

Linguistic Choices in Documentary Films: Potential for Investigation for Language Didactics

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Abstract:

This article examines the potential of documentary films as a corpus and/or investigation tool in language didactics, questioning the authenticity of language choices and methodological challenges of exploiting these multimodal media. Based on the role of the documentary as a tool for investigation and on the complexity of the Algerian linguistic landscape, the study combined a diachronic analysis of films and interviews with teacher-researchers. The results revealed an evolution of linguistic dynamics (from colonial French to contemporary hybridization) and a duality of use by researchers (research corpus vs. educational support). This study asserts that documentary films are complex mirrors of the linguistic landscape.

Keywords: Language choices, Teaching-learning, Documentary films, Scientific Investigation, Language didactics

INTRODUCTION

The integration of documentary films into language didactics is widely praised for its ability to offer learners an immersion in linguistic and cultural contexts perceived as authentic. Unlike traditional teaching materials, these films present native speakers in real-life communication situations, exposing learners to the richness and complexity of language use. As Coste (2000: 15) reminds us, within the framework of a pluralistic education, it is a matter of « *betting on diversity and alterity as resources for learning* ». This

perception of authenticity is, according to applied linguists like Widdowson (1978), crucial for the commitment and motivation of students.

A fundamental question remains, however: to what degree does this perceived authenticity constitute a didactic reality? It is indeed necessary to question how the linguistic choices (languages used, dialectal variations, accents, codec alternation or code-switching) in documentaries reflect or on the contrary, distort the linguistic reality of the communities they depict, and what is the impact of these constructions on the didactic fidelity of the corpus designed by Astolfi and Demaizière (1990) as being the adequacy of the corpus with the learning objectives defined for the target audience.

The main didactic and methodological challenges are clear. How can tutorialists develop methodologies to exploit the linguistic complexity of documentaries without cognitively overburdening learners? How can documentary films, by nature not designed for educational purposes, be adapted to meet specific learning needs, especially with regard to oral comprehension of accents or language mixtures? The problem lies in the need to move from simple exposure to not only educational but also and above all scientific exploitation. This involves designing analytical tools and activities that transform a potentially chaotic corpus into a structured and effective resource, while preserving its intercultural essence and motivating power for the learner.

1 . Theoretical Framework

1.1. Documentary film as a tool for scientific investigation in language didactics

The documentary film is a tool for scientific investigation in the humanities and social sciences, especially in education, allowing access to subtle realities that words struggle to express (Leblanc and Monceau, 2010:18). The didactic documentary, specifically oriented

towards the transmission of knowledge, aims to offer an intelligibility of reality for learning (**Huber and Peyronie, 2014**). The moving image has a heuristic value, objectifying practices and promoting reflective analysis, acting as a "projection surface for analysis" (**Foucault and Monceau, 2012: 71**). However, the use of the image in research raises the tension between authenticity and artificiality, as the camera can influence the observed behaviours. As Barats (2013:62) points out, *"the image gives access to reality while offering a constructed reading. The research film is not a proof, but a point of view."* A rigorously designed documentary film offers considerable potential for the understanding of educational phenomena, requiring constant vigilance over its production and use.

1.2. The language landscape in Algeria

Algeria is characterized by a complex linguistic landscape where classical Arabic, the national and official language (**Law No. 91-05 of 16 January 1991**), coexists with dialectal Arabic (Darja), the majority and vehicular mother tongue. Amazigh languages, an essential component of identity, have gradually gained status, from "national language" in 2002 to "national and official language" in 2016 (Article 4 of the Algerian Constitution), although their full integration is continuous. French, a colonial heritage without official status (Republic of Algeria, Constitution of 1976), remains an important language in higher education, science, business and the media, contributing to a de facto multilingualism. Finally, Algeria actively promotes English (from primary and higher education) for international openness, access to scientific knowledge and employability, without questioning the status of national languages.

