

## Dialectal Arabic, MSA and Formal Education in Algeria

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**Abstract:** *The present paper addresses issues related to the effect that the abrupt shift from the mother tongue to the school language impacts on the quality of Algerian children's formal instruction and the difficulties they face in primary school. The diglossic character of today's Arabic appears to be problematic as it hampers the intellectual progress and the cognitive development of the child. To clarify the point, the study compares the intellectual development that the Algerian learner goes through with that of English or French children who are not faced with the same difficulties at school as their respective native tongues are not very distant from the standard forms. A number of 3 to 5-year-old children were observed in a kindergarten where they got progressively acquainted with Standard Arabic, particularly in its spoken form, while playing, singing and drawing. This early immersion proved to be of valuable assistance for their academic achievement when they reached school age.*

**Key-words:** *mother-tongue; education; MSA, Dialectal Arabic; cognitive development.*

**Résumé :** *Cet article aborde des questions liées à l'effet que le changement brusque de la langue maternelle vers la langue de l'école représente pour la qualité de l'instruction formelle des enfants algériens et les difficultés qu'ils rencontrent à l'école primaire. Le caractère diglossique de l'arabe d'aujourd'hui semble être problématique, car le phénomène entrave le progrès intellectuel et le développement cognitif de l'enfant. Pour clarifier ce point, l'étude compare le développement intellectuel que l'apprenant algérien traverse avec celui des enfants anglais ou français qui ne sont pas confrontés aux mêmes difficultés à l'école étant donné que leurs langues maternelles respectives ne sont pas très éloignées des formes 'standard'. Un certain nombre d'enfants (âgés de 3 à 5 ans) ont été observés dans une 'crèche' où ils se sont progressivement familiarisés avec l'arabe standard, en particulier dans sa forme parlée, tout en jouant, en chantant et en dessinant. Cette immersion précoce s'avère une aide précieuse pour leur réussite scolaire lorsqu'ils atteignent les bancs de l'école.*

**Mots clés:** *langue maternelle, éducation, ASM, l'Arabe dialectal, développement cognitive*

### Introduction

The present article attempts to explore the issue of language medium in formal instruction in the Algerian school system in which Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is used while the pupils' mother tongue is one of the regional Arabic dialects in most of the country or a Berber variety in a few scattered areas. Researchers in education issues and psychology have long delved into investigations concerning the

language of education at school. It is often the case when the school language is the official/standard form that is sometimes very different from the child's first language.

The hypothesis put forward by educationists is that the tongue acquired first by the child is the best medium for formal instruction, a view that has long been encouraged by the UNESCO. This seems obvious as the new pupil is expected to learn how to read and write while the two other skills are acquired to a large extent during the first five years of life, and thus attention in class will be focused on novel language features and skills.

Another major reason arguing for mother-tongue based education is the natural parallel development of child cognition and language acquisition, a fact that reinforces the assumption that the best means of teaching/learning at primary level is the language acquired by children in parallel with the progressive discovery of the environment and concepts around them. But how can local Algerian mother tongues be implemented for formal instruction, knowing their lack of homogeneity?

What we propose in this paper, however, is the preparation of the Algerian children for the standard form of Arabic before they reach school age, for teaching in the mother-tongue is problematic given the virtual unfeasibility to select one Arabic dialect or a Berber variety over the others and their standardization. The assumptions of the study are based on the direct observation of a number of pre-school children (two- to five-year-olds) in a kindergarten where MSA is used to a large extent as a medium of communication along with some use of dialectal forms, the aim of the lady teacher in charge being to prepare them for a smooth transition to the school language.

### **1. An Overview of the Language Situation in Algeria**

The complexity of today's linguistic situation in Algeria is due not only to the Arabic/French mixture resulting in dialects full of borrowings and various types of code-switching, but also to the linguistic phenomenon in which two varieties of the same language co-exist side by side in a 'diglossia relationship' (Ferguson, 1959a, 1970). Indeed, it is the case of all Arab countries that speakers' mother tongue consists of a colloquial form of Arabic used for everyday communication purposes, while Classical Arabic (or MSA) is the variety used in formal contexts such as education, religious speech, the TV/radio news, and of course the only variety used in written material (books, newspapers...).

