

Learning difficulties and linguistic needs among Moroccan university students

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Abstract

This study is related to the Volubilis project "Moroccan and European students: a comparative approach", which aims to identify the challenges and expectations of Moroccan students.

The education system in Morocco is extremely diverse; teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools are based on the use of Arabic, while the private system makes use of international languages such as French, English or Spanish. However, a majority of private schools use French. However, given that Moroccan post-secondary studies are based on the French language, the passage from the Arabic language to the French language between secondary school and higher education could be a barrier to learning in higher education.

The purpose of this research is to provide data about how the students at the University Hassan II of Casablanca use languages in their learning, and the impact of French language in higher education on academic success.

350 students participated in the survey. Their average age is 22 years and they have no physical or mental disabilities.

Our results indicate that the majority of students surveyed face a lot of problems in terms of learning and using the French language. To answer the survey, a majority of students reported using both languages (French and Arabic) showing that university students don't have a good level in either Arabic and French languages.

Keywords: Language difficulties, French language, learning difficulties, linguistic needs, higher education.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of the use of French language in higher education. Knowing that Moroccan Bachelor degree studies are based on the French language, and that Moroccan secondary education studies are based on Arabic, this passage from Arabic in the secondary sector to French in higher education could be a barrier to learning in higher education because students encounter major difficulties when undertaking courses conducted in French.

The ORDIPU (Research Observatory in Didactics and University Pedagogy) of the University Hassan II of Casablanca decided to promote the study of the difficulties and linguistic needs on the part of the students of University Hassan II of Casablanca.

Teachers have concerns with regard to this difficulty; French-language instructional units entitled “Language and Communication” were introduced to solve these difficulties. This study selected as its sample, students belonging to the Faculties of Letters, Sciences and Economics – the “Faculté des sciences Ben Msik, Faculté des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines ben M'Sik and Faculté des sciences juridiques économiques et sociales ainsebaa at Casablanca Morocco”–.

The object of this investigation is to evaluate the impact of the use of the French language in higher education; our investigation has tried to focus on how students surmount the associated linguistic difficulties, through the use of a questionnaire aimed at detecting the number of students who suffer difficulties and need linguistic support.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The surveyed selected as its sample, students who are in their third year of university study. Our sample consisted of 350 students in the fields of letters, sciences or economics.

Table 1: Gender Distribution

	Letters	Sciences	Economics
Female	47	75	47
Male	29	47	11
Total	76	122	58

In most study subjects, there was no difference between male and female students in the Faculty of Letters, but the English discipline had more female students than male students (55.2% female, 44.8% male).

Regarding the Faculty of Sciences, there were more male students in physics and chemistry. However biology had more female students than male students (9.1% male, 90.9 % female).

2.2. Measures

The questionnaire was organized in 7 themes. The analysis focuses on language questions, the main learning languages, the study languages, difficulties associated with following courses in the French language, relations between future work and language, and the language used to complete the questionnaire.

2.3. Procedure

The survey was conducted in November 2011. The questionnaires were distributed to teachers in each discipline, then the questionnaires were distributed to students during course times. The questionnaires were collected by the experimenter and the first results were produced in March and December 2012.

2.4. Analysis

After data collection, we used SPSS software for data processing and analysis. Our interest in this survey focused on the languages used in learning, the study languages, difficulties associated with following courses taught in French, the relation between future work and language, and the language used to complete the questionnaires.

3. Learned languages

We note that: “A language may be defined either as a system of symbols and codes used in communication or as a form of social behavior shaped and maintained by a verbal community” (Hedge, 2010 P5). Oral or spoken language is only one means of communication, because a person can communicate in a number of ways.

Half of the students surveyed stressed the importance of language learning (53.7%) by indicating that language learning is useful for their future and for facilitating professional integration. However, this view fluctuated, depending on the discipline of the student concerned. Students of Economics were more concerned with language learning (Table 2) than Science students and students of Letters. The results of this investigation indicate that these findings vary by gender in that female students are more interested in language learning than male students (Table 3).

Table 2: To learn languages is...

	Letters	Sciences	Economics
Disadvantageous	8.5%	10.5%	6.0%
Little use	12.3%	7.9%	6.0%
Useful	31.1%	32.5%	17.9%
Very useful	48.1%	49.1%	70.1%

Table 3: To learn languages is...; by gender

	Male	Female
Disadvantageous	12.2%	3.9%
Little use	7.1%	11.8%
Useful	26.9%	36.8%
Very useful	53.8%	47.4%

4. Language Study

Students stress the importance of improving their level of competency with regard to foreign languages. 47% are taking extra courses in French. However, we note that the Science students take fewer language courses than the students of other disciplines. This may be due to the nature of the scientific disciplines in that the number of course hours is high and the courses are hard. More female students are taking language courses than male students (Table 4). A minority of student reported having taken a language course in a foreign country (Table 5). A quarter of the students indicated a wish to take a language course in a foreign country (Table 6).

