

THE STATUS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN MOROCCO

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Crossref <http://dx.doi.org/10.26739/2433-202x>

Issue DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.26739/2433-202x-209-2019-1-3>



Article DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.26739/2433-202x-2019-1-3-5>

Abstract: English language has irrefutably turned into the global tongue or the lingua franca of the world. It has become a truly global language crossing many national and international boundaries. As its spreading on the Internet on a large scale, today English appears to evolve to a future global tongue. Indeed, English has become the predominant language of politics, technology and globalization. To put it differently, English language has managed to reach far and isolated areas and more importantly it has infiltrated into different Moroccan domains. The present paper seeks to discuss the socio-linguistic role of English in Morocco and its status in comparison to French. Also, it tends to examine student motivations for studying and choosing English and how English has infiltrated into the Moroccan Linguistic landscape. In addition, the paper focuses on the factors contributing to the spread of English and attempt to shed light on student's perceptions on English through interviews.

Keywords: English, colonial, French, Morocco and language

Undoubtedly, English is quickly growing in status and usage throughout Morocco. Morocco has witnessed momentous social changes over the past decades that have considerably impacted the landscape of English language learning. Currently, English is taught at the secondary and tertiary level of the public education system, and the 1999 educational reform aimed to introduce English education at the lower secondary level. There are also a number of private educational centers that promote the teaching of English such as American Language Centers, the British Council and AMIDEAST. Generally, English enjoys support on a wide-scale socially and from the government, and its usage is no longer limited to the educational system.

The previous Moroccan Minister of Higher Education Lahcen Daoudi announced plans to make the switch from French to English in March 2014. He also encouraged learners and said that "Moroccan students must learn English because it is so important in the job Market, and without it students might find

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difficulties in having access to the job market"¹. In this context, the Moroccan government is moving to advance the position of English in Moroccan schools and universities, emphasizing that English is the language of technology and scientific research. To quote Daoudi, "French is no longer valid, English is the solution"².

Mr. Abdelillah Benkirane, the previous prime minister, along with many Moroccan business leaders, such as Mr. Abdeslam Ahizoune, the chairman and CEO of Maroc Telecom, all of them highlighted the significance of the English language and called on Moroccan officials to adopt English and to focus more on promoting English language. In accordance with these examples, we notice that English language is promoted for its instrumental and influential value as a tool of contact with other countries and for its significance for the Moroccan economy. This evidently means that English also holds a high status and enjoys much cultural and linguistic prestige.

Fatima Sadiqi mentions in her article "The Spread of English in Morocco" published in 1991 that 87% of respondents welcome the notion of seeing English spread in Morocco and 81% "think that English is very useful for Moroccans" (108). Interestingly enough, one of the most dramatic changes that has occurred over the past twenty five years since Sadiqi's study has been the growth of Moroccan access to English through movies, internet, television programs and music. In this context, Sadiqi clearly says that

English television programs and films are translated into French. The people living in Rabat, the capital, have the opportunity to watch three foreign television channels: TV5, RAI, and especially an American channel, World Net, (two hours a day). (103-05)

Today, we witness an irresistible presence of different technological devices such as smart televisions, tablets, smart phones, the DVD and the satellite dish, which have significantly augmented the exposure to American television shows, music and films. These are indeed the effects of globalization that has invaded and impacted every aspect of people's lives.

According to Hesper's survey, which is an electronic newspaper, it is noticed that 41,526 people participated in this survey, 85.98% of respondents said that English should substitute French in Morocco while only 14.02 percent said that French should keep its status as the first foreign language in Morocco, (Zerhouni, 2015). These statistics, alongside the strong signals from Moroccan government officials suggest that there is a huge support to the adoption of English for the development of Morocco. In fact, due to its wide support, many people think that "French is giving up a lot of territory for English in

1. Lahssan Daoudi, a former minister of Higher Education addressing students of engineering in a meeting with students and the staff of the school in Rabat in 2015.

