

Advocating for Mother Tongue as a Medium of Instruction in Moroccan Multilingual Public Schools

Since independence, Morocco has adopted Arabization, a monolingual policy that entails the use of Standard Arabic as the sole medium of instruction in public schools. But recent policies have advocated for a multilingual education that promotes mother tongues use in early instruction in public schools and foreign languages. In 2003, a National Education and Training Charter called for teaching the mother tongue Tamazight. As a result, Tamazight was recognized as an official language and was integrated into the school system. Although Moroccan Arabic or Darija is also the mother tongue that most Moroccans learn to speak since their birth, and the language of daily communication, it is overlooked in the education sector. Recent debates have advocated for its use in public schools and for its standardization to obtain an official standing with Standard Arabic and Tamazight. This paper aims to contribute to discussions about mother tongues education and attempts to shed light on the importance of both mother tongues, Moroccan Arabic and Tamazight in Morocco. First, I will provide a description of Moroccan linguistic landscape considering all languages spoken, their status and their use. Secondly, I will discuss different past and present linguistic and educational policies focusing on the current one advocating for mother tongue Moroccan Arabic. Thirdly, I will examine challenges and problems that could face the implementation of this mother tongue policy. Finally, I will end this paper with recommendations for using Moroccan Arabic along with Standard Arabic and Tamazight in public schools.

Keywords: *Mother tongue policy, Moroccan educational policies, Implementation assessment*

Introduction

Upon their independence, colonized countries face myriad issues and challenges such as infrastructure, economic instability and dependence, ethnic rivalries, and lack of resources. But one of the major issues is the return to national identity and use of the national language as the sole medium of instruction in schools, a language that was eradicated and replaced by the language of the colonizer. This paper discusses the debate about the current educational reform that advocates for the use of mother tongue Moroccan Arabic in early instruction in public schools, and challenges that face its implementation. It consists of five sections. First, a presentation of local and foreign languages spoken in Morocco that characterizes a linguistically diverse and complex society will be presented followed by an examination of past and present linguistic and educational policies that have influenced the choice and the vehicle of language(s) in schools. In the third section, challenges and problems that could face the implementation of this mother tongue policy will

1 be investigated. Recommendations for the use of Moroccan Arabic along with
2 Standard Arabic and Tamazight will be offered at the end of this paper.

3 4 5 **Moroccan Linguistics Situation**

6 7 **National Languages**

8
9 Morocco is a multilingual country that boasts a rich linguistic diversity
10 characterized by a presence of two mother tongues (Moroccan Arabic or Darija
11 and Berber or Tamazight), Classical Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic or Fusha
12 and foreign languages, mainly French, Spanish, and English. All these
13 languages have a different status and do not benefit from equal footing in
14 Moroccan's society in the education. First, Berber is the language of Berbers,
15 the indigenous population of Morocco. Berbers call themselves Amazigh and
16 refer to their language as Tamazight which is used in reference to a particular
17 variety of Berber in Morocco, of which there are three dialects: Tarifit spoken
18 in Rif mountains in the North, Tashlehait spoken in the Southwest, especially
19 in the Souss Valley, and Tamazight spoken in the Middle Atlas and the eastern
20 half of the high Atlas Mountains. At least 30% of Moroccans speak one of the
21 three Berber dialects and deem it their mother tongue. (Elmraoui, 2007)

22 Second, Arabic language which was introduced to Morocco in the seventh
23 century during the Arab invasion and was adopted by Berbers as the language
24 of administration, legislation, and education during that time. Today, three
25 varieties of Arabic are in use in Morocco and stand in a triglossic relationship,
26 that is three varieties of the same language existing side by side, each enjoying
27 a particular status and fulfilling different sociolinguistic functions: Classical
28 Arabic, the high variety, is the language of the Qur'an taught in religious
29 schools and used in religious functions (Ayoub, 2017, p.2). The Modern
30 version of Classical Arabic is Standard Arabic, the official language of
31 Morocco used in formal settings, government, and administration. The third
32 variety, Moroccan Arabic, is the low variety since it is an oral and non-
33 standardized language. It is the mother tongue of all Moroccans, except in
34 Amazigh-speaking area, and used for everyday communication by both Arabic
35 and Amazigh speakers.

