

1999

Rationale for the Use of the Vernacular as a Medium of Content Transmission in a School Context

Hassan Bouzidi

Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines, Université Ibn zohr, Agadir, Maroc, h.bouzidi@uiz.ac.ma

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.aaru.edu.jo/dirassat>



Part of the [Communication Commons](#), and the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bouzidi, Hassan (1999) "Rationale for the Use of the Vernacular as a Medium of Content Transmission in a School Context," *Dirassat*: Vol. 9 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.aaru.edu.jo/dirassat/vol9/iss9/20>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Arab Journals Platform. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Dirassat* by an authorized editor. The journal is hosted on [Digital Commons](#), an Elsevier platform. For more information, please contact rakan@aarj.edu.jo, marah@aarj.edu.jo, u.murad@aarj.edu.jo.

Rationale for the Use of the Vernacular as a Medium of Content Transmission in a School Context

Cover Page Footnote

(*) The author is grateful to the two anonymous reviewers. Their suggestions and comments have been extremely useful. Thanks are also due to teachers and school inspectors who have taken part in this pilot study. (To further corroborate the preliminary findings of the present paper and to test the feasibility of a vernacular education the author is currently carrying out fieldwork in this area).

Rationale for the use of the vernacular as a medium of content transmission in a School Context

Hassan Bouzidi

Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines - Agadir

Abstract

The function of communicative factors in a school syllabus is increasingly recognized. This article explores the implications of the use of the vernacular in a Moroccan school context() for pupils' pedagogical as well as psychological development. Analysis of teachers' reports on the exclusive use of the Standard in a school context reveals concern over the decline in pupil participation in class. There is also evidence of higher rates of pupil performance when the teacher chooses to switch to the vernacular.*

To assist pupils in dealing with problems of subject-matter processing, it is recommended that the vernacular be introduced at the earlier stages of the child's schooling. The pedagogical focus here is on the development of the child's skills in reciprocal, immediate response communication.

(*) The author is grateful to the two anonymous reviewers. Their suggestions and comments have been extremely useful. Thanks are also due to teachers and school inspectors who have taken part in this pilot study. (To further corroborate the preliminary findings of the present paper, and to test the feasibility of a vernacular education, the author is currently carrying out fieldwork in this area).

Introduction

The successive implementation and scrapping of language policies, consequent upon hasty and short-sighted decisions, together with the reluctance on the part of policy-makers to allow the vernacular to play a role within the Moroccan educational system, have led to the erosion of standards to an all-time low.

Scant attention has traditionally been given to Vernacular Education inside the country. The vernacular ⁽¹⁾ languages in use, namely Moroccan Arabic ⁽²⁾ (MA hereinafter) and Amazigh ⁽³⁾, are quite simply dismissed as *lahaža:t*, i.e. "useless patois" ⁽⁴⁾ and as such irretrievably divorced from the spheres of knowledge and learning. In an attempt to justify this denial to the vernacular any role within the Moroccan Educational system, educationists point out that the traditional media of education, namely Modern Standard Arabic (MSA hereinafter) and French, have hitherto filled that position.

Neither MSA nor French are natively spoken inside the country ⁽⁵⁾. This means that all Moroccan children continue to receive their instruction through a medium which is not fully geared, if at all, to their milieu. What is even more striking is that pupils are not encouraged to use their mother tongue in a classroom context. The educationists' assumption that children at school would eventually pick up MSA is strongly undermined by the experience of the last thirty years of systematic Arabisation.

(1) Petyt (1980, p.25) defines the vernacular as a "form of speech transmitted from parent to child as a primary medium of communication".

(2) Moroccan Arabic is also used as a lingua franca among the speakers of the three major Amazigh varieties, namely Tashelhit, Tamazight and Tarifit ; about half Amazigh-speakers are at least bilingual. Several varieties of MA can also be distinguished, but these are, broadly speaking, mutually intelligible.

(3) Only estimates are currently available on the number of people speaking any of the Amazigh varieties. In Morocco, language-related questions are seldom included in population censuses, the likely reason being the high sensitivity of the so-called "Amazigh question".