2. Lahssan Daoudi in an interview with Al-Yaoum 24, reported by Jessica Rohan, and published by Morocco World News, 2014.

Morocco and in Arab North Africa generally".(Zughoul, 145).In this vein, Sadiqi in her article also referred to this rivalry between French and English and mentioned that English had started to compete with French for importance. She argues

If we take the Faculty of Letters in Fes as an example, we will notice that the number of students registering every year in the English department equals and sometimes surpasses that in the French department, given that French is offered from the primary school onward, in addition to its predominant use both in and outside school; it would thus be expected to be chosen by more students.(Sadiqi, 111)

In the light of this passage, it could be assumed that students are more inclined to enroll in the English department than others. The number of students is increasing year by year and this is due to prestigious position that English enjoys among Moroccans. In the same context, Sadiqi divides the languages of Morocco into three categories, national (Arabic), colonial (French and Spanish) or foreign (English). Indeed, English was seen and approached as a foreign language rather than a colonial one that tends to suppress local languages and have a superior status in the Moroccan linguistic landscape. In this respect, Sadiqi evidently states that "being a colonial language, French has inevitably been considered a symbol of political and cultural dependence, although this is not explicit. The rather negative attitude toward French indirectly increases the popularity of (and hence the positive attitude toward) English, a language without any colonial connotations"(111). This clearly means that Moroccan people tend to associate French with colonialism while English with development and progress, technology and openness.

Historically speaking, the relationship between Morocco and Great Britain date back to the period of the Saadii who ruled Morocco from 1575 to 1578. (Ben Shrir, 2005, 13) Great Britain sought to deepen the political, economic and cultural relations with Morocco which pushed The Saadi Sultan 'Abd al-Malik to issue decrees in favor of English merchants to facilitate their trade and commercial activities. Bearing witness to the political and diplomatic links between the two countries, some letters were also exchanged between Queen Elizabeth I and some of the Sa'adi sultans. The first Moroccan Ambassador to London was Muhammedal-Sheikh. He was sent to King Charles I with a message of peace and friendship in 1637, (14).For this reason, some historians contend the fact that until 1904 Morocco was considered as part of the informal Empire of Great Britain, (Ben Shrir, 2003, 12).

Almost the same thing could be said about the relationship between Morocco and the United States of America. Morocco was the first country to acknowledge America's independence. The Sultan Sidi Muhammad Ben Abdullah announced his intention and desire to set up diplomatic relations with the United States. Accordingly, he issued a statement on December 20, 1777, (46), announcing that all vessels sailing under the American flag could freely have access to the Moroccan ports. This in fact clearly suggests that English did not carry any

colonial tendencies as the relationships between Morocco, Great Britain and the United States were based on mutual respect, fair trade, collaboration and cooperation. Unlike France which colonized and imposed its colonial language on Morocco motivated by the civilizing discourse that France employed in order to conquer other lands. This civilizing discourse entails a hidden colonial ideology that suggests and represents Morocco as a backward, despotic and inhumane country in need of French civilization.

The power of French colonialism did not end with the independence. A fundamental constituent of the French colonial project rests upon the necessity to suppress the native's language. Power relations are therefore performed and more importantly reinforced through the preeminence of the colonizer's language in public spheres that has power over important resources. This is why, French language and its colonial influence are still dominant in Morocco especially in government offices and administration in general.

The Moroccan Supreme Educational Council's report was submitted to King Mohammed VI for approval. This report demonstrated an unexpected change in the committee's recommendations whose role was to coordinate and to report on the language of instruction in Moroccan schools. These recommendations which represented the core of the report called for the adoption of English as the first foreign language instead of the use of French. However, the Francophone lobby in Morocco that has loyalists in the group responsible for writing the final report discarded this proposal which happened to be exceptionally significant and essential for the future of Morocco scientifically, economically and politically.