36 37 **Foreign Languages**

38
39 In addition to these local languages, three major foreign languages
40 (French, Spanish, and English) are added to Moroccan repertoire. Among these
41 foreign languages, French is still prevalent in Morocco even after sixty-seven
42 years of independence from French occupation, and it is used significantly in
43 many spheres of Moroccan public life, overshadowing local languages in
44 official and unofficial communication. Spanish, on the other hand, is spoken
45 mostly in the North of Morocco because of its geographic proximity to Spain.
46 It is also spoken in the Western Sahara region of Southern Morocco. Spanish

1 “has been in constant decline because of its absence in the unified educational
2 system. (Benzakour, Gaadi, & Queflélec, 2000, pp.71-72)

3 The last foreign language is English which occupies a considerable place
4 near French due to the advent of globalization. It is used particularly in the
5 fields of tourism, media, and finance. In education, it is taught as a foreign
6 language in high schools and universities, and for several private institutions
7 for a higher education, it is the only language of instruction.

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10 **Pre-and Post-Independence Educational Policies**

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12 **The French and Spanish Educational Policy**

13

14 During the French protectorate in Morocco from 1912 to 1956, French
15 was imposed and instituted as the main language of instruction at all levels of
16 education in schools, and Standard Arabic as a foreign language. French
17 colonizers practiced a linguistic policy “based on what they perceived to be
18 their *mission civilisatrice*” (Ezzaki & Wagner,1992, p.216) – spreading their
19 language and values by educating Moroccans to believe in the universality and
20 superiority of the French culture and language, which they then imposed in the
21 cities and certain selected rural areas as “the only language of civilization and
22 advancement” (Bourhis 1982, p.14). This French educational policy intended
23 to weaken the status of Standard Arabic, the perceived symbol of national and
24 cultural identity by promoting mother tongues (Berber dialects and Arabic
25 vernaculars) through formal teaching, and by closing Arabic Koranic schools
26 in Amazigh-speaking regions. This was done through the *Dahir berbère*
27 (Berber Decree) of 1930, which created a type of schools, where Standard
28 Arabic was excluded and only French and Berber were taught.

29

30 During the Spanish occupation in the Northern part of Morocco and
31 Western Sahara, even though the Spanish hounded the same language policy as
32 French in advancing their language and culture in Morocco at the disadvantage
33 of Arab culture and Islamic schools, it did not influence the linguistic situation
34 of Morocco as French did because “there was not any sort of Spanish-style
35 “civilizing mission” directed toward the local population. In the education,
36 Spanish has not played an important role “due to the fact that it is not normally
37 a first language even for the relatively few who speak it fluently.” (Daniel and
38 Ball, 2009, p.128)

38

39 **Arabization Policy**

40

41 Since Morocco obtained its independence in 1956, it has been a national
42 priority to eradicate the use of French and promote Standard Arabic as the sole
43 medium of instruction and as the language of literacy and wider
44 communication. A monolingual policy known as Arabization was adopted. It is
45 a cultural counterpart of political and economic independence aiming at

1 restoring ‘authenticity’, asserting Morocco’s Arabo-Islamic identity, and
 2 removing French cultural influence. Arabization was at first implemented
 3 sporadically, as teachers and funds were available. In the 1970’s, Standard
 4 Arabic was added to existing curricula in French at elementary and secondary
 5 schools; and by the end of 1990-1991, it was completed for all primary and
 6 secondary levels in public schools and became the language of all subjects
 7 across all grades. While widespread support for this principle was politically
 8 inevitable, its implementation has proven an arduous process. For example, a
 9 politically charged and sustained debate developed between the proponents of a
 10 modern and Westernized trend who favor balance bilingual education and the
 11 supporters of the Arabo-Islamic culture who advocate radical Arabization.
 12 Also, its pace and scope has depended largely on which of these groups has
 13 had more power in the government at a given time.