2 . Methodology

2.1. Constitution of the corpus

The corpus consists of informative documentary films dealing with the Algerian school and the educational reality in Algeria under the colonial yoke and at independence. As for the colonial period, these are propaganda films extolling the merits and benefits of the education

system of that time. These films are aimed at French people living in Algeria as well as a minority of Algerians who have access to this type of media and are among the few families whose children have been entitled to education. The choice of this type of documentary film is fully in line with the problem of this article, and by the same token with the theme of this special issue which deals with language choices; indeed we seek to detect these language choices established by the producers of these films to address this audience of French in Algeria and this tiny minority of Algerians, the assumption being that the language choices adopted by the producers of these films are under tension by their representations of the linguistic landscape of that time which could make these documentary films accessible to the target audience.

The selection of propagandist documentary films was applied to both the colonial and post-independence periods for the same reasons; namely, to identify language choices revealing of the linguistic landscape of these eras. However, an option for documentary films of a humanist type has been added for the contemporary period; because in addition to always wanting to account for linguistic choices, this type of humanist documentary film allows the various speakers to express themselves quite freely and extensively, making the discourse spontaneous and therefore more revealing of the population's linguistic choices.

The selection of films was based on linguistic authenticity, which consists of all real and unmanipulated manifestations of language use by a given linguistic community and which is representative of a language or a variety of a language. (McEnery et al., 2006)

A multimodal analysis protocol, inspired by the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), was applied to include visual and sound elements. The challenges related to linguistic complexity (variations, code-switching) were overcome by corpus analysis tools, aimed at systematizing the identification of linguistic patterns, in accordance with the recommendations of Biber, Conrad and Reppen (1998). The research also included semi-structured interviews with teacher-researchers on their use of documentary films.

2.2. Overlapping analysis grid

Our methodological approach is based on a multidimensional analysis grid that explores not only linguistic and didactic dynamics but also cultural ones, as emphasized by Coste and al. (1997 :12) : *« Pluricultural competence [...] is not a mere superposition of distinct competencies, but a complex competence upon which the user can draw to navigate between cultures »*. This analysis is conducted across four key periods : colonial, immediate post-independence, Arabization, and the digital/AI era. This diachronic segmentation makes it possible to contextualize the evolution of language practices and policies, as underlined by Calvet (1999) for the ecology of languages. At the same time, the analysis is done by various "eyes", including direct observation in class, language interactions outside the formal framework, and testimonies. This intersection of perspectives aims at a holistic understanding of linguistic uses, joining the approaches of Hymes (1972) on the ethnography of speech. The grid focuses on the language choices of the filmed actors and the impact of the filming context, seeking to distinguish faithful representation and reproduction of stereotypes for a nuanced vision of linguistic dynamics.

In addition to this analysis grid, we utilized a second research tool, namely the semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview is an essential qualitative investigative tool that is distinguished by its balance between a thematic grid prepared by the researcher and great flexibility to deepen the answers and unexpected themes. According to Boutin (1997), this technique *"leads the respondent to communicate numerous, detailed and quality information on subjects related to research, with very little influence,"* aimed at collecting nuanced information on the perceptions and representations of the individual. This format is particularly suitable for the study of complex practices, such as the exploration of the use of documentary films as an investigative tool by teacher-researchers, because it makes it possible to go beyond the simple fact and to access the rationality, motivations and obstacles that guide these innovative practices, acting, as specified by Blanchet and Gotman (1992), to *"contextualize previously obtained results"* and interpret the wealth of qualitative data. The integration of

complex data, from both oral discourse and visual context, requires sophisticated analysis tools. It is about understanding not only *what* languages are used, but also *how* they are mobilized in spontaneous or semi-directed interactions. As specialists in corpus linguistics point out, "real language" is never a raw material, but a set of choices and variations that reflect social and communicative dynamics. Researchers must therefore develop analytical frameworks that identify recurring patterns (errors, communication strategies, meaning negotiation) and link them to the educational objectives of a language curriculum.

3. Analysis of language choices

3.1. Colonial Times

The analysis of documentary films dating from 1946, 1958 and 1959 reveals contrasting linguistic dynamics and communicative intentions, particularly relevant for a didactic study of languages. These documents, rooted in distinct historical contexts of colonial and pre-independence Algeria, shed light on the representation of languages and populations.

