

Language Learners as Mediators between Cultures: Some Implications for Teaching and Assessing English in the Algerian Context

Aprendizes de línguas como mediadores entre culturas: algumas implicações para o ensino e avaliação do inglês no contexto argelino

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ABSTRACT

The Algerian ministry of higher education and scientific research has recently embarked on a policy aimed at enhancing the role of English in higher education. This new policy seeks to ensure a higher visibility for academic and scientific activities as well as the recognition of Algerian diplomas abroad. To achieve these aims, a national commission of experts in the field of English for specific purposes, constituted for this task, has issued a report outlining a series of measures that are susceptible the achievement of this goal. However, an analysis of this report as well as some related official documents showed that the suggested measures are deeply entrenched in the norms of native-speakerism. In this regard, the present paper raises the following question: do English native speakers' norms represent a major obstacle in the way of a rapid enhancement of the role of English in the Algerian system of higher education? To answer this question, this theoretical paper explores the potential of Alcón 's (2007) hybridity hypothesis to serve as a framework for a more realistic policy geared towards the gradual enhancement of the status as well as the quality of teaching and assessing English for specific purposes in the Algerian system of higher.

Key words: English as a lingua Franca, English for specific purposes, hybridity hypothesis, the Algerian educational system

RESUMO

O Ministério Argelino de Ensino Superior e Pesquisa Científica embarcou recentemente em uma política destinada a melhorar o papel do inglês no Ensino Superior. Esta nova política visa assegurar uma maior visibilidade das atividades acadêmicas e científicas, bem como o reconhecimento dos diplomas argelinos no estrangeiro. Para atingir esses objetivos, uma comissão nacional de especialistas na área de inglês para fins específicos, constituída para esta tarefa, emitiu um relatório delineando uma série de medidas que são suscetíveis de alcançar esse objetivo. No entanto, uma análise deste relatório, bem como de alguns documentos oficiais relacionados, mostrou que as medidas sugeridas estão

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profundamente enraizadas nas normas do falante nativo. A este respeito, o presente artigo levanta a seguinte questão: as normas dos falantes nativos de inglês representam um grande obstáculo no caminho de uma rápida valorização do papel do inglês no Sistema de Ensino Superior argelino? Para responder a essa pergunta, este artigo teórico explora o potencial da hipótese de hibridismo de Alcón (2007) para servir como uma estrutura para uma política mais realista voltada para o aprimoramento gradual do status, bem como da qualidade do ensino e avaliação do inglês para propósitos no sistema argelino de ensino superior.

Palavras-chave: inglês como língua franca, inglês para fins específicos, hipótese de hibridismo, sistema educacional argelino.

Introduction

Teaching English as a lingua franca is a term coined by Jenkins (1996) to refer to a new conception of English language teaching based on the idea that English is increasingly used as an effective tool of communication that allows people who do not share a common language to overcome linguistic and even cultural barriers without resorting to translation. Modern Linguists set a distinction between language for communication and language for identification. While all languages of identification are also by definition languages of communication, the opposite is not always true. For example, to serve the role of a lingua franca, and thus become a language for communication per excellence, a language should undergo certain changes to assume its functional status and, consequently, become an ownership of anybody who uses it. In addition to making communication possible, a lingua franca has also the advantage of granting equal status to interlocutors and frees them from the native/non-native power disadvantage common in situations where languages which do not have this status are used. At different intervals in history, the world has witnessed the rise of many languages to the status of lingua Francas used over vast territories. The use of Arabic and Latin in the middle ages are good examples in this regard. However, thanks to modern technology, the influential role that English is playing in today's increasingly globalized world is simply unprecedented in history. This presentation argues that French capable to preserve a special status in the Algerian landscape despite the state's post-independence policy of Arabization has been due, at least partly, to the role of mediator that has come to play between speakers of conflicting local languages and vernaculars of identification. However, globalization, modern technology, and recent developments in English language teaching and assessment have rendered the replacement of French by English in the Algerian educational system, in general, and ,higher education both desirable and possible without the need to teach or adopt English native speakers' cultural norms.

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Linguistic and Cultural Hybridity in Algeria: a Brief Historical Overview

Due to its exceptional geographic location and rich ethnic composition, the Maghreb has been at the crossroads of eastern, western, and African civilizations. This fact has made multilingualism and multiculturalism a hall mark of this region since the dawn of history and enabled it to provide the world-especially during the middle ages-with flourishing multicultural cosmopolitan cities like Timbuktu, Telemcen, Bejaia, and Cordoba, where different languages, cultures, and religions co-existed peacefully and thrived in harmony with each other ,while the rest of the world was torn by strife over these identity matters. The thoughts of Averoes, El Maimonid, and Ibnu Arabi, to cite just these three examples, which still stand as a living testimony of the greatness of the Moorish civilization in the Maghreb and Muslim Spain, continue to provide the world with powerful philosophies that exude a fragrant, irresistible appeal to those

who still cherish the dream of building a more equitable, flourishing, and peaceful global civilization.