14 **Mother Languages (Tamazight and Moroccan Arabic) Policy**

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 16
 17 Arabization was carried on until 2000, a year that marked the launching of
 18 the national Charter of Education and Training by King Mohamed VI. This
 19 Charter provided important changes and reforms in education and introduced a
 20 new educational policy that stressed a multilingual education in Morocco by
 21 improving the teaching and use of Modern Standard Arabic and promoting the
 22 diversification of foreign languages for teaching science and technology. Most
 23 importantly, it called for the openness to teaching all the three Berber dialects
 24 (Tarifit, Tamazight, and Tashelhit) to satisfy the regional needs of the
 25 heterogeneous population, and to give local independence to schools. (Daniel
 26 and Hall, 2010, p.131). For the first time in many decades, Tamazight language
 27 is officially recognized and deemed as a valued component of Moroccan
 28 identity, and “part of the country’s cultural inheritance” (COSEF, 2000, p.43).
 29 It was constitutionalized by a Royal Dahir decree as a national language, and
 30 declared in 2011 as an official language of Morocco besides Standard Arabic
 31 as proclaimed in Article 5 of Morocco’s constitution:

32
 33 “Tamazight [Berber/amazighe] constitutes an official language of the State, being
 34 common patrimony of all Moroccans without exception. An organic law defines
 35 the process of implementation of the official character of this language, as well as
 36 the modalities of its integration into teaching and into the priority domains of
 37 public life, so that it may be permitted in time to fulfill its function as an official
 38 language”. (Morocco’s Constitution, 2011)

39
 40 As a result, Tamazight has changed from a spoken non-recognized
 41 language to a written codified and standardized language, and its status has
 42 been uplifted. In 2003, Tamazight was integrated into the school system, first
 43 in elementary level across the country and gradually in all levels (Errihani,
 44 2006). Based on the household and region, Tamazight has been taught in the
 45 three varieties. (Tomastik, 2010)

46 Although Moroccan Arabic or Darija is the mother-tongue that most
 47 Moroccans learn to speak since their birth, it is not taught in schools. Formal

1 learning in public schools has been conducted in Standard Arabic, a language
2 considered a second language for Arabic and non-Arabic speaking Moroccan
3 students. But, in recent years, there is an urge for the use of Darija in
4 instruction at the elementary level to ease the learning of Standard Arabic. This
5 emerging interest in reinforcing the significant role played by the mother
6 tongue languages in the domain of education emerged right after King
7 Mohammed VI's speech on August 20th, 2013, in which he drew attention to
8 the educational problems and crisis in Morocco and urged for an educational
9 reform. One of the reasons of Moroccan education failure stated by King
10 Mohammed VI in his speech is "the disruptions caused by changing the
11 language of instruction from Arabic, at the primary and secondary levels, to
12 some foreign languages, for the teaching of scientific and technical subjects in
13 higher education" (Morocco World New, 2013). After the King's speech,
14 Nourredine Ayouch, a well-known Moroccan businessman and a founder of a
15 local educational foundation Zakoura, organized an international conference
16 "Le chemin de la réussite" (The Path to success) in Casablanca on October 4th
17 and 5th 2013 that gathered policy makers, scholars, linguists, and educators to
18 discuss the origins of public schools' problems and propose solutions to these
19 problems. One of the educational claims was to advocate for the use of the
20 mother tongue Darija as the language of instruction from preschool through the
21 first years of primary school with a gradual shift to Standard Arabic in the third
22 grade. The basis for this claim is that since Darija is spoken and understood by
23 most Amazigh and Arab-speaking Moroccan children, its use in the
24 educational system in early years of education might be beneficial for early
25 leaning because it would facilitate and ease the acquisition of Standard Arabic.
26 (Hall, 2015, p.278)

27 Advocating for Moroccan Arabic in early instruction was met with
28 resentment and skepticism and initiated heated debates among policy makers,
29 activists, scholars, and linguistics. While some advocate for the use of Darija in
30 early instruction, others oppose firmly to its application and implementation.
31 The paragraphs below present these contrasting views and positions of
32 different Moroccans. Following the October colloquium, a debate between
33 Nouredine Ayouch and the historian Abdellah Laroui took place on
34 November 27, 2013 in a televised program called "Moubacharatan
35 Maâakoum". Ayouch supported the use of Darija as a language of instruction
36 arguing that is the main mother tongue and more than 89% of Moroccans use it
37 to communicate. He also endorsed his argument by referring to the UNESCO's
38 (2008) recommendations, which propose that children who begin their
39 instruction with their mother tongue continue to perform better than children
40 who must acquire another language when they enter school. (Ball, 2010).
41 UNESCO also declares that the teaching in the mother tongue helps in
42 reducing the number of school dropouts. (Bender & Ducher et al., 2005)