The first video (1946), entitled "North African Life", is characterized by a striking linguistic asymmetry. This is obviously a propaganda document, where the narration is exclusively provided by a journalist speaking in French. The total absence of words attributed to actors in the field — whether students or teachers filmed in educational or daily contexts — signals a deliberate desire for discursive monopoly. French is the only legitimate language for the expression and interpretation of Algerian reality, relegating local languages (dialectal Arabic, Amazigh) to the rank of mere mute objects of the colonial gaze. The credits themselves, presenting the title first in French and then in classical Arabic, although marking a formal recognition of Arabic, subtly reaffirm the hierarchical primacy of French. This configuration raises fundamental questions about the didactic fidelity of such corpora: they can only serve to illustrate a certain linguistic ideology, and not a balanced plurilingual reality.

In contrast, two videos (1958 and 1959 by Philippe Este), in a context related to the "Algerian revolution", reveal a significant change in the initial language choices. In the 1958 video, the credits are directly and

exclusively written in classical Arabic. The introductory presentation itself is in Arabic: "حول الفاجعة الجزائرية / وقع (وقع) اخراج هذا الفيلم من عدة افلام" ("About the Algerian tragedy/ This film was made from several films taken from Algerian incidents"). We found the presence of an old spelling of the phoneme (وقع instead of وقع) in the Arabic credits, although minor, is revealing. It can indicate either an imperfect command of classical Arabic by the authors of the credits, or a production made in haste, or the reflection of a transition in writing standards.

In the 1959 documentary, the credits are written in French, but they are translated and read in perfect classical Arabic. The commentary, throughout the 6-minute documentary, is read in Algerian Arabic. This shift towards Arabic as the language of entry into the documentary suggests an attempt to directly address an Arabic-speaking audience, or at least an increased recognition of Arabic as a language of communication and legitimization of discourse, marking a gradual break with the unilateral preponderance of French observed previously. These preliminary observations underline the importance of paratextual analysis (generics, titles) to understand production intentions and the evolution of the status of languages in the Algerian socio-political context.

3.2. The dawn of independence

The examination of documentary films dating from the early years of independent Algeria (1963-1972) reveals complex and enlightening linguistic dynamics on language policy and educational realities of the time. These audiovisual documents, although of varied nature (French or international), offer an overview of the tensions and developments between official and teaching languages, and vernacular or foreign languages, after independence.

The film analysed in 1963, entitled "Écoles d 'Algérie", illustrates the importance of French immediately after independence. The credits are written exclusively in French, and the speeches of the high school

1According to traditional Maghrebi notation, the *qāf* (ق) is identified by a single dot above, while the *fā* (ف) is marked by a single dot below.

principal as well as the journalist are held in the same language. The filmed course is also a French course. This observation is consistent with the post-independence reality where, despite the desire for Arabization, the Algerian education system, inherited from the colonial period, continued to operate largely in French, especially in secondary and higher education, due to the lack of qualified Arabic-speaking cadres and resources (**Bensalah, 1989**). This documentary highlights a period of transition when French retained a central role in the educational system, despite the proclamation of Arabic as an official language.

The videos of 1965 and 1970 show a diversification of the languages represented, although French remains dominant in some contexts. The 1965 documentary, produced by the BBC, features Algerian students from the Department of Languages at the University of Algiers speaking in English. This presence of English in an academic context, although linked to the foreign production of the film, underlines a gradual opening to other international languages in Algerian higher education. The "distinctly French-speaking" accent of an Algerian student in her speech in English also reveals the linguistic transfers and the interference between the languages in contact in the learners' plurilingual competence (**Hamers & Blanc, 2000**). In 1970, the discourse of documentaries remained mostly in French. This could be explained by the fact that, during this period, as Joubert (1996) emphasizes, the French language in the Maghreb is no longer merely a foreign tongue, but a vital tool for self-expression. He notes that: « *The French language in the Maghreb has ceased to be the language of the "Other" to become, in Kateb Yacine's words, a "war trophy" (butin de guerre) allowing for the expression of a unique identity* » (**Joubert 1996 : 22**). It should be noted, however, that. The insertion of a single expression in Algerian Arabic — the saying "اللي فات مات" (The past is past) — is particularly significant. This isolated occurrence of dialectal Arabic breaks with the almost French monolinguality of previous productions and can symbolize a first attempt, even embryonic, to anchor in a local linguistic reality, or to add a touch of cultural authenticity.

