the influence of globalization. The flourishing number of private language schools teaching foreign languages in general and more particularly English and French is evidence of people's enthusiasm to learn those languages. However, the relatively low attendance in private language schools may be explained by the fact that learning foreign languages is time consuming and costs money. Thus, those enrolled in learning French or English are aware of such investment. Finally, the dominance of English

discloses an expected reality. Indeed, under the effect of globalisation, there is an increasing demand to learn English in Algeria for several reasons including job requirements, education, science, tourism, social media, etc.

Conclusion

Learning foreign languages is useful at both individual and societal levels, especially under the global era. The results confirm the growing awareness of Algerians towards the importance of foreign languages and opportunities they offer. Though the Algerian educational system favours teaching foreign languages (French, English, etc), many Algerians learn them either alone at home through Internet, apps, software, etc., or in private language schools. If learning an additional language requires time and money, many Algerians are ready to do such sacrifices because the outcomes are beneficial for them. Though French has long been the dominant language in different domains of life of Algerians, under globalisation English is competing and even displacing the latter in many domains, mainly sciences, technology and social media. On the other hand, it seems that the bilingual situation of Algeria has not only favoured positive attitudes toward leaning foreign languages but also facilitates the learning process. Finally, understanding advantages of learning foreign languages may help shaping the future concerns that the Algerian society will need to address.

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