

Language Choice and Attitudes towards French and English: Moroccan High School Students in Consideration

Najib Slimani and Jihad Iguider

ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate language choice and language attitudes towards French and English among Moroccan high school students. The Moroccan society is known for its diverse linguistic map which includes both national and foreign languages. For decades, and since colonization, the use of French as the country's second language has developed to include different domains in society like administration, education, and media. English has remained a foreign language with limited functions. However, currently, the use of English is growing fast in different areas of society and Moroccans are shifting towards favoring English over French. This shift in language choice affects the social behavior besides the social identity of the community. This research seeks to reveal the reasons for this gradual change in language choice and attitudes in Morocco and elicit its social significance. Methodology-wise this research draws on a qualitative case study based on a questionnaire as the major tool for data collection. The findings reveal that the Moroccan high school students are aware of the importance of the English language at the international level and that is what steers their favorable shift towards English.

Keywords: English, French, identity, language attitudes, language choice, Moroccan high school students, social behavior.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Language is a key factor that constitutes part of the identity of different speech communities and individuals. It partakes in every sector in society such as administration, education, media, business, etc. The Moroccan linguistic identity is made up of many languages and Morocco is a multilingual community. According to Boukous (2012), the global linguistic situation is dynamic and the same goes for the linguistic situation in Morocco, which has gone through different developments throughout history. Bentahila (1983) divides the history of the language situation in Morocco into two eras, namely (i) before the French colonization and (ii) after the French colonization. There were two languages in the first era, Amazigh (the language of the indigenous people) and Arabic 'the new comer' after the Arab invasion in the seventh century A.D. During the second era, the French language was introduced in Morocco and imposed on the people as the language of the colonizer. Spanish was equally the language of the colonizer, mainly in the northern and southern regions of the country, though its influence was limited compared to that of French. In addition, English and German are used in Morocco, but their use remains limited, especially in public sectors. In spite of that, nowadays, the use of the English language in Morocco is growing fast to become "the most widely competitive language to French" (Zouhir, 2013, p. 276). In 2021, a campaign was launched by Moroccans on social media platforms calling on the government to replace French with English as the country's first foreign language, without any substantial feedback. In this regard, Moroccan youngsters seem to display a favorable attitude towards English as the language of modernity and communication with the outside world. To quote Cetintas-Yildirim (2020, p. 1038), "language choices can give a clue about the future shifts from one language to another".

This paper is underpinned by the hypothesis that some speakers' preference of English over French in Morocco might lead to a future shift from French to English. This hypothesis is corroborated by the intention of the Moroccan Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation to implement a policy that aims to teach scientific subjects/disciplines in English rather than French. However, this investigation shows that the shift is initiated mainly by the people, youngsters, and to a lesser extent, by the government. Against this background, this paper sheds light on the choice and attitudes of young Moroccans, namely high school students, towards French and English and the reasons behind their favorable choice of English over French. Eventually, the researcher provides answers to two questions:

- 1) Which language do young Moroccans prefer: French or English?
- 2) What are the reasons behind their apparently favorable shift towards English?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In an early work on attitudes, Allport (1954 cited in Garrett, 2010, p. 19) defines attitude as “a learned disposition to think, feel, and behave toward a person (or object) in a particular way.” This definition associates attitudes with three attributes, namely, cognition, emotions, and behavior. Furthermore, it suggests that attitudes are not innate, but rather learned and acquired. Garrett (2010, p. 22) considers the ‘personal experiences’ and the ‘social environment’ to be the most important sources of attitudes. In their study of language attitudes, Agheyisi and Fishman (1970, p. 141) observe that the “discussions of language choice and usage, especially in multilingual settings, are related to the social significance of the different languages and of their representative speakers.” People form different attitudes towards a certain language according to the role of that language in society and the functions that it fulfills. Cargile and Giles (1997, p. 195) suggest that attitudes do not include only cognitive reactions, but also feelings and emotions, which means that when people have favorable attitudes towards a language, they also show emotions of likeability towards it. In the same regard, Ennaji (2005, p. 157) observes that “the more a language is liked or appreciated, the more it is used in different domains”. According to Agheyisi and Fishman (1970, p. 151), “attitudes are learned, enduring, and positively related to overt behavior.” Therefore, attitudes towards languages are dynamic; they change according to situation and time. Language, let us emphasize, is a major porter of identity bound values.