Finally, the 1972 film, whose documentary language is German, while a French course is filmed, illustrates the complexity of multilingualism and foreign influences on the Algerian educational landscape. The language of the documentary itself (German) indicates

an international audience or a non-French co-production, and the fact that it chooses to film a French course in Algeria is an indicator of the persistence of this language as a teaching subject, even if it is no longer the sole language of instruction. These observations, taken as a whole, suggest a gradual but non-linear evolution of the Algerian linguistic landscape after independence, characterized by the initial dominance of French, the emergence of other foreign languages in higher education, and a timid but growing recognition of local languages in the public sphere.

3.3. Arabization

The analysis of Algerian documentary films dating from 1975 and 1988 offers an eloquent insight into the evolution of language policies and their repercussions on educational and communicative practices in post-independence Algeria. These two periods are particularly significant for observing the effects of the generalization of Arabization and the persistence of the French linguistic heritage, as well as the emergence of Amazigh languages.

The 1975 documentary entitled: "The Algerian School in 1975" directly reflects the impact of the Arabization policy of the education system. The filmed courses are taught exclusively in Arabic, focusing on subjects such as Islamic education and the Arabic language. This observation is consistent with the accelerated implementation of Arabization, particularly noticeable at the level of basic education during this decade (**Grandguillaume, 1983**). The choice to film courses entirely in Arabic, without any trace of French as the language of instruction, signals a clear orientation and consolidation of Arabic as the dominant and legitimate language of national education. This document is a visual testimony to the state's desire to break with the colonial past and affirm an Arabic-speaking linguistic identity, even if, in practice, the complete Arabization of scientific and technical fields remained a major challenge.

The 1988 film presents an interesting contrast and reveals the persistent complexity of the Algerian linguistic landscape, despite Arabization efforts. In this documentary, students are filmed speaking in French, although this oral production is marked by hesitation and an

obvious lack of vocabulary. This observation suggests that, even after years of Arabization of education, French retained a significant place in the language practices of young Algerians, especially outside the formal framework of Arabised subjects. The lexical difficulties encountered by students may indicate a teaching of French as a foreign language that did not always offer enough opportunities for fluency, or a decrease in exposure to French compared to previous generations. Even more notable is the presence of some expressions in Tamazight. This inclusion of fragments of Amazigh language, even isolated, is an early indicator of the vitality of this language and its presence in daily interactions, even before its subsequent official recognition. It marks an implicit recognition of the vernacular languages that coexisted with Arabic and French. In sum, this 1988 documentary highlights a *de facto* complex multilingualism, where Arabization is progressing, but where French and Amazigh languages continue to play distinct roles, reflecting a sociolinguistic reality much more nuanced than that conveyed by official discourses.

3.4. The digital age

The analysis of recent documentary films, reflecting the current Algerian linguistic landscape, highlights an increasing complexity and hybridization of language practices, especially in official and media discourses. These observations reveal a reality where languages coexist, interpenetrate and are strategically mobilized according to contexts and audiences.

A first significant observation is the use of classical Arabic in the speech of a director of education, coexisting with the insertion of technological terms in French (e.g. "tablet", "artificial intelligence"). This practice, referred to as lexical borrowing or code insertion (**Myers-Scotton, 1993**), is common in modernization and specialization contexts where Arabic, although an official language, has not yet fully developed its technical lexicon. It illustrates a functional bilingualism where French operates as an input language for technological and scientific concepts. This trend, often observed in the Algerian professional and educational spheres, testifies to the persistence of French as a reference language in certain fields, even within predominantly Arabic-speaking institutional discourses.

Moreover, the observation of the same actors giving speeches in French for French-speaking channels and in classical Arabic for Arabic-speaking channels underlines a pragmatic language adaptation strategy. This inter-speaker and inter-media code alternation is not a sign of incompetence, but rather a proof of the plurilingual competence of the speakers and their ability to adjust their language production to the target audience and the delivery medium (**Gumperz, 1982**). It reflects a segmentation of the Algerian media landscape where the choice of language is a conscious decision, aimed at maximizing the reach and impact of the message with specific segments of the population.