43 Laaroui, on the other hand, opposed to this policy stating that "Standard
44 Arabic is linguistically rich, and that Darija is not qualified to cover Sciences
45 and Academia because it lacks rules and standard practices in writing and
46 syntax" (cited by Ait El Caid, 2014, p.2-3). He argued that Darija should not be

1 used into the scholarly domain because it “is not sufficiently rich to be utilized
2 as a part of the educated community and is not able to offer the information
3 base that [standard] Arabic is right now giving” (The complex language debate
4 in Morocco – al Jazeera English, 2015, p.2). He added that since teaching and
5 learning are essentially associated with written textbooks, and that the main
6 role for oral communication in school is to access these written books, Darija
7 thus cannot fulfil this role. He also claimed that Darija cannot be a medium for
8 higher learning because it is not a language ‘of culture’ that can be classified at
9 the same level as other foreign languages (Hall, 2015, pp.283-284).

10 Another advocate of this policy is Ahmed Najim, Chief executive of Goud
11 Ayouch, an online magazine who asserts that the use of Darija in early
12 instruction could help improve Morocco’s education dilemma because
13 Moroccan students are often baffled by the switch from Darija at home to
14 Fusha at school. According to him “Darija is fascinating in the sense that it is
15 very close to the Moroccan psyche. It simply strikes a chord with readers and
16 has a huge impact”. (The complex language debate, 2014, p.2)

17 Other adversaries like Fouad Abou Ali, president of the National Coalition
18 for the Defense of Arabic Language, a grassroots advocacy organization, and
19 Moqri Abouzayd, member of the Justice and Development Party (PJD) party
20 and of the parliament assert that the problem is not simply linguistic but
21 political averring that this is another ploy to divide Moroccan society and
22 deprive it from its Arab and Islamic bequest (The complex language debate,
23 2014, p. 2), and adopting an unwritten tongue with a regional variation in
24 instruction is an attempt to divide Moroccan society and culture. For instance,
25 Fouad Abou Ali affirms that Fusha is “the language of Islam and “endeavors to
26 estrange it focus on the social and religious quality framework it speaks to, and
27 will strip away Morocco’s Arabic and Islamic characters” (The complex
28 language debate in Morocco, al Jazeera English, 2015). Moqri Abouzayd, on
29 the other hand, criticizes this policy and condemns it as “an endeavor to
30 obliterate the establishments of the country and a scheme against Islam.” (The
31 complex language debate, 2014, p. 2)

32 The above reactions demonstrate that the issue of language of
33 instruction in school is not only a pedagogical concern, but also a social and
34 political issue. They also show that most Moroccans do not approve of this
35 reform and the use of Moroccan Arabic in schools instead they believe clearly
36 in the significance and the value of Standard Arabic as the language of public
37 education.

40 **Problems Facing Implementation of Mother Tongue Policy**

41
42 Most educational policies face challenges that hinder their implementation
43 and this policy is no exception. One of the challenges could be attributed to
44 practical factors. Individuals who called for this policy seem to act alone and
45 are driven by political considerations rather than educational values and real
46 needs and concerns of most Moroccans. The Ministry of Education was not

1 involved in the initial claim and no collaboration and coordination between this
 2 governmental entity and the concerned party. Professional educators,
 3 specialists and even ordinary Moroccans should be consulted, and their
 4 opinions should be valued.

