

AP Seminar

9th Feb, 2023

Word Count: 2200

Arabic and Success in the Maghreb

Introduction

Known for their bustling markets, miles of sand dunes, and historic architecture, the North Western African countries of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, collectively referred to as the Maghreb, are the perfect rendition of classical Arabian culture (Britannica). However, the region's colonial past continues to impact its citizens today. Between 1830 and 1912, France invaded the Maghreb, establishing a presence so strong that the Maghrebi nations "had no claim to any independent identity whatsoever", emphasizing the magnitude of French influence (Hussey).

Following the French's departure in the mid 20th century, the Maghrebi governments intended to reverse the influence of the French through a strategy called Arabization, in which the education system was gradually reverted to Arabic (Azzouze et al. 1).

While this was perceived as cultural emancipation from France and progress towards individual identity, the inconsistency of Arabization throughout all education resulted in the preservation of French in higher education and jobs, as compared to the use of Arabic in public schools (Daoud). In order to provide their children with an advantage, wealthier families of the Maghreb send their children to private schools operated only in French (Azzouze et al. 1). These students are provided with an advantage due to their economic status, because they gain earlier exposure to the French language, whereas public school students are only exposed to French when they enter university, making it considerably more difficult (Azzouze et al. 1). Therefore, students without the financial means to acquire private schooling are set up for future failure due to the lack of French in the public education system.

In “Mapping the Bilingual Brain,” Chris Berube highlights that bilingual children exposed to multiple languages at a young age may face neurological advantages. He argues that young language learners are apt to cognitive advantages that are not present in adult learners (Berube). However, this is not the only advantage that bilingual children face: additionally, students exposed to foreign languages at a younger age may also be exposed to social advantages. In “John Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding of Ideas,” Locke argues that children exposed to multiple concepts and ideas in childhood are more apt to social advantages in the future. He writes that “if a child were kept in a place where he never saw any other but black and white till he were a man, he would have no more ideas of scarlet or green” (Locke). Essentially, Locke states that children exposed to fewer foreign concepts, such as foreign languages, at a younger age would be less likely to form and understand complex ideas as an adult, thus diminishing their overall contribution to society. Overall, both the sources emphasize the common theme that those who are exposed to foreign concepts, such as languages, at a younger age reap significant benefits in the future. This is clearly visible in the Maghreb, as kids who are exposed to French at an early age have the greater capability to grasp concepts in French than those who haven’t been exposed until university.

To this day, the educational divide between Arabic and French based on socioeconomic status exists within the Maghreb, and continues to affect the lives of countless students and limit their success. Therefore, it is essential to analyze the linguistic disparity between public and private schools in order to spread more awareness regarding the discriminatory education system in the Maghreb, because it unfairly deters the chance of success for students in poorer financial states, thus maintaining the French elitist system. This paper will highlight how a lack of knowledge in the French language leads to a lack of success at the university level and in the job market, concluding that an Arabic education is detrimental to Maghrebi students’ success.

Linguistic Disparities in Pre-University Education

In North Africa, the quality of schooling varies drastically based on whether it's public or private: “At the secondary level, private schools often focus on French education. In contrast, public schools are commonly taught in Arabic” (Thomas 1). Mikaela Thomas, a student at Bucknell University’s department of Languages, Cultures, and Linguistics, emphasizes the magnitude of the disadvantage associated with fully Arabic-speaking schools in her bachelor thesis. Thomas states that students who “come from an Arabic background... lack preparation for the French or English-taught higher education,” emphasizing the early disadvantages public-school students face (1). Essentially, Thomas states that students who are in Arabic-speaking schools are exempt from the early familiarization of French, consequently decreasing their level of success in higher education, thus highlighting how an Arabic education is detrimental to success in higher education.

This concept is similarly emphasized by Cheryl LeRoux, Professor Emeritus of Department of Education Foundations at the University of South Africa, who explains the complex system of linguistic discrimination and its effects on Maghrebi students’ futures in her thesis. LeRoux argues that the education system in the Maghreb only allows an elite population to access a French education, resulting in a lack of French for public school students, consequently leading to their drawback in later education. She says that Arabic is perceived, “especially in higher education, as limiting” (LeRoux 1). Fundamentally, LeRoux argues that Maghrebi schoolchildren are set back in their educational careers due to the lack of Arabic in higher institutions. Given that these linguistic differences transpire in primary and secondary institutions, Arabic-speaking schools underprepare students and set them up for failure.