The majority of students are aware of the importance of studying foreign languages, since it is a determining factor for academic success and professional integration, a determining factor in academic success, and in terms of academic achievement and professional integration. The Moroccan labor market requires facility in the French language to ensure easy integration in professional fields.

Table 4: Languages courses by gender

	Male	Female
No	34.5%	26.3%
Yes, sometimes	48.3%	46.1%
No, not often	17.2%	27.5%

Table 5: Languages course undertaken in a foreign country (already)

	Letters	Sciences	Economics
No	90.5%	92.6%	93.1%
Yes	9.5%	7.4%	6.9%

Table.6: Languages courses to be undertaken in a foreign country (in the future)

	Letters	Sciences	Economics
No	33.3%	31.9%	17.2%
Maybe	31.1%	23.0%	23.4%
Probably	26.7%	29.2%	28.1%
Definitely	8.9%	15.9%	31.3%

5. Difficulties with regard to undertaking a course in the French language

The majority of students reported difficulties when it came to following courses in French. However, the degree of difficulty encountered varied significantly. We found that more than half of the students said that they encountered little or some difficulties when it came to undertaking a course in French, but that 26% of the students reported having big problems following and understanding a course in French.

This is due to the use of Arabic at the secondary level in education, in that the switch to use of the French language in higher education was considered an obstacle to academic success and that students found it difficult to persevere in the academic environment.

Table 7: Difficulties in terms of undertaking a course in the French language

	Letters	Sciences	Economics
No problems	7.4%	14.4%	14.5%
Few problems	33.3%	31.4%	32.3%
Some problems	32.1%	30.6%	22.6%
Big problems	27.2%	23.1%	30.6%

Table.8: Difficulties in terms of undertaking a course in the French language by gender

	Male	Female
No problems	14.5%	11.3%
Few problems	28.9%	34.6%
Some problems	28.9%	29.6%
Big problems	27.7%	24.5%

6. Relations between future work and language

A majority of students of all disciplines affirmed that the Language and Communication module meets their needs and responds to their expectations of professional communications, their academic success and their linguistic competence development.

According to the Sciences and Letters students, the professional communication requires a high level of competency in terms of foreign languages. On a scale of 0 to 6 (0 being not at all important and 6 being highly important), students evaluated the average importance of foreign languages for professional communication at 4.96 and 4.62 by gender. We can conclude that, in the students' minds, language learning while at university increases their chances of finding a job easily.

Table 9: Attitudes with regard to foreign languages

	Letters	Sciences	Economics
Facilitates professional insertion	3.89	4.31	3.68
Facilitates the monitoring of other teachers	3.82	4.04	4.02
Develops my language skills	4.44	4.81	3.92
Requires foreign languages	4.62	4.96	3.45

Table.10: Attitudes with regard to foreign languages

	Female	Male
Facilitates professional insertion	4.24	3.75
Facilitates the monitoring of other teachers	4.27	3.39
Develops my language skills	4.58	4.24
Requires foreign languages	4.42	4.63

7. Language used to complete the questionnaire

When students were interrogated about the language they used to read the bilingual questionnaire (Arabic and French), 29% of the students reported using mainly French to complete the questionnaire, while a quarter said that they used mainly Arabic. However, 26% of the students reported using both languages (French and Arabic) to complete the questionnaire. A minority of students indicated that they used only Arabic or only French. These results indicate that university students don't have a good level of competency in both Arabic and French, which caused them to combine both languages simultaneously to understand what they were reading.

Table 11: Language used to complete the questionnaire

	Letters	Sciences	Economics
French only	9.1%	10.3%	9.6%
Mainly French	30.3%	26.5%	34.6%
Both languages	25.8%	23.1%	36.5%
Mainly Arabic	18.2%	35.9%	9.6%
Arabic only	16.7%	4.3%	9.6%

8. Discussion

This survey has the goal of collecting data on the language difficulties faced by students through an investigation within the framework of the Volubilis Project Hubert Curien, in order to identify the difficulties encountered by students when they use the French language at Bachelor degree level courses at university.

Based on the results of this survey, a majority of students indicated that they encountered difficulties with regard to undertaking a course in the French language. Half of the students affirmed the importance of languages learning (53.7%). Students stressed the importance of improving their level of competency in foreign languages while 47% are taking extra courses in French.

The results of our survey provide some indication of the poor level of competency in both Arabic and French, that students are aware of the importance of foreign languages - mainly French - in terms of academic success, so 47% are taking extra courses in French. A majority of students of the disciplines of Letters, Science and Economics affirm that the Language and Communication module meets their needs and improves their academic achievement and the development of their linguistics competence.

We believe that improving the language skills of Moroccan students will facilitate their ability to follow a course in the French language, persevere in terms of their university academic career and facilitate their professional integration.

Our results indicate that the majority of students have big problems when it comes to using the French language, which confirm our previous research (Soubhi et al., 2014) where the majority of students (85%) reported having problems with the use of the French language in higher education. Students reported to have problems when it comes to understanding courses in French. However, students know the importance of language in terms of professional communication.

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