A. *Language and Identity*

Identity is defined by a number of attributes such as ethnicity (belonging to a certain group in which people share the same culture and descent), religion, culture and language. Edwards (2009) suggests that our use of language is what defines who we are and thus it is part of our identity. Identity and language are interrelated concepts, but language is not the only element that makes up identity. Ennaji (2005, p. 24) explains that the two concepts are linked and that there are other factors that constitute identity such as religion, nationality, race, etc. Ennaji (2005) maintains that speakers in multilingual communities, such as Morocco, try to preserve their native languages as part of their identity and, at the same time, show positive attitudes towards the dominant foreign languages. According to Cetintas-Yildirim (2020, p. 1034), “the preference of one language over the other can be seen as an indication of the bilingual speaker’s opinion about his/her identity”. The English language is hailed as a practical tool of communication in various global contexts.

B. *English as a Global Language*

The English language is often associated with global communication and international affairs. Indeed, it is used in international business, communication, media, education, and science. Worldwide, it is the lingua franca par excellence for it is the medium of communication used by people from different parts of the world and whose mother tongues are different (Crystal, 2003). Crystal (2003, p. 3) defines the global language and explains the position of English as an international means of communication stating that “a language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country”.

This ‘special role’, according to Crystal, can be achieved in two ways: either the language is adopted by different countries and is given official status to cover the vital sectors of life, or it can be part of the foreign languages which are taught in school. Ferguson (2006, p. 110) explains that “the spread and decline of languages is causally linked to the power and the fortunes of their speakers rather than to any properties of the language code”. This means that a language becomes powerful when its speakers are powerful as well, whether politically, economically or militarily. Therefore, English as an international language, draws its power, not from its intrinsic characteristics but from its position as the language of world communication and global affairs. Ferguson (2006, p. 110) states that the spread of English in the past was due to the expansion of the British Empire in the first place and secondly to “the growing economic, military and political dominance of the United States in the later twentieth century.” The dominating use of English in scientific research after Second World War, together with the influence of the American multinational companies worldwide in tune with Ferguson’s argument, are key factors in the spread of English. However, the spread of English as a global language can have an impact on other languages. As Dornyei (2002, p. 426) explains, “a central tenet in the study of language globalization is that the promotion of English as a global language occurs at the expense of other languages by gradually eliminating linguistic and cultural diversity.” Morocco wise, the English language is gaining momentum as a viable linguistic option.

C. *Linguistic Situation in Morocco*

The linguistic situation in Morocco is multilingual par excellence. Both local and foreign languages constitute the Moroccan linguistic map. The oldest language in Morocco is Amazigh, the language of the indigenous people in North Africa as a whole. In Morocco, there are three varieties of Amazigh, namely Tashelhit in the central region, including parts of the High Atlas, Tamazight in the Middle Atlas region,

and Tarifit in the north (Bentahila, 1983; Ennaji, 2005; Sadiqi, 2006). Arabic and Islam came to Morocco as a consequence of the Arab expansion in the seventh century A.D. Arabic has different varieties as well, which are Classical Arabic (found in the holy Quran and pre-Islamic literature), Modern Standard Arabic (the language of education and administration) and Moroccan Arabic or Darija (the language of everyday communication). These varieties of Arabic stand in a diglossic relation and complement each other, Modern Standard Arabic being the high variety and Darija the low variety. Both are used to perform different but complementary functions in society. Bilingualism between Amazigh and Arabic existed in Morocco even before colonialism (Zouhir, 2013). After the establishment of the French protectorate in 1912, the French language was introduced in the country as the language of education, administration, and economy. Spanish, the other colonial language, was used in the northern and southern regions. However, with the exception of the former Spanish occupied territories, its influence in society remains limited as opposed to French. According to Sadiqi (2006, p. 3), English “was introduced in Morocco during World War II when Americans established military bases on the Moroccan land to link them to battlegrounds in Europe.” Ennaji (2005:111-121) considers the English language a foreign language in use in Morocco alongside Spanish and German. He perceives it as ‘a newcomer in Morocco’.

Throughout the years, English has grown fast in Morocco and that is what Sadiqi (1991, pp. 99-102) investigates in her study about ‘the spread of English in Morocco’. She states that education, among other domains, is influenced by the spread of English. This influence, according to her, can be seen in the number of the departments of English in Morocco which rose from only two in the 1970s to eleven departments in 1987. She also gives the example of the increasing number of students who register in the departments of English in addition to the growing number of graduates from these departments. For Sadiqi, the decision makers’ policies in education are key factors that contributed to the spread of English in Morocco. This growing status of English in Moroccan society will probably have an impact on the situation of the other languages that make up the linguistic repertoire of the country, especially the French language. As Zouhir (2013, p. 276) explains, “the emergence of English in Morocco” has allowed this language to become “the most widely competitive language to French”. After this brief presentation of the review of literature relating to the subject of this paper, it is now our intention to provide the main aspects of the methodology that is used for this study.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research methodology used in this investigation depends on a qualitative case study based on a questionnaire as the major tool for data collection. The rationale behind using a qualitative approach in this research lies in the fact that it is a suitable method to reveal the participants’ views and thoughts about the use of the French and the English language.