Finally, the presence of speeches in Algerian Arabic (Darja) dotted with coded alternations (Arabic/French/ English) within short sentences reinforces the idea of a deeply hybrid daily linguistic reality. This phenomenon of intra-sentential code-switching, where French words or expressions are inserted into a syntactic structure of dialectal Arabic, is characteristic of the language practices of younger generations and informal interactions. Far from being a sign of linguistic degradation, this alternation is a dynamic communicative resource that testifies to the fluidity with which speakers navigate between their linguistic repertoires (**Poplack, 1980**). Documentaries capturing these moments offer valuable insight into language in action, its flexible use, and its ability to integrate elements from different backgrounds to meet the expressive needs of speakers in a de facto multilingual environment.

The following table summarizes the key observations regarding language choices in the Algerian documentary films analyzed:

Table 1: Linguistic Panorama of Algerian Documentary Films by Period

Period Analyzed	Years Keys	Dominant Languages	Language Skills High school	Intentions/Key Observations
Period Colonial	1946 1958 1959	French Arabic Classic	Arabic Classic	1946: Discursive monopoly of French (propaganda), silent local languages. 1958/59: Switch to classical Arabic in generics, marking increased recognition.
Independence Dawn	1963 1965 1970 1972	French	English Algerian German	1963: Persistence of French in post-independence education. 1965-72: Progressive diversification, appearance of English at university, and timid inclusion of Algerian Arabic, external influence (German).
Arabization	1994 (1) 988	Classical Arabic	French Berber languages Algerian Arabic	1975: Full application of Arabization in L. Education 1988: Persistence of French in students despite the Arabization, emergence of expressions in Tamazight and Algerian Arabic.
The digital era	First-run movies	Classical Arabic, Algerian Arabic, French and English		Hybrid plurilingualism: Classical Arabic for official speeches with French borrowings (technology), alternating Arabic/French/English codes in the media and Darja. Coping Strategies

4. The researchers' point of view

4.1. A semi-structured interview process

The semi-structured interview is an important qualitative investigative tool, combining a thematic grid prepared by the researcher and flexibility to deepen responses and explore unexpected themes.

The interview offered to researchers is divided into three parts. The first is whether the researcher uses documentary film as a tool for scientific investigation or as a body of analysis in his research. The second part of the interview is dedicated to exploring the languages in which these documentary films are produced, while the third step focuses on the procedural aspect of this exploitation, as well as the potential offered by this medium in scientific research.

The interview was conducted with six lecturing research professors in didactics and literature from the departments of Letters and French languages of Frères Mentouri University, Constantine 1 and ENS Assia Djebbar, Constantine 3.

4.2. Analysis

The semi-structured interview with six teacher-researchers highlights diverse approaches to the integration of documentary films into language research and didactic practice. The testimonies reveal a recognition of the value of these media, but also of the constraints and adaptive strategies, especially in the face of the linguistic issue and methodological challenges.

The teacher-researcher 1 testifies to a research focused on the film adaptation of a Chinese French-language novel ("Balzac et la Petite Tailleuse Chinoise"), perceived as a "realistic documentary" film. The use of a Mandarin film subtitled in French is notable, facilitating reception for this non-Chinese-speaking researcher. He highlights the film's contribution to "grasping the cultural significance of the novel" and concretizing "Chinese culturemes", confirming the idea that documentaries are powerful vectors of cultural reality (Kramsch, 1998). Faced with linguistic difficulties, the use of Artificial Intelligence for translation and online research for historical context

illustrates a contemporary methodological adaptation to the challenges of documentary plurilingualism.

The teacher-researcher 2 exploited a dozen documentary films on the Algerian student during the colonial period, composed of testimonies of former students. This researcher highlights the ability of these films to reveal "more subtle realities" and their "emotional, cultural, linguistic load". The predominance of French in these testimonies, with "rare coded alternations in Algerian Arabic", reflects the immediate colonial and post-colonial sociolinguistic context where French was a language of access to higher education (**Grandguillaume, 1983**). This approach underlines the interest of documentaries for the study of authentic testimonies and their historical and emotional value in the didactics of languages and cultures.

