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# TEACHING, LEARNING AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SELF: EDUCATION, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN MOROCCO

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## Introduction

We often lose sight of the big picture in education. We forget where we are from. Cultural memory is particularly important in post-colonial societies as people try to sort out who they are, what languages they speak, and what they believe; where ‘they’ start and the former colonist ends. Morocco’s own historical and cultural journey has shaped its approach to education and language. As many post-colonial nations have done, it has ‘reinvented’ its ideology and culture and has stumbled through decisions that have resulted in unintended consequences for the educational establishment. Unfortunately, this process has been uneven and incomplete. As is often the case, students have been pushed and pulled from all sides, left in between competing interests that often fail to recognize *their* actual needs. This essay consists of Morocco’s history of education, theorists’ writing about the interplay of culture, language and education, interviews with teachers at a prominent private school in the country and my own memories of learning and teaching in Morocco. At the intersection of these four frames is an exploration of language, culture and socioeconomics reflected in education.

## Colonialism, French Education & Its Legacy

Morocco is uniquely situated on the African continent. It is the westernmost Islamic country on the continent, the northernmost African country and a mere three miles across the Strait of Gibraltar from Europe. It exists in a liminal space between western and traditional cultures, and the developed and developing worlds. These competing influences have been folded into Morocco’s larger

cultural framework and become part of its Arab-African-European identity.

Morocco's construction of 'self' can be seen through its history of education and language. Morocco was colonized by the French whose policies were focused on maintaining existing social structures. They developed an educational system to serve the Westernized Moroccan elite to "educate members of each social class better so that they would be more capable of filling the position into which they were born."<sup>1</sup> In response to perceptions that France's more democratic approach to education in Algeria and Tunisia had failed, three different types of schools were created, the *écoles des fils de notables*, and separate schools for peasant and artisan classes.<sup>2</sup> By 1940, only three percent of school-aged children, 27,000 of a total population of 900,000, attended school. Although the number of students increased by 19,000, shortly before independence in 1956, the majority of the Moroccan population remained uneducated.<sup>3</sup> In 1952, of the 178 architects in the country, only one was Moroccan. There were 25 Moroccan doctors and just one accountant. In 1958, only 1,500 Moroccans had graduated from high school and an estimated 42,000 had finished primary school.<sup>4</sup> The French education system failed to provide most Moroccans with the necessary education to successfully navigate independence.

In the post-colonial period, the Moroccan government sought to differentiate itself from its former colonial rulers through a process of "Arabization". This assertion of Morocco's Arab-Islamic identity was designed to unite its people. Morocco also celebrated its new freedom through the rapid expansion of the educational system. By 1987-1988, the number of children in secondary school had jumped from 23,000 to 1,348,670.<sup>5</sup> During this period of rapid expansion, the Moroccan government began a process of "Moroccanization" of the schools. Moroccans were encouraged to fill teaching positions and training programs were expanded to meet the demand.

Moroccanization and Arabization were seen as complementary processes through which education would express the values of the post-colonial state. However, higher education and in particular, the sciences and

technological education were still taught in French.<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically, Arabization "became a vehicle to maintain the elite power structure and superior status of the French language."<sup>7</sup> Upper class parents continued to send their children to private elementary and secondary schools, the majority of which use French as the primary language of instruction or emphasized bi- or trilingual education.<sup>8</sup> Although lower-class Moroccans learned in Arabic, the elites continued to learn in French.

In contrast to the elites, the majority of Moroccans are monolingual speakers of either Tamazight, or the Darija dialect of Arabic.<sup>9</sup> Tamazight is the official name of the Berber language; there are three dialects of the language spoken in Morocco. Approximately 34 percent of the Moroccan population speaks Tamazight, while the rest of the population speaks Moroccan Arabic.<sup>10</sup> Moroccan Arabic, or Darija, is a dialect of Arabic, which has been strongly influenced by Tamazight, French and Spanish. It differs from Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) in its vocabulary, pronunciation and grammatical construction. Both Tamazight and Darija are excluded from formal academic settings and are primarily oral, possibly contributing to Morocco's low literacy rates.<sup>11</sup> As of the 2004 census, approximately 52 percent of the adult population was considered literate; just under 40 percent of the female population is literate.<sup>12</sup> The middle and upper classes are often bilingual or multilingual and speak Modern Standard Arabic, French, English and Spanish as well as local languages.<sup>13</sup> Because of this, social divisions are exacerbated by language.

