

LANGUAGE-IN-EDUCATION POLICY AND PLANNING: THE CASE OF LEBANON

GHAZI M. GHAIT
KASSIM A. SHABAAN

Abstract – *Recent changes in Lebanon's educational legislation indicate a shift away from using the national language, Arabic, as a medium of instruction in favour of other foreign languages, namely English, French, and German. The latest decree that was passed in 1994 stipulated that these foreign languages can be used as instructional languages in all cycles, including the pre-school and elementary levels. The issue of language-in-education in Lebanon is an old one, dating back to the arrival of foreign missionaries during the second half of the 17th century. Since then several policies and decisions have been made by the colonial powers and the successive Lebanese governments. This paper reviews these policies and decisions in the light of the country's political history with special emphasis on their impact on students and communities at the socio-economic, educational and political levels. The paper maintains that the policies made by the French during their mandate over Lebanon (1920-1943) favoured the Christian Catholic and Maronite communities. Meanwhile, the policies adopted by the successive Lebanese governments in the era of independence (1943-1975) were largely improvised and more of responses to emotions triggered by independence. Consequently, several socio-economic and educational incentives determined the spread of foreign languages, especially English, in contemporary Lebanon. This widened the gaps among the classes that make up Lebanese society and contributed to the distribution of quality education along sectarian and socio-economic lines.*

Introduction

The question of what language to adopt as a medium of instruction, when applied to societies like Lebanon whose native language, Arabic, is a recognised world language with a long history and tradition, sounds rhetorical. Most people would naturally assume that the mother tongue is the logical choice as it is an expression and reflection of the cultural and thought patterns of its speakers, resonating with the citizens' inner being and constituting a symbol of their identity. However, in places like Lebanon where national identity has been questioned, the issue assumes religious, socio-economic, educational and political overtones.

The issue of linguistic allegiance in general, and that of the choice of the medium of instruction in particular, has been a main cause of deep-rooted conflicts in Lebanon. Decisions and policies regarding the use of one language or another in education, whether they are made by colonial powers, public officials, or by those in charge of private educational institutions, have had a direct bearing on the educational opportunities and future of several generations. Such decisions and policies have also had an impact on the individual and communal sense of identity and belongingness, on the principles and practices of political, social, and psychological unity of the citizenry, and on the perceptions of equality and justice, especially as perceived by the disadvantaged. The problem in Lebanon is not that controversial decisions have been taken, but rather that the needed decisions either have not been taken or, when taken, have not been implemented properly, if at all. The fragile political and social structures of Lebanon and the need to maintain harmony and to avoid violence have been blamed for the policy of inaction. But as the Lebanese enter a new phase of national accord after the Taif agreement in 1989, they are finding that they have to confront their past and try to carve a new future where vagueness and grey areas in principles, policies, and actions have to be reduced drastically or to disappear altogether.

This paper deals with the impact of language policies on students and communities in Lebanon, with special emphasis on policies pertinent to the choice of the medium of instruction. These policies are examined in the light of the country's political history, highlighting their impact on students and communities at the socio-economic and educational levels.

Prior to World War I

The multilingual and multicultural tradition of Lebanon is as old as Lebanon itself as a result of its strategic geographical location as a commercial crossroads between East and West. The relative independence, self-rule, and freedom of the Lebanese, even under the Ottoman Empire (1516 - 1918), helped make Lebanon the gateway of the West to the Middle East. Linguistic plurality, though not in the organized sense, has been a cherished tradition in the history of Lebanon. This is manifested by the presence of many foreign languages, especially French and English, and the keen interest of the Lebanese in learning these languages.

The roots of the current diversity and the seeds of the linguistic conflicts dividing the Lebanese can be traced back to the middle of the 17th century when ties were established between the various Lebanese religious communities and the West. Following the establishment of these ties, missionaries came to Lebanon and found that the most convenient way for them to propagate their ideas was

through education. They established schools which, in addition to providing basic education, opened windows of foreign languages and cultures to the Lebanese and attempted to 'civilise' and 'modernise' the population along western patterns (Jabbour 1992).

The French Jesuit missionaries were the first to arrive and open schools in Lebanon. They began their efforts as early as 1636 and managed to develop intimate relations with the Christian Maronites who had already acknowledged the authority of the Church in Rome. These missionaries first established the Antura College following which they opened several small schools that emphasised the study of reading, writing, arithmetic and liturgy with occasional instruction in Latin and French. However, with the beginning of the second third of the 19th century, the Jesuit missionaries started organising their schools along modern lines. For instance, they modernised the Antura college in 1834 and established the Catholic Seminary in 1855. This Seminary then became the nucleus of Saint Joseph University that was established in 1875 and continued to the present as a strong cultural link between France and Lebanon.

