Early Foreign Language Acquisition: a case in point

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Résumé

Cet article s'intéresse à l'éveil aux langues chez l'enfant algérien durant la phase de socialisation. L'objectif étant de proposer des pistes de recherche pour une meilleure compréhension et appréhension des langues et leur impact sur le système socio-éducatif en Algérie.

From a dynamic perspective, Algeria is characterised by the use of three languages in contact (Arabic / French / Berber). A number of studies exist nowadays which refer to a multi-lingual setting where the co-habitation and use of at least three languages (Arabic / French / Berber) is maintained and put to work according to a number of socio-economic and political factors. The domains of use of each of these languages - or its varieties- is generally consciously or unconsciously recognised by the majority of users i.e., Arabic (and French) in the Administration, French for science and technology along with English, the varieties of Arabic, French and/or Berber at home and for informal purposes. In this case, the choice of one language or another is generally dictated by social constraints which exert a pressure on the speaker's communication strategy and competence.

To summarize this situation, we shall borrow Ferguson's formula (1966:31) and adapt it to the sociolinguistic profile of this country as we see it.

1. ALGERIA (3L = 2MajL + 1MinL)

That is to say three languages in contact including two major languages[38] (Arabic / French) and a minor language (Berber). If we take into account the importance of the social uses of each language (domestic use, social use, use at school, official use, etc.) we get:

2. ALGERIA (3L = 2MajL. (Cl.A., Lit.A., MSA, EdSpA, MidA., Ar.D)

+ 1(Fr) (Fr.D)) + 1MinL(Ber)) + (1FL))

That is, three languages including two major languages. The first language being Arabic with shades of Classical Arabic (Cl.A), Literary Arabic (Lit.A), Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), Educated Spoken Arabic (Ed.Sp.A), Middle Arabic (Mid.A or Lugha l Wusta) and the dialects (Ar.D). The second language is French which consists of a standard(ized) (or written) form (Fr) and a spoken form (Fr.D). The third language is Berber with its varieties. Finally, we have 1(FL) for English with the status of a foreign language.[39] Formula 2 is more adequate than formula 1. It illustrates the language situation in Algeria today. Such an equation does not necessarily mean that we have at hand a bilingual or a multilingual setting. Other determining factors must be taken into account to decide if this is the case. We shall leave this question open and concentrate on the situation of languages in contact and which raises a number of issues:

a. Language Acquisition, the Child's Language Acquisition, Language Awareness and Early Foreign Language Acquisition.

b. The relation Mother Tongue / School Tongue.

c. Language Awareness in Algeria.

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[38]. Major in terms of users of the language, though that can lead to confusion because of an obvious lack of statistical data on this subject.

[39]. There are other foreign languages such as Spanish, German, Italian, etc. but English takes pride of place not only at school and university levels but also in the socio-economic sector.

1. Language Acquisition

a. The Child Language Acquisition

We shall not embark on the well known, yet inevitable, first language acquisition stages. Suffice here to say that they are three: the ***Holophrastic phase*** with sound recognition, where one object equates one word, e.g. nose, head, arms, toy, dog, etc., the ***Structural phase*** with the recognition of discourse categories such as nouns, pronouns, articles, verbs, adjectives, and discourse markers such as the {s} of plurality or third person singular of the Present Simple Tense in English, the {ed} marker for regular past in English. A process of generalisation takes place at this stage as in *Mummy, milk all gone! (for "Mummy the milk has all gone"), or he **goed* (for he "went"), together with understanding simple orders such as "stop it!", "don't cry!" etc. Finally, we have the ***Syntactic phase*** where the child utters simple active declarative sentences such as "I want milk" or "Mum, I love you", then he moves on to more complex sentence structure constructions, as the case may be for reported speech "Dad told me Mum loves me" or the passive structure as in "Catty is kicked by Doggy", etc. If the child produces complex sentence structures for his age, this is but indicative of his brightness and high IQ.

The American linguist Noam Chomsky put forward as early as 1957 (Syntactic Structures) the postulate that any normal child possesses innate processes to acquire language. The generative enterprise aimed at demonstrating that all language performance is based on underlying competence (the concept of innateness for Chomsky). These innate processes can be used for L1 and re-used for L2 (simultaneous bilingualism). They slowly fade away after the age of ten for biological reasons. Accordingly, the individual possesses from birth a basic competence which boils down to a capacity to produce well formed sentences (With a finite set of rules, the native speaker can produce an infinite number of sentences).