The testimonies of teacher-researchers 3, 4, 5 and 6 converge towards a predominantly pedagogical and illustrative use of documentaries, rather than as a body of research. Teacher-researchers 3 and 5 integrate documentaries in French into oral communication (PTO) or art history modules, aimed at the installation of French skills. The teacher-researcher 4 uses documentaries as a "medium for analysis, discussion or illustration" to enrich his courses, favouring predominantly French-speaking or systematically subtitled productions to "facilitate access to content" and "avoid that the language barrier constitutes an obstacle". Finally, the teacher-researcher 6 confirms the pedagogical use (in particular for the module of Comprehension and Oral Expression - CEO), but excludes a function of investigation corpus or research tool. Collectively, these feedbacks highlight a strong preference for documentaries in the target language (French) or with subtitles, in order to maximize understanding and direct exploitation in the classroom, thus reinforcing the idea that linguistic accessibility is a primary criterion for teachers (**Gilmore, 2007**). The analysis of these testimonies thus reveals a double facet of the use of documentaries: that of a body of in-depth research for some, and that of a pragmatic and facilitative educational tool for the majority.

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Table 2: Summary of the Uses and Perceptions of Documentary Films among Teacher-Researcher(s).

Lecturer - Researcher	Type of usage	Languages of Documentaries Used	PERCEIVED BENEFITS
LR 1	Research (film adaptation)	(all day)	Entering the cultural scope, concretization of "culturèmes"
LR 2	Research (historical testimonies)	French (rare Algerian Arabic alternations)	More subtle realities, emotional/cultural/linguistic charge.
LR 3	Pedagogical (Oral Module - PTO)	French	Installation of oral communication skills in French.
LR 4	Pedagogical (Analytical support, discussion, illustration)	Mostly French (if not systematically subtitled)	Better understanding, direct exploitation, trade facilitation.
LR 5	Pedagogical (Art History Module)	FRENCH ONLY:	Course illustration, video support on YouTube.
LR 6	Pedagogical (CEO Module)	Indicated "educational support", not "investigative corpus"	Educational support (not an investigative to

CONCLUSION

This study examined the potential of documentary films as an investigative corpus for language didactics, focusing on the language choices they make and their implications. By tracing the evolution of the Algerian linguistic landscape through these audiovisual archives — from the colonial period to the digital age — we have demonstrated that these films are not simple reflections of reality, but discursive constructions that reveal the sociolinguistic dynamics, the underlying language policies and the practices of coded alternation and

hybridization. The preeminence of French during the colonial period, the gradual Arabization post-independence, and the contemporary emergence of a *de facto* multilingualism integrating dialectal Arabic, French, Tamazight and English, are all complex facets that documentaries manage to capture. However, the "didactic fidelity" of these corpora remains a central question, because their authenticity cannot always be directly transposed into learning situations without adequate pedagogical mediation.

The methodology adopted, combining a diachronic analysis of the language choices in the films and interviews with teacher-researchers, made it possible to highlight challenges and opportunities. While some researchers exploit documentaries as real investigative corpus to explore subtle realities and phenomena such as *code-switching* or the contribution of AI tools for translation, the majority of teacher-researchers use them as illustrative teaching materials. This distinction reveals a gap between research potential and classroom integration practices, often motivated by the search for target language or subtitled materials to facilitate learner understanding. The analysis of the data confirmed that the documentaries are valuable testimonies of the evolution of languages in real context, showing in particular the fluidity and adaptation of Algerian speakers to multiple linguistic repertoires.

Ultimately, documentary films offer a fertile field of investigation for language didactics, provided that they address their linguistic richness with a critical analysis grid and methodological tools adapted to manage their complexity. They are a valuable resource for developing not only language skills, but also learners' sociolinguistic and intercultural awareness. Future research could focus on the development of innovative didactic devices to capitalize on the linguistic heterogeneity of documentaries without overburdening learners, in particular by further integrating the contributions of Artificial Intelligence for contextualization and analysis. It is imperative to continue to explore how these "traces of reality" can be transformed into targeted educational tools, in order to prepare learners to navigate an increasingly plurilingual and complex world.

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