(4) Value judgments are at present virtually tabooed in Linguistics. No evaluation of 'language' is possible in the abstract, without regard to other variables.

(5) In a few well off families French remains the dominant language.

What policy-makers did not anticipate is that MSA is not supported by a socio-cultural background (as is the case with MA or Amazigh) and as such cannot develop outside the boundaries of the school. The mother tongue, on the other hand, can _ if given a chance _ develop to be the language of the school. The point is that the language of the school cannot develop into the language of the home through artificial means.

As result of this lack of continuity between home and school, the Moroccan child faces a number of problems. At the pedagogical level, the child encounters difficulties related to reading, writing and subject-matter learning. At the psychological level the child is said to experience feelings of 'inferiority' and 'linguistic insecurity' (after C.C. Christian 1972).

Although I would agree with the traditional view that due to their present level of development (e.g. lack of school materials) the vernacular languages cannot compete with the well-developed, already established media of education, I suggest that familiarity with the language of teaching will benefit the child at the start of his schooling.

The uses of the vernacular

In the paper at hand I distinguish between two aspects of vernacular education : (a) the use of the vernacular as a medium of instruction throughout, and (b) the use of the vernacular as a medium of content transmission to assist the standard.

The use of the vernacular as a medium of instruction throughout would require that the school materials be printed in the vernacular, which would not be possible without prior standardization and codification of the language in question. The process would also need to be conceived as a gradual, long-term project. Other considerations come into play here, in particular that student and parental attitudes and interests be examined beforehand, to ensure that there obtains unequivocal evidence of widespread public support for a vernacular education, not to mention the fact that this operation would necessitate full commitment on the part of language policy-makers.

The second use of the vernacular, i.e. as a factor contributing in the overall learning process, proves less problematic. The bulk of instruction here would continue to be carried out through the medium of MSA and/or French. The role of the vernacular here would be to take over where the standard leaves off. In other words, wherever the pupil feels he cannot fully express himself in the standard, he should be allowed to switch to the mother tongue – the language he is most familiar with – to ask a question, to provide an explanation or to make a comment.

This latter aspect of the vernacular, i.e. as a contributory factor in the teaching/learning activity, will be the main focus of the present paper.

The standard versus the vernacular

A concept of paramount importance in understanding the difficulties that may arise from the exclusive use of MSA and/or French at school is Hymes's 'communicative competence'. Hymes (1972: 279) advances the idea that, assisted by "a finite experience of speech acts and their interdependence with sociocultural features", children do not only learn to 'speak', but they also learn to 'talk'. That is to say that they learn to communicate in ways deemed appropriate by the speech community in which they happen to operate.

MA and Amazigh are supported by a sociolinguistic and cultural background which equips their native speakers with the capacity to receive and respond to speech in a way which does not require any undue effort to understand. In MSA, on the other hand, a linguistic feature does not always carry a social meaning. This limited social import in MSA or French makes them less effective in content transmission.

At school, the child who struggles to express himself in a language he has not yet mastered is automatically branded 'poor' in that language. Teachers often forget that it is that rift between home and school language that is the main culprit. Because of the limited 'social connotation' in the language of instruction, pupils are ever exerting themselves to link speech sounds to

abstract concepts. The materials used at school are printed exclusively in MSA or French and are therefore totally new to the child who arrives at school possessing a well formed linguistic system (MA or Amazigh).

Syntactical and phonological differences between MA and MSA present serious problems for children when learning to read. A child speaking MA or Amazigh will not necessarily be familiar with the dual form or case endings, for example, which characterize MSA. For instance, up to the age of seven, which is the age when most Moroccan children start their schooling, the child has been accustomed to referring to such basic objects as 'car', 'doll' and 'shoes' by *tomobil*, *munika*, and *sbbat*, respectively. Once he joins school, most of the vocabulary he has learned at home is not exactly the one he is now expected to use in a school context. Once he joins school, the child realizes that the terms have changed. For example,

- (i) /sajja:ratun/ substitutes for /tomobil/'car'
- (ii) /dumjatun/ substitutes for /, munika/'doll'
- (iii) /hida:ʔun/ substitutes for /sbbat/, 'shoe'