The problem is that few people in the Algerian society reach an acceptable level of competence in effective use of the standard form of Arabic in formal situations, even when they have gone through elementary, intermediate and higher education. As a matter of fact, using MSA outside the contexts mentioned above would sound out-of-place and even become a topic of derision. Now, we wonder... Why don't English people or the French sound inappropriate when they use the standard form of their language? Why do most Algerians have to switch to French when discussing a scientific, medical or technological topic?

The point is the more worrying when we remember that state education has gone through the process of Arabization for almost forty years now<sup>1</sup>! One obvious reason for the lack of full success of Arabization is that the Algerians' mother tongue is very distant from the standard form of Arabic which is not practiced outside the class context. Thus, only one solution remains to be implemented: immersing the child in an MSA use environment for three to four years before school age. Not only will such early immersion prepare the children for better school achievement but it will also enhance their cognitive development. Reminding us of recent studies in cognition and the role of language in its development, Clark (2007:476) says: "*Words undoubtedly direct young children's attention. That in turn can influence how young children organize and consolidate what they know about particular kinds and relations*".

There is no doubt that the lexical amount and grammatical structures that the child acquires will serve for better cognitive growth and conceptual representations. Earlier scholars investigated the relationship between language and cognition emphasizing their parallel growth.

## **2. Language Acquisition and Cognitive Development**

Recent research in cognitive science has shown that language acquisition and cognitive development are tightly related, each having a decisive impact on the other. Indeed, it has been attested that while acquiring their first language, children build linguistic representations

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<sup>1</sup> The process of Arabization of formal instruction in Algeria was undertaken on a grade-by-grade basis starting with the primary level in the 1970's and, through bilingual sections, reaching secondary school in the mid 1980's where the process was completed in 1990. At university level, a number of faculties became arabized in 1997 while scientific, medical and technological streams continue to be taught in French.

on their conceptualization of the world to be able to express experience of life (Clark 2004).

The Russian psychologist Vigotsky (1934) insists on the impact of social environment on child development, the language medium being of utmost importance. As socialisation and knowledge construction obtain mostly through language, the mother tongue is of prime importance; and if the mother tongue is different from the language of instruction at school, that is, if the child is confronted with a new social and linguistic environment, then we can only expect disturbance in, or interruption of, their cognitive development and subsequent low academic achievement. This is precisely what occurs in the Algerian School. The child does not develop learning through a language he/she has mastered, and the learning process in a 'new' language will have negative effects on their cognition and psychological functions. As a matter of fact, as Vigotsky (1978:90) argues, "learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human psychological function".

While Vigotsky views cognitive development as stemming from social interactions and places more emphasis on the role of language in the process, Piaget (1920's/1930's), the well-known Swiss psychologist, maintains that children's cognition develops through their exploration of the environment constructing thus their own knowledge of the world. Another disparity between the two scholars' views on the two systems, language and thought, lies in the precedence of one over the other. But whatever their considerations, they acknowledge that the language acquired in the first years of life is tightly associated with conceptual representations and thus plays a central role in child's cognitive growth and intellectual development. In fact, they both agree on the vision that mother tongue acquisition lays the foundations for the learner's next steps of intellectual knowledge and problem solving.

### **3. Mother Tongue and Formal Education**

The UNESCO has long put forward the 'axiomatic' view that using the first-acquired language at primary school level is crucial for better performance. Its (1953:11) declaration states that: "*it is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue. [...] Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium.*"

It is acknowledged, however, that “it is not always possible to use the mother tongue in school, and, even when possible, some factors may impede or condition its use.” (ibid.)

Much later on, John Daniel, Assistant Director-General for Education in the UNESCO, insists on the point saying that “*Years of research have shown that children who begin their education in their mother tongue make a better start, and continue to perform better, than those for whom school starts with a new language*” (2004)<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, as emphasized by the UNESCO (2008c:4), “research evidence today clearly shows that using the learners’ mother tongue is crucial to effective learning.”