5 Another challenge could be appertained to an attitudinal factor. Policy
 6 makers, and ordinary Moroccans hold negative attitudes regarding Moroccan
 7 Arabic because of its form and status. Moroccan Arabic is perceived as
 8 “corrupt and incorrect form of Arabic, which is associated with poverty and
 9 downgrade and therefore considered to be inferior to Classical Arabic for it is
 10 neither codified nor standardized” (Ait Dada, 2011, p.19). Until Moroccan
 11 Arabic’s status is made constitutional and official and its use valuable in real
 12 life, it will be hard for this policy to be carried out. Even though Moroccan
 13 Arabic is one of the mother tongues besides Tamazight, it is only considered as
 14 means of communication among Moroccans. For this reason, Moroccans feel
 15 that it is not a significant and valuable language to be used in instruction in
 16 schools, instead, they prefer to have foreign languages because of their prestige
 17 and value as they guarantee success in the job market. Moroccans who are for
 18 bilingual education in two languages might appreciate the principles
 19 motivating teaching Moroccan Arabic, but, for practical reasons, they prefer
 20 foreign languages, mainly French. Others, however, hold a favorable attitude
 21 toward teaching and learning Moroccan Arabic, feeling that using Moroccan
 22 Arabic is somehow the right thing to do, and that there is an obligation for
 23 them to promote the merit of Moroccan Arabic.

24 The nature of Moroccan Arabic could also be a factor causing hindrance to
 25 a successful implementation. In Morocco there are an abundance of regional
 26 varieties of Moroccan Arabic, namely (Rabati, Fassi, Marrakshi, shamali, etc.).
 27 These dialectal varieties bear many linguistic differences concerning mainly
 28 phonetics, pronunciation, morphology, and lexicology. So, the question which
 29 dialect variety should be resorted to for instruction in schools? The Moroccan
 30 variety used in two central Moroccan regions (Casablanca-Settat and Rabat-
 31 Salé-Kenitra) represents the largest population group and which according to
 32 Ayouch and his team is understandable in all Morocco could be the one taught
 33 in all schools (Abdellah Shabal, Hespess, Dec.7, 20016). In fact, this variety is
 34 used to create the first Moroccan Arabic dictionary by Zakoura foundation. Of
 35 equal importance is impoverishment and impurity of Moroccan Arabic lexicon
 36 due to lexical borrowings from French and Spanish. These borrowings make
 37 Moroccan Arabic and Standard Arabic two deviated and separate languages
 38 rather than varieties on a continuum. Thus, the transition from one to the other
 39 could be uncertain and difficult and there is a need to renovate Moroccan
 40 Arabic and develop and adequate terminology compatible to Standard Arabic.
 41 For these reasons both Ayouch and Laaroui recommend a new form of
 42 Moroccan Arabic as the language of instruction that would be easy for children
 43 to learn and understand. Ayouch suggested an “elevated” Moroccan Arabic
 44 that would be codified and could be used in writing whereas Laaroui
 45 recommended the creation of a “simplified” Standard Arabic only for oral use.

1 In this regard, Ayouch launched a first Moroccan Arabic dictionary which
 2 explains Arabic words with Moroccan Arabic. In a press conference held in
 3 Casablanca, Ayouch explained that this dictionary, prepared by the Zagoura
 4 Development Center, was supervised by several Moroccan experts and
 5 researchers who worked on it for four years. He added that this dictionary is
 6 “the first of its kind to make Moroccan Arabic language alive and continuous,
 7 pointing out that for every two years there will be a publication of a new
 8 dictionary, and soon there will be a preparation of an electronic dictionary in
 9 the Moroccan dialect to enable Moroccans from different places to add words
 10 and their explanation. Khalil Al-Maghrfawi, university professor pointed out
 11 that "this dictionary is part of a range of projects that aim to use Moroccan
 12 Arabic professionally”, and that the team who worked on this dictionary "tried
 13 to make it easy and clear and avoid separating between Standard Arabic and
 14 Moroccan Arabic”. Al-Maghrfawi indicated that the team faced great
 15 problems, especially the way of writing because words vary in pronunciation,
 16 therefore different writing was required. He, moreover, emphasized that the
 17 method of writing used in the dictionary is based on principles that facilitate
 18 the passage from Moroccan Arabic to Standard Arabic, especially for learners.
 19 Other future projects of the Zagora Center involve the publication of a
 20 selection of texts in Darija to strengthen its presence, as well as preparation of
 21 grammatical rules that will help with understanding the rules to facilitate their
 22 learning.