However, the fall of Muslim Spain and the prevalence of some erroneous interpretations of Islam has contributed to weakening the ties of this region with the west and caused the great cities of Maghreb to lose a great deal of their universal glow. In this regard, Lewis (2002), rightly, attributes the failure of the Islamic world to catch up with modernity, which the west began to enjoy because of the contribution of Muslim civilization especially in Spain, to the state of isolation that this region has been forced to live during the Ottoman era. According to Lewis (2002), while the west benefited from a continuous flow of knowledge about the Islamic world through the Christian minority, the overriding majority of Muslims ignored completely the developments that were taken place in the west because Muslims were forbidden from living among the infidels.

It is this ignorance of the language and the culture of the other that have, in my humble opinion, deprived the first generation of Algerian freedom fighters from reaching their goal in the nineteenth century. Indeed, an outstanding distinguishing characteristic of the November generation, compared to their ancestors in the previous century, was their laudable knowledge of their culture and society as well as those of the colonial power and the world. Final victory was achieved through the genius of those brave and magnificent men and women who conducted a ferocious battle at home and abroad. The battle abroad adopted mainly diplomatic means to isolate the colonial power at the international scene through exploiting the achievements of the armed struggle combined with the aroused sympathy of the world towards an oppressed people and its righteous fight for freedom. The ultimate victory of the diplomatic battle that has materialized miraculously into independence was achieved thanks to the freedom fighters' efficient knowledge of the 'other' and the world, mediated to a large extent by the French language which was still until then enjoying an influential international status.

Unfortunately, however, the monolingual policy that has been promptly adopted after independence has sparked tensions among local identification languages. Ironically, these policies, based on the ideology of "one nation, one state, and one language", which have been developed by romanticist German philosophers to respond to requirements of a totally different linguistic and social reality than ours, have allowed French to be perceived as a neutral language especially in communication context where it is a shared code by speakers who perceive that they belong to conflicting identification tongues.

In the Algerian system of higher education, the policy of Arabization has stumbled upon a terrain full of insurmountable complexities and pitfalls. While the humanities and social sciences have been to a large extent Arabized, the faculties of fundamental, engineering, and especially medicine sciences have been, except in minor aspects, impermeable to this wave of change. As far as this issue is concerned, and except in the faculties of medicine where all teaching is provided exclusively in

French, the fundamental and engineering faculties dispense lectures and tutorials using different forms of code switching and code mixing between French and standard Arabic and /or one or more varieties of Arabic or Berber. The highly technical nature of these fields and their direct impact on economic and individual lives explain, at least partly, all the shareholders in the teaching and planning enterprise from engaging in an uncalculated adventure to Arabize these fields. In addition to the above mentioned reasons advanced explicitly by the ministry of higher education , it is perhaps this consciousness about the limitations of the potential of Arabization in these fields that is motivating some spheres in the decision making apparatus, in the elite, and in the public at large to opt for English rather than to Arabic to replace the use of French in these strategic fields. The official recognition of Tamazight as an official language in the latest constitutional reform weakens further both the position and the argument of those who might resist the enhancement of the role of English as a lingua franca, and even more, puts this language in a better position to ease possible tensions between the conflicting identification tongues that form the Algerian linguistic landscape.

Now, after considering some recent developments in the Algerian linguistic situation that appear to be favorable to the new orientation in language in education planning, let us move to consider some recent developments in the theory of English language teaching with specific reference to the issue of teaching of foreign language culture.

The Notion of the Intercultural Speaker in English Language Teaching

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The present paper argues that two obstacles stand in the way of the ministry's policy aimed at enhancing the role of English: 1.the argument that English has been historically and culturally distant from the Algerian context ,and 2.the native-speakers 'norms are necessary for an effective teaching and assessment of this language in our system of higher education. As far as the first obstacle is concerned, Derradji (2019), a professor of applied linguistics and English language teaching, made the following comment:

The socio-cultural reality and Algerians, in general, are closer to the French language than to the English language as much as are the Egyptians and the Hindous culturally closer to English. This is what is called linguistic anchorage.

This view represents a prevailing assumption among at least part of the elite which equates the learning of a foreign language, any foreign language, with adopting the cultural norms of the target language. As for the second obstacle, the report of the sectorial commission (2019) itself with its insistence on the instauration of certificates and achievement levels based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) bears witness to the entrenchment of the local community of English language teaching professionals in native-speakers 'norms.