*April 2004 — The trains out of Meknes are often unreliable. Sometimes you have to wait a long time to go anywhere and can sit on hard concrete benches, next to tracks filled with weeds. Fortunately, this time I sat next to a friend. We talked about our classes at Al Akhawayn, our professor for Political Geography, our roommates, where we went to school as kids. The easy conversation of new and old friends, who know each other well enough to be comfortable but not well enough to already know all of those facts. It's*

1 Barbara DeGorge, "The Modernization of Education: A Case Study of Tunisia and Morocco," *The European Legacy* 7, no. 5 (2002): 584.

2 Ibid., 584-585.

3 Ibid., 586.

4 Ibid., 586.

5 Ibid., 589-590.

6 Ibid., 590.

7 Daniel, M.C., and A. Ball, "The Moroccan educational context: Evolving multilingualism," *International Journal of Educational Development* 30 no. 2 (2010): 131.

8 Ibid., 131.

9 Ibid., 132.

10 Ibid., 132.

11 Ibid., 131.

12 This is defined as individuals, "age 15 and over [who] can read and write." "Morocco," CIA – *The World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mo.html> (accessed June 6, 2011).

13 Daniel & Ball, "The Moroccan Educational Context: Evolving Multilingualism," 131.

*funny how with one seemingly innocuous question, a response can rattle around in your brain forever. I ask about the students at Al Akhawayn and where they studied before coming to university. "If you went to French schools you're a snob and not a patriotic Moroccan. If you went to Arabic schools you're stupid, ignorant and backward." She says this with a note of bitterness in her voice. Having been educated in the public school system she now studies at the preeminent English-speaking university in the country.*

### Culture, Identity & Education

Morocco is remaking its image to reflect a certain definition of 'self,' and has defined its educational identity in terms of Modern Standard Arabic, despite the very diverse linguistic context. By creating this binary of what 'is' and what 'is not' Moroccan education, those who did not speak the *lingua franca*, Moroccan Arabic, are marginalized and disempowered, while the monolingual majority tries to gain fluency in a non-native language. Although the majority may seem to gain an advantage because of their access to higher education and multilingual skills, students struggle to gain a critical understanding of concepts taught in a non-native language. Additionally, these students are separated from the language of the larger culture and at risk losing their sense of belonging, causing resentment and disengagement. Both groups are disadvantaged by the reactionary move to reassert a 'Moroccan' identity.

Throughout *The Pedagogy of Hope*, Paulo Freire discusses the importance of understanding what he calls the 'why': listening to people to better understand their needs, before seeking to 'educate' them in any particular way. If students are to be successful, their needs must be affirmed and met by the language education process. Freire wrote, "We carry with us the memory of many fabrics, a self soaked in our history, our culture."<sup>14</sup> By disempowering students linguistically, we run the risk of missing the point of education entirely. For the Moroccan elite, this means taking a critical view of the way in which language and education intertwine.

Moroccan linguistic theorists have also examined this intersection of language and culture. Aomar Boum makes the argument that, "French colonial educational policies and post-independence Moroccan national schooling ideologies have created a national system of double standards...

which [exacerbate] regional educational and socioeconomic inequalities."<sup>15</sup> He describes Morocco's educational policy through a framework he defines as, "the political coherence of educational incoherence."<sup>16</sup> Boum argues that politicians who advocate for the national policy of Arabization, but are wealthy enough to pursue private French education for their children, have ghettoized rural, impoverished students. Additionally, they have effectively barred Arabic-speaking low-income students from continuing on to higher education, which is taught primarily in French. These leaders have "advocated a double-standard system benefiting the privileged few and putting at a disadvantage the rural student population."<sup>17</sup> Beyond the polarization of society along socioeconomic lines, the system has pushed parents with means to seek other educational opportunities for their children. The discontinuity of language in the education system perpetuates existing inequalities and further isolates already disconnected elites.