Thus, as early as Bloomfield (1933) or Chomsky (1957, 1965) the idea that a normal child is predisposed to acquire language and that he is innately gifted with the capacity to acquire language and later on the culture of the language or languages he is exposed to has long been admitted. Yet it has also been subject of controversy.

Other scholars stress on the impact of the social environment. The cognitive capacities of the individual are neither totally innate nor totally acquired. They result from a progressive construction process where experience and internal maturation are involved (Piaget's constructivism). Vygotsky (1962) also argues that the child uses "***social speech***" under the form of a "monologue". He mostly uses this form of discourse as verbal behaviour for his own actions, attitudes, and sometimes feelings (also know as *baby talk*), rather than for communication purposes. Yet, such a "monologue" develops as the child grows up into a form of "***inner speech***" that Vygotsky defines as thinking embodied into words. The child has thus reached a stage where his communication has become purposeful. It helps him identify himself inside as well as outside a social group ("individuality"). It also helps him to detach himself from or belong to a particular group, community or culture.

- Language Awareness and Early FL Acquisition

The Russian scholar Vygotski describes language development in its social functioning. Language is acquired as a regulation instrument in the social interaction and it is with the presence of the adult and with his pairs that the child interprets, formalises and learns (Socio-constructivism).

Other scholars such as L. Berk (1995) see in "*inner speech*"[40] an essential element in the child's cognitive development and language acquisition. In fact, early language acquisition makes the child more prone to learning other languages and language practice, which boils down to an exercise which operates at the level of the brain and it makes him capable of producing a variety of sounds. As he grows up, the child keeps traces of the sounds that he memorised during childhood and which he has practised and articulated long enough to set aside the sounds that he perhaps heard and produced but unconsciously rejected as "foreign" (Foreign Talk). This is done through a natural brain mechanism. The brain selects its language unconsciously. A large plasticity for language acquisition is noted before adolescence and as he grows up, the child becomes less and less sensitive to sound discrimination and distinctive oppositions.

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[40] . Known in French as 'soliloque' or 'soliloqy' in English.

The presence before the age of ten of a cerebral plasticity has long been discussed and investigated. The conclusion is that this plasticity fades away and disappears after this age (10) for neurophysiologic reasons. This is due to the flexibility of the synapses or space contact between two neurons which become sclerotic after the age of ten. Thus, the learning of a foreign language - mainly if FL is genetically different from L1 - becomes more difficult after the age of ten.

Early FL acquisition is then paramount. The more we lose time the less we give ourselves the chance to use the easiness in learning / teaching FL at an early age. This doesn't mean that an adult cannot learn a foreign language. The sound repertoire he possesses and the oppositions he recognises may not necessarily match those of the target language. Thus, an early FL learning is more advantageous for the child because he can master sound discrimination far better and faster than an adult. The mastery of grammar and vocabulary are more inductive for the child and more deductive for the adult.

What characterizes, at first sight, a bilingual child is first and foremost his verbal communication and interaction. The family environment, the social environment and the context of situation play an important role to make him a natural bilingual child. This contact with a foreign language is substituted for the monolingual child by the school context. The question raises itself then as to whether the school is adequately equipped to play the role of the socio-linguistic environment of a naturally bilingual child. To answer this question, one may look briefly at what the school produces in Algeria today.

Early bilingualism, which is the introduction of a foreign language at school before the age of ten, is situated between simultaneous bilingualism -as for children born from mixed couples- and consecutive - or school bilingualism- as expounded in the official syllabi in Algeria today. Field results obtained so far clearly point at failure in the school system in terms of language acquisition. Kh. Taleb Ibrahimi (1995) argues in this vein: « L'école algérienne ne produit pas des bilingues mais plutôt des semilingues qui ne dominent vraiment aucune des deux langues ».[41] This illustrates well the language learning situation in Algeria today.