However, the argument that socio-cultural barriers stand in the way of an effective enhancement of the role of English in higher education is completely discrepant with the modern conception of teaching English as a lingua franca. The conception of teaching English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is based on the belief that the present status of English predisposes it to serve as a neutral tool for communication in international settings among interlocutors who belong to diverse languages and cultures. These English language users learn English not to become native speakers, but, instead, to be able to encode and decode intelligible messages to mostly non-native speakers of this language. Consequently, English language teaching methodology should disentangle itself from the native speaker 's ideology through adopting more realistic and achievable goals which are compatible with these learners' capacities and needs. These goals should reflect new research-based pedagogic norms (Alcón Soler, 2007). According to Alcón Soler (2007:1), establishing those intrinsically variable pedagogic norms are to be geared towards fostering the communicative competence of language users conceived as intercultural speakers. This new conception of English as a lingua franca is, therefore, tightly intertwined with two other concepts: the notion of intercultural speaker and the construct of intercultural communicative competence (Alcón Soler (2007:2).

These notions are based on a post-modernist dynamic conception of the notion of culture itself. In this regard, House (2007:10) (citing Sperber 1996) defines culture as follows:

Within any group there exists a multitude of 'mental representations', most of which are fleeting and individual. A subset of these representations, however, can be overtly expressed in language and artifacts. They then become 'public representations, which are communicated to others in the social group...If a subset of public representations is communicated frequently enough within a particular social group, these representations may become firmly entrenched and turn into 'cultural representations'.

While the traditional essentialist views to culture consider it a closed and stable structure, the importance of this view lies in its depiction of the dynamic process whereby some norms submitted to natural selection become representative of a social group. This definition might also serve as a valid description of how intercultural speakers create new hybrid cultures mediated by ELF in contact zones. It should also be noted here that language is the most important tool whereby members of any social group transmit their social and cultural representations to others within or outside their group. Language also is the most important means that allow society to pass on its cultural heritage to future generations. It is, thus, legitimate to raise here are the following question: Which cultural knowledge is enacted between interlocutors who speak two different mother tongues use ELF to communicate?

To answer this question, House (2007) proposes to approach this issue through adopting a new perspective on the foreign language user: the intercultural speaker. As

far as this key notion is concerned, House (2007) warns us against the danger of confounding the notion of the intercultural speaker with ‘the deficit-oriented’ view that has marked a seemingly similar notion in applied linguistics, namely interlanguage. While interlanguage emphasized the deviant and incomplete nature of the learner’s language system compared to the norms of the native speakers ‘competence –a competence which the language learner aspires to acquire, but will never reach, the inter-cultural speaker, according to Alcón Soler (2007:1), should be looked at more positively as ‘... someone with knowledge of one or more cultures and social identities ,and who enjoys discovering and maintaining relationships with people from other cultural backgrounds...’ .However, in his/her quest to learn other cultures, the intercultural speaker do not intend to suppress his/her mother tongue language and culture to replace them with that of their equivalents in the target language. Instead, according to House (2007:15),

Intercultural actants need to be conceived as independent of both their native culture (and language) and the new culture (and language) which they are trying to link, mediate, reconcile. They are creating something new and autonomous in-between, hybrid, third way. What is seemingly deficient can thus be turned to advantage.

House (2007) attributes intercultural speakers’ ability to understand and get their messages across despite the limitations of their knowledge of the target language and culture to one component of their intercultural competence, namely strategic competence. Strategic competence is the locomotive that hauls the other components and allows them to grow as the intercultural speakers’ expertise in international encounters develops. Instead of the stifling effect of the rigid imitation of native speakers’ norms, the activation of the this component allows a great deal of creativity ,which, in turn, leads to the construction of hybrid cultures. Based on this view to the intercultural speaker, English as a lingua franca can, thus, play the role of a catalyst in the emergence of a more inclusive and equitable human culture and society. This creative potential of teaching English as a lingua franca finds an adequate theoretical articulation in Alcón’ s (2007) hybridity hypothesis.