*January 2010 — I feel like I sit in this seat, at this table, at this time, with this student every day. And we read and read and read and nothing ever changes. It's like he can't connect the pieces. I put down my book and look up. "Alem, how are you doing today?" "Okay," he says, not looking up. I try to push all of my frustration out of my head so that Alem can't sense it, as young children often seem able to do. All of a sudden a conversation with Alem's French and Arabic teachers pops into my head. It's not English, I think. It's all language. "I was wondering something. What language do you speak at home?" Alem looks up. "I speak Dutch with my Mom." My heart melts. "Really?" I say it and think it all at once. He speaks Dutch at home, Darija with his best friend Nizam, I ask him to speak in English, his French teacher demands French, and his Arabic teacher wants Modern Standard Arabic. Five languages.*

### Teaching & Learning in A Moroccan Context

It is into this context that expatriate teachers, that teach French and English, are thrust when they move to Casablanca, Morocco to teach at the international American school I will call "The American School of Casablanca (ASC)." The school is a K-12 trilingual school with 710 students from around the world. 60 percent of the student population is Moroccan, twenty percent is American, and

<sup>14</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Robert R. Barr (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 23-24.

<sup>15</sup> Aomar Boum, "The Political Coherence of Educational Incoherence: The Consequences of Educational Specialization in a Southern Moroccan Community," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2008): 205..

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 214.

twenty percent are from over 30 other nations.<sup>18</sup> The school's mission is to create a "caring educational community" that prepares students for higher learning, while honoring the students' heritage.<sup>19</sup> This school is a typical example of the private, elite education system that has grown out of the social hierarchies that are reinforced by Morocco's multilingual policies. Although less expensive than other private English language schools in the city, its tuition rates are a minimum of 64,200 Dirhams per year.<sup>20</sup>

Parents who work in occupations such as business, engineering, law and government often choose private schools to ensure their children study at a university outside of Morocco. Multilingualism and education abroad are seen as keys to financial success.<sup>21</sup> Parents and extended families, who were often educated in Moroccan schools, speak a combination of French, Modern Standard Arabic and Darija, and use all three with their children. The difference between these students and their parents, however, is that the parents were instructed in their native language and culture. At the point at which they were beginning the learning process, their linguistic skills and identities were affirmed and reinforced.

In contrast, the students at the international school are instructed in English, then French, and then Standard Arabic. Their language development is uneven and inconsistent. Students in K3 are immersed in English. K4 and K5 aim for dual-immersion in French and English. Multilingual teachers often switch to MSA and Darija to communicate with their students. In the first through fifth grades during a school day, students are taught French and Arabic for an hour each; the other three-and-a-half hours of class time are in English.<sup>22</sup> English core teachers are required to instruct students in Reading and Language Arts, Math, Social Studies and Science. Even Moroccan history, a subject with

which most English core teachers have little experience, is taught in English.<sup>23</sup> Once students reach middle and high school, all core subjects are taught in English. Arabic and French are offered at all levels as electives.<sup>24</sup> Although most students are instructed in all three languages for twelve years or more many struggle to gain academic fluency in any of these languages.