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[41]. Translated here as : "The Algerian School does not produce bilinguals but semi-lingual pupils who master neither of the two languages" (i.e. Arabic and French)

b. The Relation Mother Tongue / School Tongue

The debate on the *mother tongue* / *school tongue* issue has long been initiated in Algeria and elsewhere. The first question to be addressed in this vein is whether the mother tongue in question, or *Native Language* for the sake of clarity in the discussion, is considered as a *Minority Native Language* or a *Majority Native Language*.

Fishman's *Theoretical Paradigm* (1991) gives basic value positions on Minority Native Languages. Basically, he attests eight stages of language loss. Among these (cf. Fishman, 1991: 82-84), Stage Five seems to be of interest to us. In fact, Stage Five involves cases where the language in question is used in force and in a dynamic way within the social / regional boundaries of a given community or communities. Moreover, minority languages along this scale (Stage Five) tend to be used outside home (in the street, at school, etc.). Yet, these may not be identified in official teaching syllabi (which is the case in Algeria). Group tensions or conflicts are generally absent. They have, if they do occur, no significant impact on a Global Teaching Program. Cases for Algeria may be the Touareg, the Mzab, etc.).

Stages One to Four along Fishman's scale also seem to be of special interest in discussing the Algerian language situation today, provided the issue is handled by language technicians (data collection in terms of language attitudes, language use and language effectiveness – technological transfer, translation needs, cultural exchange and relations, etc.), language management experts, and language practitioners (teachers, syllabus designers, textbook writers, etc.). This being so, because any effort to bring about legal changes on the basis of the scope of users and effectiveness of the native language in question will almost certainly trigger off reactions from the majority. These are in fact underlying issues on the *Mother tongue* and *School tongue* debate that encourage blocks of resistance and even rejection by the "Arabic-Only" movement that Algeria has witnessed since Independence.

Stage Four sees the minority language as a necessity at the level of elementary education. It fits well into a scheme of using it as a language of instruction (cf. the teachings of Standard Arabic through dialectal Arabic, e.g. colour terms zraq → azraq; bjad → abjad, etc., or numbers waħad →wa:ħidun, tlata →ɵala:ɵa, rabʕa →   arabaʕa, etc. for our small children). Along this stage (Stage 4), the minority

language is not to be seen as a school tongue but rather as a support for the learning of the school tongue through the mother tongue. The mother tongue has not been favoured institutionally to be used, at least at this early age, as a support for learning the Arabic Language or the Standard Form of Arabic. It has, nevertheless forced itself in the classroom as a means of communication and even as a medium of instruction under the form of dialectal Arabic used at school for communication and understanding the teaching / learning of Standard Arabic or Institutional Arabic, as well as for other subject matters taught at school.

c. Language Awareness in Algeria

The new reform brought about changes in approaching the teaching of French in Algeria. This language is taught starting from the 2nd year of primary school. However, it is important to note "en passant" that what is taking place in our schools today is not a case of bilingual teaching and learning. In fact, a true bilingual teaching and learning is attested only when the two languages (MT / FL) are used for extra-linguistic purposes. Duverger and Maillard (1996) argue that bilingual teaching / learning is effective only « lorsque sont présentes deux langues d'enseignement, deux langues véhiculaires, deux langues qui vont servir aux apprentissages extralinguistiques »[42].

As it stands, the teaching of French in Algeria does not reflect a bilingual teaching / learning basis. It may, however, be considered as an important and determining factor for Language Awareness and Early Foreign Language Acquisition in Algeria.

Basically, *Language Awareness* is associated with a movement in Britain which played an important role in the teaching/ learning of mother tongues and foreign languages; in this case English. The aim of the movement was to push the learner to understand better the « Other » and his culture. The program aimed at solving learning problems associated with children of immigrant communities who had difficulties learning foreign languages (English in this case). The program was meant for communities from India and Pakistan living in Great Britain. It was conceived as a kind of bridge between MT and FL.

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[42]. Translated here as: "with the presence of two languages functioning as mediums of instruction, two common languages which are used for extra-linguistic learning".

In France, L. Dabène from the "Centre Didactique de l'Université de Grenoble" adapted this program in 1987 to schools with children from the Maghreb and living in France. The results were quite satisfactory.

Today, the Algerian School has embarked on similar programs for Language Awareness where the child follows educational programs for languages and cultures. This model (Language Awareness) which exposes the child to languages and cultures other than his own at an early stage was initiated after a tacit recognition of the failure of the language teaching approach in the Algerian School System.