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Language Learners as Mediators between Cultures: The Hybridity Hypothesis

In response to the problematic of reconciling linguistic diversity with national unity in the European context and the role that English as a lingua franca might play to solve this question , Alcón (2007:27) observes that ‘...an increasing linguistic unity is not a threat for cultural diversity because English functions as a direct mediator between participants in a discourse who would otherwise have to rely on translation.’ What makes this language fit for this role is the fact that ‘...interlocutors use it as a language for communication not as a language for identification...As a matter of fact, the idea that English belongs to everyone who speak it has been gaining ground... ’

(Alcón 2007,27).The idea that English becomes an ownership for anyone who uses it puts interlocutors at equidistance from one another ,thus freeing them from the asymmetrical power relationship which characterizes the traditional native/nonnative exchanges. It is in order to achieve this very ideal that an artificial language – Esperanto-has been invented in the nineteenth century and gained relative success. English as a lingua franca, however, has the advantageous appeal of being a natural language. To achieve this objective , Alcón (2007) proposes a practical framework: the hybridity hypothesis. This hypothesis, according to (Alcón 2007,31),‘...mean [s] [to]accept[...] different types of English that have emerged around the world, as well as the need to analyse the discourse constructed through intercultural communication.’

An effective implementation of this hypothesis necessitates the introduction of new measures and concepts in language teaching and assessment to replace their traditional equivalents which are judged to be not commensurate with the new orientation. The first concept to be introduced, according to Alcón (2007),is that of the mediator between cultures ,which should replace the obsolete concept of the native speaker. As a result, the native speakers’ norms of the communicative competence should be replaced by those of a variable intercultural communicative competence where multilingual individuals serve, instead, as the norm. Moreover, a developmental approach to the notion of language users’ expertise should guide the design of new pedagogic models. These measures should materialize in a more realistic matrix of language learning objectives based on the notion of expertise.

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Some Implications to Teaching and Assessing English

The rise of English to the status a lingua franca has not only increased interest in English language learning/teaching,but it has also been changing the nature of English language teaching itself. The English for Specific Purposes movement a, which is leading this change,has been developing a pragmatic pedagogy that have produced many innovations .Some of these innovations like needs analysis and genre approaches which have found their way to main stream English language teaching.It is investment in this pedagogy which focuses on content that will make enhancing the role of English in the Algerian higher education system both possible and effective.However, the English for specific purposes enterprise should engage in a radical rethinking of the norms that have served as the sole reference in the design of its teaching and assessment materials. According to House (2007: 17),

this norm should not be the mono-cultural speaker because an intercultural speaker is by definition no mono-cultural speaker,rather s/he is a bi-tri-or multilingual speaker whose intercultural knowledge and skills are,as it were,under construction.

Thus, what remains to be done is adopt the existing English for Specific purposes material and methodology to the realities of the Algerian context following

the framework of the hybridity hypothesis of ELF use in contact zones. In this regard, House (2007, 17) advocates that the native speaker's norms should be replaced by

...the relatively more stable bi-, tri-, or multicultural speaker under comparable social, cultural, and historical conditions of language use, and with comparable goals for interaction in different intercultural discourse domains.

In the light of the above, the present paper proposes the following steps to render the English for specific purposes practice in our universities more conducive to the achievement of more realistic goals:

- Recognizing the status of intercultural speakers and cultural mediators for the thousands of Algerian academics who use English to teach, write research articles and participate in international conferences in different academic disciplines.
- Establishing a threshold level for a variable intercultural competence in different language macro-skills for each discipline.
- In Algerian universities, English already serves as the medium of instruction in some modules that are taught there and there by Algerian academics. In addition, thousands of Algerian academics publish in journals and participate in different scientific events where English serves as the sole medium of communication. This material should serve as input for analyzing and describing these intercultural speakers' language using discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to define achievable norms for Algerian learners of English for academic purposes.
- Introducing English-based Algerian academic texts into the English for specific purposes material used in our context.
- Designing standardized tests for each discipline taking into account a realistic level of achievement based on the Analysis of the new research-based norms.
- The activation of the role of language centers around a national teaching and research agenda based on a tight cooperation between experts in different disciplines and language teaching professionals.

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Conclusion

The new orientation in teaching English as a Lingua Franca offers favorable conditions to enhance the role of English in education in general and higher education in particular. In addition to its potential to serve as a necessary ingredient of a sustainable national language policy geared towards fostering linguistic diversity within a matrix of national unity, the use of English as a lingua franca in the Algerian context of higher education provides an effective tool for increasing the visibility of academic research and strengthening our ties with the world. In this regard, the hybridity hypothesis appears to be a promising paradigm for breeding intercultural speakers who can mediate between local and universal culture as well as exploiting universal culture and savoir faire to fix local problems. Enhancing the role of English in the Algerian context, however, should be based on a mature policy based on a tight

cooperation between local shareholders and international experts around a well reflected research agenda to teach and assess a variable intercultural communicative competence on the basis of realistic and achievable goal. This can be achieved through the activation language centres and a large investment in the English for specific purposes enterprise. To be effective, this enterprise should adopt the research-based norms of variable intercultural competence based on the experience and the texts of Algerian users of English in international settings.

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