Contrastingly, Esmaa Mahmoudi Ghrib, a doctoral student in Human Sciences at the Bourguiba Institute of Modern Languages in Tunis, argues that Arabic-speaking schools may be advantageous to students due to the ease with which students can learn. Ghrib argues that “The learner does not meet as much difficulty in learning things in his or her own native language as he or she does when using a foreign or semi-foreign language,” and that “The best medium of instruction is the mother tongue,” highlighting the naturalness Maghrebi students encounter in Arabic-speaking schools. Essentially, Ghrib counters that Arabic may provide advantages to students because it is easier to learn than French,

providing Arabic educated students with an ease that is not present in French-speaking schools, thus granting them an advantage.

However, Jamal Salmi, education economist and coordinator of the World Bank's tertiary education program, agrees that while Arabic is easier for Maghrebi students in the short term, it is ultimately French in the long term that ensures one's success in university. Salmi states that with a French education, pupils are prevented from "growing intellectually," highlighting the advantages of an Arabic education for students, but between Arabic and French, "a poor mastery of the latter is particularly regrettable... as it hampers students' ability to learn mathematics and the other science subjects." Fundamentally, while Salmi agrees that in the short term Arabic-educated students face an advantage, in the long term it restricts their ability to learn various subjects, thus being detrimental to their success in university. It is ultimately French in the long run that prepares them for university and opens opportunities to learn a variety of subjects, therefore being more vital than Arabic to Maghrebi students for their success in higher education.

Both Thomas and Le Roux argue that Arabic-educated children are faced with disadvantages following schooling because of their lack of exposure to French and the inconsistencies within access to the French language within Maghrebi education. While Ghrib and Salmi affirm that Arabic may be advantageous to students in the short term due to linguistic ease, Salmi counters that French is ultimately more important to academic success, overall supporting that linguistic disparity in Maghrebi education is a causal factor for the disadvantages and lack of success students face in higher education.

Linguistic Disparities in the Maghrebi Job Market

The linguistic disadvantages shown to Arabic-educated students in university continue into their careers. Janet Yearous, a doctoral student at the University of California, Merced, argues in her doctoral thesis that Arabic educated students face employment difficulties in the job market due to their lack of French. She questions whether Arabic educated students "will be able to find employment in a job market which favours French-educated persons?" (Yearous 10). Furthermore, Yearous affirms that "those

enrolled in Arabized scientific sectors such as medicine and engineering have an extremely difficult time finding available employment,” emphasizing the struggles Arabic-educated students face in the job market. Essentially, Yearous argues that Arabic educated students are more likely to be unemployed in the Maghrebi job market due to their lack of French education. These struggles faced by Arabic students in the job market exemplify the disadvantages that a fully Arabic education grants them in the job market.

Similarly, Ali Alalou, a professor in the department of languages at the University of Delaware, argues that the use of French is necessary in the Maghrebi job market, and that Arabic-educated students are less likely to succeed due to their lack of French. Alalou affirms that “French is still widely used among professionals,” emphasizing its prevalence in the Maghrebi job market (413). He goes on to state that “the majority of young people educated in public schools are linguistically ill-equipped to compete in the job market, in which the mastery of French is all but mandatory” (Alalou 413). Essentially, Alalou argues that French still holds prominence in the Maghrebi job market, and that the Arabic-speaking schools’ failure to incorporate French into the education places them at a disadvantage when competing for jobs.

In contrast, Joshua Angrist and Victor Lavy, education economists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Warwick, respectively, counter that Arabic may actually be beneficial to students in the Maghrebi job market. They state that “Strong native language skills may prove to be of more enduring value in the local labor market than French language skills,” countering the conclusion that Arabic is detrimental to students in the job market (Angrist and Lavy 49). Essentially, Angrist and Lavy argue that Arabic may be beneficial for employment in the job market. Given that Arabic-educated students may possess benefits in the job market, consequently a fully Arabic education would be advantageous to students’ success in the job market.

However, Moulay Driss Aqil, Professor of Education at Columbia University, agrees that while Arabic does allow students to gain initial employment in the Maghrebi job market, French ultimately elevates the status of employment that students are able to achieve. In his doctoral thesis, Aqil states that Arabic does allow “children to access the job market and start their professional life,” emphasizing the

advantages Arabic possesses in the job market (114). However, he then magnifies the higher importance of French in the job market by arguing that French is “the language of social promotion, as it provides access to job security and to a high social status” (Aqil 114). Fundamentally, while Aqil agrees with Angrist and Lavy on the advantages of Arabic in the Maghrebi job market when acquiring initial employment, it is ultimately knowledge of French that grants access to higher paying and more prestigious jobs. Thus, a fully Arabic education is detrimental to students’ success in the job market.

Concludingly, a fully Arabic education is detrimental to students’ success in the Maghrebi job market. Although Aqil agrees with Lavy and Angrist that knowledge of Arabic is advantageous for initial employment, ultimately knowledge of French is necessary for the acquisition of distinguished jobs, thus establishing it of higher importance for professional success. Given that Arabic-educated students are not taught French until university, they are less likely to obtain career success, thus proving Arabic education as detrimental to students in the job market.