In fact, some MA terms may not carry the same meaning in MSA :

- (i) /msa/, MA for 'he left'

maša : MSA

- (ii) /hdar/, MA for 'he spoke'

/hadara/ MSA for 'he wasted'

- (iii) /b^ʔ a MA for 'he wants'

/ba^ʔ a / : l MSA for 'he committed adultery'

In an attempt to come to terms with these morphophonological differences, children have been observed to generalise the new structural rules and to apply them to MA terms as in :

(i) * sarzamun/ for/sarzam/, 'window'

(ii) *fu : tatun/ for /I-futa/, 'towel'

(iii) */tabsi : lun/ for /tabsil/, 'plate'

or to Amazigh lexical items as in :

(i) */ibri : nun/ for /ibrin/, 'couscous'

(ii) */akssu : dun/ for /akssud/, 'wood'

(iii) */afullu:sun/ for /afullus/, 'rooster'

Teachers' and parents' response to these 'anomalies' has always been one of 'humour' and 'amusement' rather than one of disapproval, which reflects the important fact that the child is expected to produce such utterances since, as well as learning the new rules, he is also 'unlearning' the old ones.

For the lexical items that may sound familiar, the child needs to acquire the new phonological structure. For example,

(i) /sazaratun/ for /səzra/, 'a tree'

(ii) almadrastu/ for /Imədrasa/, 'school'

(iii) /jal abu/ for /ta-jal ab/, 'he plays'

Valuable time and effort are also spent on the application of short vowel diacritics : sakl (6), and reading remains nothing more than a vocal exercise where structural features are focused upon at the expense of meaning.

The vernacular as a contributory factor

We now turn to ways in which the use of the mother tongue can benefit teacher and learner alike. As early as 1951 the "Report of the Unesco Meeting of Specialists", has clearly emphasised the importance of the mother tongue in the child's self-expressiveness : "The mother tongue is a person's natural means of self-expression, and one of his first needs is to... develop his power of self-expression to the full" (UNESCO 1951: 711).

(6) A formal exercise in which children are taught to apply the diacritics (which represent the short vowels in Arabic to the written consonants).

The use of Moroccan Arabic and/or Amazigh, especially in the earlier stages of the child's schooling would mean that he can then exercise his natural linguistic creativity. The child is provided with the opportunity to actively participate in the process of learning rather than remain a mere consumer of what the teacher says. The social and cultural import that MA and Amazigh enjoy will function as an incentive for the child to use his imagination and creative powers.

For communication between teacher and pupil to be productive, the medium used needs to be one that both parties are familiar with (C. C. Christian 1976). The child cannot by any means be able to follow what the teacher says let alone respond to it critically, if the child does not possess a good mastery of the language being used. The ability to use and perceive language is a *sine qua non* requirement in any learning activity.

This mutual intelligibility is lacking in the Moroccan classroom, where most teaching is done through the medium of MSA and/or French, while the mother tongue plays no role in education. Familiarity with the language of teaching is also a very important variable between the child's background and his eventual achievement. Difficulty in subject-matter assimilation tends to make children resort to rote learning and memorisation, a feature of Moroccan educational system as a whole which is unfortunately often carried on at university level.

The partial use of the native language may improve the transmission of educational content. Subject-matter processing in MSA tends to be rather protracted, time-consuming and generally unproductive. Through the use of the mother tongue, the child's attention is drawn to what is being said where he would normally spend valuable time grappling with the way it is being said. Concept learning will thus take the place of memorisation and rote learning. For example, the child will face less difficulties in the assimilation and solving of a problem of arithmetic through the use of a familiar language.

More importantly, the use of Moroccan Arabic and/or Berber as media of content transmission will not be totally novel to the child. Outside the classroom, the use of the mother tongue is common practice. Once out of school, pupils almost always resort to the mother tongue to discuss a matter pertaining to a lesson with their classmates or parents. They often feel a lot more comfortable using the mother tongue when making calculations such as adding or multiplying. They feel relaxed and, as a result, they concentrate on content. This means that the use of MSA within the school actually runs counter to out-of-school trends. Moroccan Arabic and Berber, in contrast, will not be totally out of place.