23 24 25 **Recommendations for the Use of Mother Tongue (Moroccan Arabic) along** 26 **with Standard Arabic and Tamazight** 27

28 To use Moroccan Arabic in early instruction at schools, it is vital to
 29 consider the feasibility of such educational policy with respect to people’s
 30 attitudes, teaching resources and methodology, and teacher availability for both
 31 Arabic and Berber speakers. First, for a mother tongue to be perceived as
 32 effective and useful, not only a change in its status is essential, but also a
 33 change in people’s attitudes as well as their views about it. Policy makers,
 34 politicians, parents, and teachers should recognize the value of the mother
 35 tongue, exemplify interest in teaching it, and transmit their enthusiasm and
 36 passion to others.

37 Offering instruction in a specific variety of Moroccan Arabic could help
 38 smooth the transition from Moroccan Arabic to Standard Arabic. Since
 39 Moroccan Arabic and Standard Arabic are varieties of the same language
 40 which share several linguistic features, alternating between the dialect and the
 41 Standard in instructing and explaining the language would ease some of the
 42 problems facing the students in learning Standard Arabic, and facilitate their
 43 understanding.

44 Providing competent and suitably trained local teachers on effective
 45 language teaching based on the latest innovations in language pedagogy to
 46 provide instruction in any Moroccan Arabic variety chosen as well as in

1 Moroccan Arabic would avoid the problem of having students, upon achieving
 2 a more advanced level, will face the problem of not continuing with the same
 3 variety of the dialect. Teachers should also be trained and taught the teaching
 4 pedagogies and methods of learning and teaching languages that will equipped
 5 for teaching better. Upgrading methodology for teaching Moroccan Arabic
 6 right in the pre-schooling would be another worthwhile step for successful
 7 transition to Standard Arabic. Teaching Moroccan Arabic must also introduce
 8 textbooks that deal with everyday life situations and reflect meaningful real
 9 situations and contexts. Teachers should be supplemented with interesting and
 10 authentic materials and use communicative-based tasks and activities to make
 11 Moroccan Arabic more attractive and livelier. Most textbooks that have been
 12 used so far in public schools to teach Standard Arabic are predominantly
 13 centered on written materials ignoring the oral skill. This is in fact an area in
 14 the language that needs to be developed. Some Arabic and Berber-speaking
 15 Moroccan children before reaching the age for schooling, they attend Koranic
 16 pre-schools from age 4 to 6 where they learn Arabic alphabet and reading skill
 17 in Standard Arabic. So, this written and reading knowledge in Standard Arabic
 18 gained in Koranic schools should be used as early as kindergarten to foster oral
 19 competency in Standard Arabic. It could also “serve as a scaffold to more
 20 successful reading development in the Arabic language.” (Daniel & Ball, 2010,
 21 p.133)

22 23 24 **Conclusion**

25
26 Even though the claim to implement Moroccan Arabic in the educational
 27 system is still debatable and has received many criticisms, the reality is that in
 28 recent years, its use has increased significantly among Moroccans in social and
 29 academic life. Moroccan Arabic has moved from being a dialect into a
 30 potential and operative language in many domains. Nowadays, it is used “as a
 31 medium of communication between members of Moroccan organizations and
 32 in conferences and seminars among intellectuals, linguists and journalists”
 33 (Zouhir, 2013, p. 276), and widely used in advertising and marketing, online
 34 media, and in cartoon strips and kid’s shows. More importantly, it is used in
 35 television and radio for broadcasting programs and debates between politicians
 36 about political subjects and problems (The complex language debate, 2014,
 37 p.3). This paper about Moroccan Arabic, mother tongue policy and its
 38 implementation in early instruction offers an opportunity to better understand
 39 the issues of using mother tongues, local and national languages in multilingual
 40 societies. It also serves as an example and resource for dealing with the same
 41 problems and disputes involving other countries that have same linguistic
 42 diversity as Morocco. Most importantly, it makes a significant contribution in
 43 the field of language policy, and in particular mother language policies.

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