*February 2009 — I stare at the tattles, completely visible in the label-less 'Pick Cracker' jar. No teacher wants to sit and listen to tattles about pushing, picking boogies, forgotten promises, and broken pencils, so I decide to have my students write their tattles. As I sit at my desk during French (my planning time) with the jar open and a pile of crumpled paper in front of me, I can feel twenty-four pairs of eyes boring into my back, as if they could read my mind just by looking hard enough. There is a growing stack of tattles that just aren't worth dealing with. I open another one. Scribbled in pencil on the back of a math worksheet it says, "Husam said 'OO' to me." I stare. Suddenly, a devious and inspired thought pops into my head. It's not 'OO,' it's BOOBS. The note reads, "Husam said boobs to me," except that the student didn't know the word in English. My shoulders shake with laughter. I don't know what I'm going to do with this note, but it doesn't really matter now. The tattle jar has been more than worth my original investment.*

Asked about the challenges of teaching in a multilingual environment, Jane Fitzgerald, a third-grade teacher, wrote:

I communicate with my parents via email, newsletters, and parent meetings. The challenges [...] Well, I have two major languages to contend with, not counting the two expats from Spanish-speaking countries. Getting things translated in a timely manner requires translators (translators that are not pro-parent or sympathize with one side more than the other) - translators that are available for the teachers, not the entire school and its administration. Finding a translator last minute is very challenging if a meeting is needed to resolve a situation that may require immediate attention.<sup>25</sup>

Her comments highlight a unique difficulty of teaching in a non-native language. Although her students' parents come from a more educated background than most Moroccans and many speak multiple languages, communicating in

18 "About Us," American School of Casablanca, [http://www.gwa.ac.ma/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=20&Itemid=110&lang=en](http://www.gwa.ac.ma/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=20&Itemid=110&lang=en) (accessed June 5, 2011).

19 Ibid.

20 The 'Dirham' is the official currency of Morocco. According to the CIA World Factbook at the time of this writing, the exchange rate is approximately 8.1 Dhs per US dollar. As such, the 64,200 Dh tuition rate for elementary school would be approximately \$8,000. The per capita GDP of Morocco, however, would be approximately \$5,000. The high school tuition rate, at almost \$10,000 is twice the income of an average Moroccan.

21 Amy Kirpatrick (elementary school teacher) in discussion with the author, June 2011; Jane Fitzgerald (elementary school teacher) in discussion with the author, June 2011. Note: names have been changed.

22 American School of Casablanca, "Elementary School Parent/Student Handbook" (student handbook, American School of Casablanca, 2009-2010).

23 Ibid.

24 American School of Casablanca, "Middle School Parent/Student Handbook" (student handbook, American School of Casablanca, 2009-2010).

25 Jane Fitzgerald (elementary school teacher) in discussion with the author, June 2011.

English can still be a struggle. This is a particularly important point for things like homework: if a student struggles with a certain concept, their parents are often unable to help them, not because they do not know about the subject but because they do not understand English.

An additional problem in the program's design was highlighted by Amy Kirpatrick, an ESL specialist and the department head for Student Support Services. Because elementary school students receive their primary instruction in English - their newest language - and learn no academic content in French and Arabic, the burden is on the English-language instructors to teach vocabulary, while trying to help students develop critical-thinking skills. Ms. Kirpatrick, who provides services for "small groups of students who need extra support with vocabulary development, reading comprehension, or writing," mentioned that students are often 'graduated' out of the ELL program after only a year of instruction due to the influx into the school of new students who are in need of even more help.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Ms. Fitzgerald questioned:

[At school] we are spending three to four hours on teaching students to think critically while learning a third language, one hour on script writing and pronunciation in Arabic, and one hour on conjugation and pronunciation in French. Why do I have the hardest thing to teach? Why am I trying to get them to develop critical thinking skills with the use of fewer words than any other language?<sup>27</sup>

Although the school 'honors' the multifariousness the students' languages by instructing in French, Arabic and English, students are disadvantaged by the fact that they are most fluent in the languages they use least. Additionally, this underutilization of native languages gives an impression to students that the knowledge they bring with them to school each day is not important. Vocabulary and colloquial expressions that students could employ in learning subjects like math or science are marginalized.