The mother tongue is also one of the highly visible manifestations of the child's self image. School, being the point of contact par excellence, is the single most important setting where that image is amplified. By denying him the chance to use his mother tongue in class, the child will inevitably experience such psychological problems as feelings of 'inferiority' and 'linguistic insecurity'. The child whose language system is considered 'redundant' and excluded from the realm of education and learning will start thinking of himself and his culture as substandard and second-rate. All in all, any attempts at limiting the use of the mother tongue in this context can only create a feeling of frustration in the child, exacerbate his feelings of insecurity, and undermine his confidence.

Supportive data

The sample of primary teachers I have spoken to in the Souss area recognised the difficulties of using the vernacular as a medium of education throughout. However, the great majority acknowledged the fact that they themselves often switch to the vernacular to clarify or elaborate on a point. A considerable number of teachers also stated that they often found it extremely difficult to sustain a conversation in MSA (for example, for a full session) without finding themselves automatically switching to MA or Amazigh.

It should, however, be pointed out here that a high percentage of these teachers have received their training mainly in French and are now required to conduct their teaching in MSA in accordance with the policy of Arabisation. Still, many among those who have had little contact with the French language and culture also acknowledge the use, albeit limited, of the vernacular in a school context.

A great number of primary school inspectors also championed the introduction of the vernacular in dealing with the primary curriculum in an attempt to promote creative learning and pupil participation. Inspectors are particularly concerned that primary teachers in the Souss area, for example, overuse dictation, rely too much on whole-class teaching and overload children with facts. The use of the vernacular for subject-matter processing may help alleviate some of those problems, according to inspectors.

Concluding remarks

Children in Morocco arrive at school possessing a well-formed linguistic system : MA and/or Amazigh. This system is not the one used as a medium of instruction, and it plays little role, if any, in a school context.

Accordingly, the child loses on two counts. At the pedagogical level, he finds it difficult to assimilate subject-matter in a language he does not fully understand, which, in turn, negatively affects the child's performance. At the psychological level, the child starts to think of his mother tongue as inferior since it is not associated with the spheres of learning.

In the present paper, I have suggested that the Moroccan child would benefit from some use of the mother tongue at the start of his schooling. I have pointed out that such use of the vernacular for subject-matter processing would not be totally new to the child since it has always been common practice, albeit an unofficial one, both within and outwith the school.

Ultimately, the use of the vernacular as a medium of content transmission as the child joins school may be recommended on the grounds that it would :

a) give the child enough time to come to terms with the new linguistic environment _ a sort of transitional period where the gap between home and school language is somehow bridged.

b) create an educational framework which encourages intelligent and active responses. When children are able to evaluate subject-matter with confidence and respond critically to it, they are much less likely to rely on rote learning and mimicking and are more likely to become intellectually autonomous rather than automatons.

c) help the child overcome feelings of inferiority and linguistic insecurity. By allowing and encouraging the child to use his mother tongue to ask or answer a question, for example, he will gain confidence since he would then start associating his own linguistic system with the realm of education and learning. By so doing, the child's motivation and interest in the learning activity are further stimulated.

d) pave the way for any eventual use of the vernacular languages as full media of instruction or as subjects of study.

REFERENCES

Christian C. C. (1976) : "Social and Psychological Implications of Bilingual Literacy. In A. Simoes, jr. (ed.) *The Bilingual Child: Research and Analysis of Existing Educational Themes*. New York: Holt.

Hymes, D. (1972) : "Modes of Interaction of Language and Social Life." In J.J. Gumperz and D. Hymes (eds.) *Directions in Sociolinguistics*. New Yor Holt.

Petyt, K.M. (1980) : *The Study of Dialect: An Introduction to Dialectology*. London: Andre Deutsch.

Unesco Meeting of Specialists (1951) : "The Use of the Vernacular Languages in Education." In *Monographs on Fundamental Education IV (Paris)*, p.689-715