A. *Participants and Setting*

The participants in this study are public high school students from the city of Marrakech, aged between 15 and 19. They are 100 in number (51 females and 49 males). They constitute four different classes in different branches, two in scientific subjects and two in arts. They all belong to the first three levels of high school education, one class in the first year of high school, two classes in the second year, and the fourth in the third year. This study focuses on high school students as its primary source of data collection because they are the ones who are observed to demonstrate a more favorable preference of English in society. This preference is driven by many factors. To state only the major one, these students are digital natives who use digital technology and social media on a daily basis. Therefore, they are exposed to the English language more than any other generation. For this reason, they consider the use of English in their everyday life to be more important than any other language. We believe that the linguistic behavior of these students reflects, to a large extent, the linguistic situation of Morocco in the foreseeable future. Fig. 1, 2, and 3 demonstrate the gender, level of education, and specialty distribution of the participants.

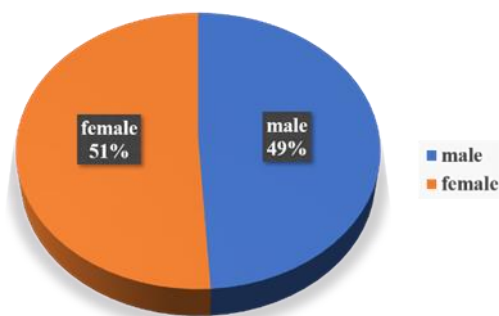


Fig. 1. Gender of the participants.

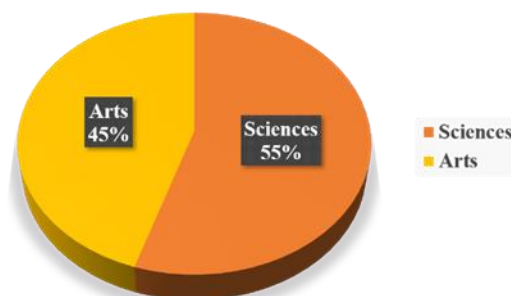


Fig. 2. Specialties of the participants.

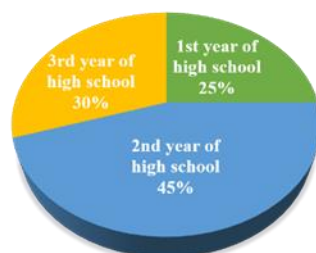


Fig. 3. The participants' level of education.

B. Instruments

As is already said, this investigation adopts a questionnaire as the main tool for data collection. Apart from the section that is about the demographics of the participants (age, gender, and school level), the questionnaire contains 5 questions about language preference between Arabic, French and English. Besides the first question which is close ended, the remaining questions are divided into two parts. In the first part, the participants are asked to choose one of three options and the second part contains open ended questions where the participants are asked to justify their answers. For purposes of clarity, the questions are in both English and Arabic.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The following table presents the answers to the five questions in the questionnaire in terms of numbers. The total number of participants is 100. All the numbers in Table I are out of 100.

TABLE I: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES

	English		French		Arabic		Both French and English		Other languages	
	Number of students	%	Number of students	%	Number of students	%	Number of students	%	Number of students	%
1) In what language do you like to watch films?	77	77%	10	10%	10	10%	-	-	3	3%
2) What language do you really want to master?	71	71%	8	8%	0	0%	-	-	21	21%
3) As school subjects, what is your favorite subject?	49	49%	34	34%	17	17%	-	-	-	-
4) Which language is more important for future?	84	84%	10	10%	0	0%	6	6%	-	-
5) Which language do you think we need most in Morocco, French or English?	80	80%	9	9%	6	6%	5	5%	-	-

In order to analyze the data in the questionnaire, we consider one question at a time to bring out the different choices of the students and the reasons behind these choices.

A. Question 1: In What Language Do You Like to Watch Films?

The reason behind asking this question is to reveal the languages that Moroccan youngsters are exposed to on a daily basis. As a matter of fact, the language that people use in their everyday lives becomes gradually part of their social practices and identity. Moreover, many people consider watching films as a means to learn or to master new languages. As we can notice in the table above, 70 participants out of 100 say they watch films in English. This tendency exhibits the importance that the English language has for

them. Concerning French and Arabic, only 10% of the participants say they watch films in these languages.

Other languages appearing on the surface are Turkish and Korean, but they constitute only 3%. These two languages are spread among young Moroccans as well as young Arabs due to the widespread use of Korean and Turkish drama and songs in the Arab world.