This certainly means that, in contrast, ‘jumping’ abruptly to a second language or the official language of the country, as a medium of instruction would result in slow learning and low achievement for six-year-old pupils. Much has been written about minority communities’ problems with the host country language and, in spite of the incredible asset in their native tongues, immigrant children fail in school and drop-out when they have to make allegiance to the language of the host country, especially in Europe and North America. In this respect, Cummins (2003:62) argues that “*when children are encouraged to reject their mother tongue and, consequently, its development stagnates, their personal and conceptual foundation for learning is undermined.*”

We believe that this is precisely what happens in Algeria and in the Arab world as a whole, given the overall negative attitudes displayed towards the colloquial forms of Arabic. So, what has to be done in the Algerian educational context if we want the children to get through adequate learning at primary school level and to achieve better academic and intellectual outcomes afterwards? Will the teaching/learning process in the child’s mother tongue yield satisfactory results? What dialect is to be selected for such enterprise and on what basis? Or would it be better to make use of a dual language education programme involving a colloquial form of Arabic or a Berber variety along with the official language of formal instruction, a combination that might lead to a better preparation for further studies?

A fundamental question is raised at this level in regard to multilingual environments: How does multiple language acquisition affect the child’s cognitive growth? Research under way attempts to understand the effect of acquiring two (or more) languages simultaneously or subsequently on cognitive growth. There is in fact,

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<sup>2</sup> John Daniel was Assistant Director-General for Education in the UNESCO from 2001 to 2004.

as Yang and Lust (2013) point out, an “*ongoing debate as to whether positive or negative cognitive consequences follow from dual or multiple language acquisition during early childhood.*” Malone (2008), on the other hand, argues for the idea that extensive use of mother tongue instruction results in ‘stronger’ bilingual education programme.

#### **4. The Language of Education in Algeria**

The issue in the Algerian context lies in the fact that pupils reach school age with almost no practice of the medium they are to be instructed in, and thus, school is a new world for them as they have to cope with a somewhat ‘new’ language. Thus, at school-age, Algerian children are required to make much more effort than English or French pupils who only focus on reading and writing in the first years of their schooling, the two other skills being acquired naturally at home. In contrast, Algerian school children have to focus on the four skills which is too demanding as the diglossic character of Arabic makes MSA very different from the spoken dialect acquired at home; literacy in the school language is harder to reach and the gap between the two varieties can only be filled through a long process similar to that of learning a second language. Often, the difficulties result in slow academic progress if not school failure and, eventually, poor literacy. Ibrahim (2009:93) says indeed that “this gap could be a major cause of low learning achievement in schools and low adult literacy levels everywhere in the Arab region.” In the same vein, Mehrotra (1998) argues that “if the medium of instruction in school is a language that is not spoken at home [...] the chances of drop-out increase correspondingly.”

Evidence from research in education and psychology has shown that the use of the learners’ vernacular is essential for effective learning outcomes. Indeed, some educationists have argued that the only countries likely to achieve ‘education for all’ (EFA) are those where the language of instruction is the learners’ mother tongue (UNESCO 2008). But because of the problematic issue in Algeria, and in the Arab world as a whole, pupils are at a considerable disadvantage when compared to Western children whose dialectal varieties are not so distant from the standard form of the language. It is worth recalling at this stage that these countries’ standard languages had gone through the process of selection of a given variety (usually the one used by the powerful, those who govern and decide), its codification and, most importantly, its implementation and imposition as the only language of formal instruction. The outcome of such

process was the progressive acquisition of the standard language or a close variety as a native tongue whereas in the Arab world as a whole, and in Algeria in particular, the diglossic character has persisted for centuries and the gap separating the High variety (MSA) and the Low variety remains wide in spite of the apparent literacy.