Fluency in any language is a concern for many of the teachers. Although the school encourages the use of English in leisure time, students do not have the necessary vocabulary to talk about non-academic things. Ms. Fitzgerald notes, "When I sit and observe my students playing a game and getting so wrapped up in it that they become verbal, I find that English, for obvious

reasons, takes a back seat. They don't have the vocabulary to say what they really want to say, to explain how they are feeling. They almost always speak in French. Darija is used for commands like, 'Come,' 'Move,' etc. and rarely for [an entire] conversation."<sup>28</sup> Students often ask, "Miss, Miss! Can I ask another student what this word is in English? I don't know how to say it in English," or "What does this mean?"<sup>29</sup> Although the teachers encourage students to look for clues in the sentences, paragraphs or even pictures to determine the meaning of an unknown word, students are often unsuccessful. This leads to frustration, as students are unable to communicate their ideas easily and must constantly translate from Darija to French or Standard Arabic to English. Ms. Fitzgerald wrote, "The only 'strong' students that exist, exist because their parents speak to them in English...critical thinking has taken a hit, writing skills, too. It's a mess."<sup>30</sup> This problem is not exclusive to trilingual programs of private school like these in Morocco. When confronted with so many inconsistencies and competing demands, students struggle to construct their own definition of 'self.'

## Conclusion

Although the ideology of public education would suggest a strict binary construction of what is and what is not Moroccan culture, by promoting Arabic but using French the elites implicitly acknowledge that the binary is not realistic. Parents who can afford it opt out of the public system altogether. Ironically, their students struggle in private schools. They have only a superficial grasp of core subject areas because they are required to learn in a second, third or fourth language. Additionally, they struggle to find their identity due to such an educational system. When a school chooses to educate students in an unfamiliar language - whether it be Modern Standard Arabic, French or English - rather than their 'heart' language, it rejects some of their knowledge. The 'received wisdom' for students is that the language they bring to school is not enough. When the Moroccan government chose to Arabize the entire public educational system it inadvertently created a system in which students who have access to private schools are separated from the local culture and language. If teachers are ever to empower their students, they must somehow overcome this obstacle. Any solution to this problem will require a deep understanding of the history

<sup>26</sup> Amy Kirpatrick (elementary school teacher) in discussion with the author, June 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Jane Fitzgerald (elementary school teacher) in discussion with the author, June 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Amy Kirpatrick (elementary school teacher) in discussion with the author, June 2011; Jane Fitzgerald (elementary school teacher) in discussion with the author, June 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Jane Fitzgerald (elementary school teacher) in discussion with the author, June 2011.

and cultural framework that has created the current situation. It will also require respect for the students' native language. On a much larger scale, educational language policies must be inclusive whenever possible so as to empower their participants. Governments must not create policies out of a reactionary tendency to construct culture as exclusively one thing or another. The loser in either case is not the teacher or the government, but the individual who has been denied an education that empowers his or her sense of self.

*June 2010 — I sit on the concrete steps, watching my class play soccer, swing, jump rope, and draw with chalk. They buzz with happy energy as they play. I am proud of them. But one conversation still nags at me. Alem has failed. Not a, “well let’s pass him and see how he does,” type of failure, but true failure. He’s failing almost everything. I know why, but I can’t change the system to make it work for him. He tries so hard. When I talked to him about it, he burst into tears and I almost wanted to myself. Alem is moping alone, not playing soccer as he usually does. I call Nizam and Alem over. They’re best friends and cousins and I know that Nizam, the kindest kid I’d ever met, would comfort him. “Hey, Nizam. Can you help me with something? Alem is feeling sad because he can’t go to third grade with you next year and he’s worried he won’t have any friends.” Nizam instantly puts his arm around Alem’s now heaving shoulders and puts his face right in front of Alem’s. “Don’t worry. We can still be friends.” Alem cries and Nizam continues to comfort him...in English, with a little bit of French...and Arabic. PEAR*

## INTERVIEW

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### A HISTORIAN’S PERSPECTIVE: UNDERSTANDING CHINA AND NORTH KOREA

*Professor John Delury*