The Moroccan linguistic landscape is by no means protected from this apparent and dominant linguistic, socio-cultural, political and pedagogical spread of English. In this respect, Martin Hyde argues, in her article *The Teaching of English in Morocco*, that the exceptional dissemination of English made of English not only a global language but also a lingua franca, (Hyde, 295). According to the British Council, speakers of English as a second language probably outnumber those who speak it as a first language, and around 750 million people are believed to speak English as a foreign language, (Howson, 5). This in fact indicates that English has become a popular language and more importantly receives support from around the world.

Morocco, like many other nations in this world must, willingly or unwillingly, accommodate this cultural and linguistic movement. It must embrace English and adopt it so that the country can become open to foreign investments. Hyde argues that

Language nowadays deals in image, and can be marketed and sold like any other product or service: 'speaking English is the key to employment', 'speaking English joins you to the international community', 'speaking English makes for modernity', and so forth. (Hyde, 296)

Indeed, globalization has boosted the need for English language proficiency and has contributed to a large extent in the spread of English among people, in particular, those willing to excel in the field of IT (Information Technology)

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and business affairs. To put it differently, with technology, it has become a precondition to master English so as to adapt to the high demands of the modern life. This can be attributed to the current situation of English; the language of technology, media, tourism and business. This is why, Sadiqi says clearly that

Policy makers in Morocco have certainly realized that international communication between Morocco and the rest of the world could not be achieved by French alone; they know that English is the key to communication in a very tangible sense. (Sadiqi, 106)

In the light of this, one can deduce that fact that through the use of English students can have access to everything including commerce, business, science and research. There are huge numbers of students who choose to study English because they know that English is an international language. In addition, Moroccan high school students prefer to learn and to speak English more than to have French as their communication tool.

I had the chance to interview a group of students, and some of them clearly stated that "English allows us to have jobs especially in companies that deal with non-speaking English nations." Learning English for Moroccan students is motivated by the fact that they want to get to know Anglophone cultures because they plan to travel to the States and Canada. One of the students told me that "I am learning English because I plan to have a job in America and of course I have to speak English so that I can successfully integrate in the American society". Many students invoke different reasons for learning English, one of them said that "listening to Rap and Hip Hop music made him consider learning English so that he could understand what American rappers talk about." students also brought up the notion that English language is seen as the symbol of the American dream which means that it can help them realize economic and personal fulfillment. Another student pointed out that English is often equated with modernization in Morocco, indicating that English can help integrate the Moroccan population and economy into that of the rest of the world.

The Internet and technological breakthroughs are also stimulating the growth of English. In this respect, a considerable number of Moroccan computer companies are recruiting and calling for employees who already have a command of English since the internet and the functions of computers are in English. Besides this, social media communication tools, such as Facebook, Skype, Yahoo and Twitter also have augmented student motivations for learning English. These social media sites encourage English language learners to widen their language, broaden their scope of knowledge and develop communication abilities in authentic communication settings. Social media offer the possibility for Moroccan students to have cultural contacts with native-English speakers.

All these facts can indicate that English is a very powerful and strong language. African countries such as Senegal, Gabon and Rwanda had already made the switch to English and adopted English in politics and education. The objective behind switching to English in these African states is, according to

the Guardian, to "increase access to global economy□to encourage investors as most of them are speakers of English", (Mcgreal, 2010).Despite its allegiance to French, language-in-education planning in Senegal has given top priority to English in its education system.Taking into account the increasing interest in English as a first foreign language in Morocco, I believe that Morocco must follow the path of these nations.

On the basis of this discussion, it is time for us, as researchers, experts, educators, professors and scholars, to indulge in an open debate about the linguistic future of Morocco. This is a very essential subject that will have a great impact on the position of Morocco in the world as well as its culture and identity.Adopting English as the first official foreign language in Morocco means that that the young Moroccan generation will be able to proudly announce that Morocco has completed its independence.

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