Basically, the system accounts for two dimensions: the *cognitive dimension* which rests upon the observation and reflection on the nature of the language the child is exposed to and how it operates and the *emotional dimension* which reflects identity relation, respect and tolerance towards what is foreign.

The program for Early Language Teaching in Algeria was introduced in September 2003 with the implementation of the Competency Based Approach and the text books produced for this sake often make use of multiracial classroom environments. The program involves in-school activities and extra-school activities. The learner is asked to perform tasks not only at school but also to prepare projects outside school with the help of the teacher, his pairs and his parents. Learning how to speak, how to make linguistic exchanges in communication situations, how to maintain oral / written interactions at school, how to make announcements are factors of creativity which are included in this program.

The foreign languages represent today a significant asset on the individual as well as on the socio-economic level. Algeria opted for an early teaching of foreign languages to give a chance to all the children at different levels to be integrated into a world in perpetual change. It is precisely the development of competencies installed in the child which constitutes a possible solution to the problems involved in the teaching of languages in Algeria.

The argument that children learn better than adults is not a recent one. The notion of "optimum age" refers to the smooth acquisition of foreign languages. This age is situated between ages four and ten. The fact that children learn better and faster than adults was demonstrated as early as the late 50's by the neurologists W. Penfield and L. Robert who insisted on the superiority of the child over the adult on the

phonetic and phonological planes. The essence of W. Penfield and L. Robert's approach comes from research on the plasticity of the brain at an early age. Neurologists consider that before the age of nine, the brain has a significant degree of plasticity which makes the child learn languages with ease. The theory of the "***significant phase***" that Scovel (1969, 1981) and Oyama (1976) developed is based on the assumption that neurobiological modifications are not very favourable for the acquisition of a foreign language after the age of nine.

The concept of "***optimum age***" was debated for a long time before it was replaced by the concept of "***critical period***" (Lenneberg, 1967). It represents a longer phase than that of the "optimum age" and it goes up to two years before the beginning of puberty. As the cognitive structuring is correlated with language acquisition, it is important that the training for languages intervenes before this "critical period". Thus, a foreign language is acquired faster and more easily before puberty.

The critical period is also known as the "***sensitive stage***". The age limit for this stage is not determined exactly. The reason is that it all depends on the skills and competence of each child and his acquisition pace. This stage is often linked to the Mother Tongue acquisition which may be subjected to maturational constraints. Maturation may sometimes be delayed for reasons such as a lack of parental contact or child contact (e.g. wolf child) or physiological reasons such as deafness, etc. These children can gain the competence of a native child (ordinary child) only if the acquisition phase has not taken place before the "***age limit***"[43] which is between 12 to 13 years at most. After this 'age limit', the faculty of language is on a stand still in the brain.

If the child manifests at an early stage a real pleasure in learning a foreign language, this pleasure decreases during his adolescence. It is therefore paramount to use the child's natural language acquisition resources at an early stage for a better teaching and learning of a foreign language.

After this age limit which has proven to be a favourable stage for the acquisition of foreign languages, there is a transition phase towards adolescence that Selinker (1969) refers to as the "*puberty*

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[43] . Known in French as 'le seuil fatidique'.

thrust"[44]. This transition is very critical and unfavourable to learning. It is a limit beyond which adolescents become less and less motivated to learning and are more and more concerned with the transitional state towards adulthood in terms of changes in their body (physical appearance), in their mind and in their personality. Before the age limit (approximately 10 years of age) the child is very motivated for learning and discovering things including foreign languages. This can only be achieved if learning takes place under attractive conditions and a motivating context.

After this age (10 years) it becomes difficult to maintain this motivation for languages because the child is more directed towards his social image and status and the opinions of others about him. He therefore develops fear for making mistakes which makes him more careful about the language he produces and his verbal behaviour.

If we do not take into account the child resources before the critical stage, we cannot reach an effective bilingual teaching and learning project.