B. Question 2: What Language Do You Really Want to Master?

This question elicits the languages that young Moroccans are passionate about or the languages that have crucial roles in their lives. English is conspicuously the language that the majority of the participants (71%) want to master while only 8% are interested in mastering French. This proclivity reflects the importance of the English language in the participants' personal and academic life which is easily observable in the reaction they show towards English when they are asked to justify their choices. They consider it easier to learn than French and they describe the English accent as being beautiful and ear catching. Another reason that makes the participants strive to master English is the fact that it is an international language that provides better job opportunities for its speakers, unlike French, which is not spoken worldwide. There are other languages that the participants are interested in, namely Spanish and German (besides other languages like Korean and Turkish as mentioned before). 11 students are interested in learning Spanish because they are already good at French and English, and 5 students want to learn German because they intend to continue their studies in Germany. Since the main purpose of this study is to assess the importance of the use of French and English among high school students, the focus remains on these two languages.

C. Question 3: What is Your Favorite School Subject (Arabic, French or English)?

This question elicits the students' preferences in terms of language as a school subject. Although these students might have other preferred school subjects, this investigation is mainly focused on the three languages already mentioned. Thus, it transpires that certain factors have a strong bearing on the students' choice of a given language. These factors include the nature of the syllabus, the personality of the teacher, and the teaching method. For example, when the students are impressed by the teaching method which is used by a certain teacher, they tend to be more interested in the subject that is taught and vice versa. No matter how these factors shape the students' choice, English is the first language selected by the students (49%), followed by French (34%) and Arabic (17%).

D. Question 4: Which Language is Most Important for Your Future, English or French?

The vast majority of students (81%) have chosen English as the language which is likely to secure their academic and future careers. For some of them, this language is "the language of the present and the future". For others, "it offers better opportunities not only at the national level but also worldwide". These statements show that the students are aware of the position of English as a global language and of its ability to secure better future opportunities for them. They are aware of the importance of English as a language of computing science and global communication, in particular. One of the students indicates that English is important for his future because he wants to become a program developer, and this domain requires a good mastery of English. Many students admit that they plan to continue their studies abroad and English will make their journey much easier whether they go to an English-speaking country or any other country in the world.

E. Question 5: Which Language Do You Think We Need Most in Morocco?

The answers to this question are also in favor of English as 80% of the participants believe that English is the language that Morocco needs most while only 9% consider French to be the language that is most needed. Interestingly enough, 6% of the students suggest that the focus should be on Arabic as one of the national languages of the country. The students who select English justify their answers saying that English is the language on demand worldwide and that it is the language of technology, business, science, and communication. For this reason, Morocco needs this language in order to move forward and develop its economy. Some students mention tourism as a vital sector in the country's economy, observing that relying on English in this domain will be fruitful since tourists come from different parts of the world, not only from the French speaking countries. Another advantage of the use of English in Morocco concerns the partnerships that are signed by Morocco with different countries. Plainly, English in all these partnerships enjoys a highly prestigious position.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The first observation that can be made concerning the discussion above is that English achieves the highest scores in all the questions. This testifies to the great importance of English as a global language in the students' awareness. These latter do not consider English as a mere means of communication, but a language that is worth investing in, since it plays a major role in both their academic life and their future careers.

The other major finding in this study has to do with the favorable attitudes of high school students towards English in comparison with French. In this regard, it turns out that high school students, while not totally critical of the existence of French in Morocco, admit that its domains of use are very limited, especially as a global language and as a language of technological and scientific advances. The positive attitudes towards English are underpinned by the fact that English is not associated with colonialism in Moroccan society as opposed to French.

Some of the students' statements reveal their need for English to outweigh the position of French in the country and provide the opportunity for this latter to achieve more development ("we need English in Morocco to get rid of the French cultural and linguistic colonialism", "we have given French enough importance in the past, so it is the turn of English now to help the country move forward"). These statements show the students' contention that the shift to English will not provide opportunities only for individuals but also for the country as a whole. The main reasons which are put forward by the students to prefer English instead of French can be summarized as follows:

- a) English, as a global language, offers more opportunities than French in various domains.
- b) English is the most dominant and most popular language in the world.
- c) It is the language of technological and scientific development.
- d) Its use provides a feeling of pride and self-esteem.
- e) It is the language that is able to compete with French and attenuate the country's dependency on France.
- f) It is the language that can provide real economic development for the country.

These positive attitudes bear witness to the prestigious place of the English language in Morocco. Indeed, this language is growing fast in the country and is becoming part of the daily practices of a spectrum of the Moroccan population, namely the young and the educated elite. Against this background, it is safe to presume that the English language is on the way to replacing French and becoming the first foreign language in Morocco.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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