Conclusion

After analyzing multiple perspectives on the effect of a fully Arabic education in university and in the job market, it is concluded that an Arabic education is severely detrimental to students’ success. The lack of French in Arabic-speaking schools immensely underprepares students for French education at the university level, causing a lower likelihood of graduation and success (Thomas, Le Roux). Furthermore, the lack of French in the Arabic system prevents students from achieving prestigious jobs, thus lowering the overall rate of success (Yearous, Aqil).

Therefore, a proposed resolution would be the implementation of French in the Maghrebi school system, although more research is needed to fully analyze the factors at play in this resolution. The Maghrebi governments should begin to de-Arabize the public education system and begin the incorporation of French courses.

A limitation of this resolution is that it fails to account for the cultural and political history of

French and the Maghreb. After all, Arabization was implemented to revert from French influence, so the reaction of the Maghrebi people to the re-implementation of French is tentative (Azzouze).

An implication would be the opportunity for students of a lower socioeconomic background to achieve success through a joint Arabic-French education due to the teaching of French. With knowledge of the French language, they are more likely to succeed in university and gain distinctive employment in the job market.

However, it must be noted that this resolution is tentative and does not account for a multitude of factors, such as the political situation and government resources. Therefore, it is vital for further research to be conducted in order to formulate a specific and feasible solution that caters to all aforementioned aspects of the education situation in the Maghreb. Nevertheless, it is clear that the current Arabic education system prevents students from reaching their potential due to its lack of French, so alterations will ensure the success of the Maghreb's coming generations.

WORK CITED

- Alalou, Ali. "Language and Ideology in the Maghreb: Francophonie and Other Languages." *The French Review*, vol. 80, no.2, Dec. 2006, pp. 408-421,
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25480661>
- Angrist, Joshua D., and Victory Lavy. "The Effect of a Change in Language of Instruction on the Returns to Schooling in Morocco." *Journal of Labor Economics*, vol. 15, no.1, Jan 1997, pp. S48-S76, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2535401>
- Aqil, Moulay Driss. "Morocco: Multilingualism, Cultural Identity, and Mathematics Education, Post French Protectorate, a Historical Perspective." *Columbia University*, 2019, pp 1-168,
file:///Users/dhariwal772019/Downloads/Aqil_columbia_0054D_15427.pdf
- Azzouze, Azzedine, et al. "Aspects of Education in the Maghreb Countries of Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia." *Agence Tunisienne De Public-Relations*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1968, pp. 1-40, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED029527.pdf>
- Berube, Chris. "Mapping the Bilingual Brain." *Radiolab.org*, 12 Dec 2012,
<http://www.radiolab.org>.
- Daoud, Mohamed. "Arabization in Tunisia: The Tug of War." *University of California, Los Angeles*, vol.2, no. 1, 1991, pp. 7-29,
https://escholarship.org/content/qt3v1089k4/qt3v1089k4_noSplash_dc4f802206b7b8b14d1a39403d6d2250.pdf?t=le422x
- Ghrib, Esmâ Maamouri. "The Introduction of Arabic as a Medium of Instruction in the Tunisian

- Education System.” *Georgetown University Press*, vol. 6, no.1, 1983, pp. 109-130,
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43192556>
- Hussey, Andrew. “Algiers: A city where France is the promised land - and still the enemy.” *The Guardian*, 27 Jan 2013,
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/27/algeria-france-colonial-past-islam>
- LeRoux, Cheryl. “Language in education in Algeria: a historical vignette of a ‘most severe’ socio linguistic problem.” *University of South Africa*, vol. 60, no.2, May 2017, pp. 112-128,10.1080/17597536.2017.1319103
- Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. 1894.
- Salmi, Jamil. “Language and Schooling in Morocco.” *International Journal of Educational Development*, vol.7, no.1, Dec 1987, pp. 21-31,
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248168619_Language_and_schooling_in_Morocco
- The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Maghreb.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 20 July 1998,
<https://www.britannica.com/place/Maghreb>
- Thomas, Mikaela K. “The Power of Language: An Analysis of Language Use and Attitudes in Moroccan Universities.” *Bucknell University*, 1 Jan 2020, pp. 1-78,
<https://core.ac.uk/download/322983567.pdf>
- Yearous, Janet. “French in the Face of Arabization: Language Attitudes among High School Students in Rabat.” *UW-L Journal of Undergraduate Research*, 2012, pp. 1-12,
<https://www.uwlax.edu/globalassets/offices-services/urc/jur-online/pdf/2012/yearous.jane>
 t.pdf

1

0