Childhood is definitely the most appropriate stage for all types of learning. The more we waste time the less we give ourselves the chance to facilitate learning for our children at school. This being so because the child has a malleable and flexible mind which becomes resistant to change a few years later. It is in the first years of his life that the child is capable of understanding and acquiring various symbols (sounds, orthography, etc.). This has been put forward by various child language acquisition findings and many theories advocate an early foreign language acquisition. Lambert and Klineberg (1967) refer to the psycho-affective dimension which facilitates intellectual impregnation. They demonstrate that it is far easier before the age of ten to accept or welcome contacts with peers, others, cultures and foreign languages.

Krashen (1978) and Dabene (1991) favour this learning stage and support the notion of the «puberty thrust». They argue that after this thrust, the transformations and identity affirmation of adolescents and pre-adolescents stand against the learning of languages in general for affective reasons. The child is more concerned with the image he is given about himself. In other words, the affective dimensions are

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[44] . Known in French as 'la butée pubertaire'.

strong determining factors. They are present and they speed up the changes in the life of the child who finds himself in a hyper reactive situation and behaviour. Children often express willingness to use or utter FL sounds and words during learning.

The question raises itself as to whether this is the case for the teaching of French in the 2nd year (7-8 years) in Algeria, bearing in mind the fact that French has the status of a second language from a sociolinguistic point of view and that of a foreign (sometimes First Foreign Language) from an institutional point of view.

The school year 2003-2004 witnessed the introduction of French as a 1st foreign language to be taught in the second year (7-8 years) instead of the 4th year (9-10 years) as it used to be prior to September 2003.

Generally speaking, the new curricula are based on a new teaching approach (Competency Based Language Teaching). The teaching programs are centred on oral comprehension, memorization, and communication at an early stage before introducing writing in FL.

The decision makers and perhaps some scholars in Algeria have opted for French instead of English because of the failure of the 1992-1993 experience in introducing English at primary school in some pilot schools across the country and which turned out to be a rejection not only from the children but from the parents as well. Added to this was the lack of teachers of English at Primary school level which contributed to the failure of the project in question.

Competency in the mother tongue is, we believe, the starting point to learn other foreign languages at school for the simple reason that be it a child or an adult, learning a foreign language always takes as prime reference what is already acquired in terms of languages (the mother tongue for the child and the mother tongue and /or another FL for the adult (cf. learning English with transfers from Arabic or French). This learning stage forms part of what is commonly known as the inter-language (Selinker). The case may be at this stage that the child uses break down strategies where he assimilates his Mother tongue, consciously or unconsciously, to the Foreign Language (cases of code switching where the mother tongue is at the rescue of situations of lack of lexical - and sometimes syntactic- proficiency).

In any learning situation, the individual effort completes the institutional effort if one expects long term results. The individual effort of the child (dominated by his motivation in the first place) is

primarily cognitive and social while the institutional effort lies not only in the human and material resources for learning but also and most of all on the time devoted to language practice at school.

In Algeria today, the second year is a first year for FL acquisition for the Algerian child. It is a year of sensitizing and discoveries of a foreign language at school, although as we said earlier, the child is generally exposed to French in many ways outside school, except perhaps for some places such as the countryside, the mountainous areas or some southern areas of the country. The teaching/learning load is 3hrs per week for French. The objective behind this program is to develop in the child "oral competencies then written competencies" in a number of situations which are adapted to his age. At this initial stage, the teaching / learning process is based primarily on the construction of the language he learns (French) and it is based on the morpho-graphic and phonetic layers in order to communicate orally and in writing. The prime objective of this program is communication, i.e., leading the child to interact orally in FL in actual situations never seen before (knowledge re-investment). It is spelt out in the Algerian Program for French in the following terms: *« Apprendre une langue c'est apprendre à communiquer dans cette langue. Cela revient à développer des compétences pour une interaction à l'oral (écouter/parler) et à l'écrit (lire/écrire). La construction des compétences sera facilitée par des manipulations de la langue ». (Programme Algérien de Français).*

This approach to Language Teaching / Learning in Algeria and the Early FL Acquisition it entails are expected to be evaluated by 2013, i.e. ten years after the implementation of the program. Current field observation and statistical results indicate that such a program has reduced to some extent the percentage of school failure but there are still problems related to teacher training programs such as in-service training, to textbook production with revised editions and most of all school learning facilities although many schools have been equipped with libraries and multimedia resources lately to allow the pupils to conduct their projects in fairly good conditions.

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