### **5. MSA or AA as a Medium of Instruction?**

Therefore, because in Algeria the language of instruction is not the vernacular, the demand on the learners is twofold: language acquisition and literacy achievement. As a matter of fact, expert educationists emphasize the view that mother tongue instruction should cover both the teaching *of* and the teaching *through* this language if we are to obtain satisfactory learning outcomes. Solving the problem that faces the Algerian educational policy appears to be a long-term project involving:

- Language policy makers
- Language educators
- The society at large
- The parents

Two options are offered:

- Primary school teaching in the mother tongue, then later in MSA.
- Introducing MSA use in kindergartens, at least three years before school-age.

*Option A:* Introducing Algerian Arabic (or a Berber variety) as a means of primary school formal instruction would in principle fit the requirements stated by the UNESCO, educationists and psycholinguists. Such process would allow a smooth passage from home to school; and pupils would not be exposed to any disruption in their cognitive development. As a consequence, plausible fine academic level would easily be achieved as learners would only concentrate on reading and writing, knowledge and literacy.

However, the first option, mother-tongue based instruction, is practically impossible to realize as it requires the homogenization of the various dialects which can only be obtained by means of the selection of *one* form of Arabic over the others and its standardization with everything that the process involves, including the formulation of a written form. Obviously, this enterprise necessitates time, effort and, most importantly, consensus between the parties involved. As a matter of fact, it is unlikely that such a form would be accepted by all

communities of the country. In addition, the Berber communities would be at a disadvantage had one dialectal form of Algerian Arabic been chosen for primary school education.

*Option B:* The second option, which consists in teaching MSA to children for a few years before school age, appears to be more feasible for a number of reasons:

- Modern Standard Arabic is already standardized and unified, not only in Algeria and the Maghreb countries, but also across the whole Arab world.
- Children can easily be exposed to this standard form of Arabic through a number of means, including TV kid programmes and cartoons, learning the Qur'an, listening to songs, etc.
- In kindergartens with pre-established programmes and qualified teachers, two- to three-year children will acquire standard forms of Arabic in a quasi-spontaneous way while playing, singing, listening to stories, repeating and learning Quranic short chapters and verses, etc...

One evident outcome of such 'curriculum' is that at school-age, the children's cognitive development would not be disrupted as they will have already acquired many important linguistic structures of the standard form along with the concepts they discover progressively, and so, sitting on the school bench, they will feel 'at home' with the new teacher. The passage from home to school will obtain in a smooth manner as far as the linguistic side is concerned and this will have a positive impact on the social and psychological insertion of the child. The new pupils will focus on reading and writing as the two other skills have already been acquired to a large extent. The overall outcome of such enterprise can only be success at school and adequate intellectual development as experienced by a few children we have observed for a few years in a kindergarten and then at school.

## **6. Field Experiment with MSA**

Two- to five- year-old children, girls and boys, have been observed in a kindergarten for about five years, with some observations reaching over to the primary school period. The lady educator uses MSA in most contexts to the extent that making requests or replying in MSA has become quasi-natural for most children! Some feedback is obtained from the parents who often make remarks to the lady telling her that their children prefer to use standard forms of Arabic at home and that they even 'show' them how to speak 'correctly'. Just an example to illustrate the point: children tell their parents to say



*mihfaḍa*, the Arabic word محفظة, not the French borrowing [karʔa:b], ‘school-bag’, or *maṭbaḥ* مطبخ, not [kuzina], ‘kitchen’.

Besides, children in their first year are taught how to draw some lines in preparation for writing Arabic letters and short words like ماما and بابا (Mum and Dad). Comprehension of stories read by the educator becomes almost perfect when they reach the second year in the kindergarten (age 3 or 4), and all this prepares them for a smooth contact with school! Indeed, parents and school teachers witness that some of these children are today far and away the best pupils in primary school.

### Conclusion

This research work first argues that the home language is the best medium for formal instruction as child’s language acquisition goes ‘hand in hand’ with cognitive development; this process allows a smooth passage to school with better academic achievement and easier problem solving than in cases of the use of a second language in school. But because of the impossibility of dialect use in the Algerian school context, we have attempted to show that success can be reached with Algerian children if exposed to MSA use in a period of two to three years, or even more, before their schooling.

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