On the other hand, the French lay missionaries began their efforts in 1909 having felt that the Jesuits were not representing "*the true spirit of modern France*" (Matthew & Akrawi 1949, p.459). Consequently, they opened two schools for boys and girls in Beirut as well as established other similar schools in the various Syrian cities of Damascus, Aleppo and Tarsus.

Along similar lines, the American missionaries started their work in 1822 and managed to open several schools within a short period of time. In 1831, they transferred the American Press from Malta to Beirut and thus began to print books in geography, algebra, biology, and religion. After the troubles of 1860, the American missionaries intensified their efforts as they established the Syrian Protestant college in 1866 in addition to 132 other schools that existed in various Lebanese cities and villages around the turn of the 19th century (Matthew & Akrawi 1949).

In like manner, the British-Syrian Mission began its work in 1860 and managed to open 40 schools in southern Lebanon and Damascus prior to World War I. Meanwhile, the various Lebanese religious communities namely, the Maronites, the Greek Orthodox, the Greek Catholics and the Moslem Charitable Purpose Association started organising their own schools. Thus, on the eve of World War I, there were 100 private Christian but only 3 private Islamic schools (Jabbour 1992). Most of the Christian schools adopted French as a medium of instruction. Meanwhile, the Islamic schools focused their efforts on the Moslem population and emphasised Arabic; whereas, the American schools appear to have followed a less sectarian policy and initially adopted Arabic as an instructional language. In fact, the Syrian Protestant College used Arabic for teaching medicine

during the first 10 years following its foundation in 1886, but later shifted to English (El-Zein 1991). This attracted the Sunni Moslem and Christian Greek Orthodox elites aspiring to climb the socio-economic ladder through education.

Consequently, prior to World War I foreign languages spread mainly along sectarian lines with the Catholics and Maronites learning French, the Moslems Arabic, and the Moslem and Greek Orthodox elites English. This linked religion to education and planted the seeds of educational and socio-economic inequalities among the various sects of the Lebanese society. However, the spread of foreign languages improved the literacy rate in Lebanon relative to the neighbouring Arab countries as the Jesuit University and the Syrian Protestant College attracted knowledge seekers from the whole Méditerranean region.

The French Mandate (1920 -1943)

The end of World War I marked the end of the Ottoman rule; however, it also brought Lebanon under the French mandate in accordance with the Sykes-Pico Agreement in 1916. Quite naturally, the French government played a direct role in the educational legislation and practices in the country. Upon their arrival, the French, who were aware of the importance of education in acculturation, did not directly interfere with the work of existing schools. However, in 1924 they sponsored a new system of public education which included a ministry of public instruction, a system of administrative procedures, and regulations for primary schools and teacher training. They also specified Arabic and French as official languages whereby French was to be used as the medium for teaching mathematics, physics, chemistry and social sciences at all levels of education. Later on, in 1926, the French sponsored a new constitution. Article 11 of this constitution established the following educational measures:

- French was recognised as one of the two official languages in Lebanon - which placed it on a par with Arabic;
- All schools, both public and private, were required to include instruction in the French Language;
- Content area subjects (mathematics, physics, chemistry, and social sciences) were to be taught in French;
- The French government would provide French instructors for private schools, if necessary.

In addition, a system of official public examinations modelled on the French system was authorised. Students would be promoted from one class to the next on

the basis of these examinations, which were also stipulated as a requirement for entering the civil service and professional sectors. Likewise, Parts I and II of the French Baccalaureate, which saw students through the upper secondary schools, were officially recognised as equivalent to the Lebanese Baccalaureate (Kurani 1949).

These legislative measures led to the spread of French as an instructional language at the expense of other languages. Furthermore, the French authorities encouraged all kinds of missionary activities. Although the Jesuits still had the largest number of schools in Lebanon, several other missionaries such as the Lazarists, Capucins, Franciscan, Christian Brothers, and the *Frères Maristes* also opened schools all over the country. Likewise, the nuns of *Les Filles de la Charité*, *Les Dames de Nazareth*, *Les Soeurs de la Charité*, *Les Soeurs de Besanson*, and the Franciscan Nuns of Mary had their schools in various Lebanese villages.

All of these schools were accountable not to the Lebanese Government but rather to the '*Haut Commissariat Français*'. They usually charged fees and some of them were intended to serve the learning needs of poor students. The teachers were both French and Lebanese and included monks and nuns. The programs of study were identical to those of the French *Brevet* and Baccalaureate certificates, but were modified to include Arabic language, history and geography. The French language was emphasised as a medium of instruction and great attention was given to ensure equal standards to those of the French schools. Instruction in French was started in kindergarten and students were subject to the French primary and baccalaureate examinations. These examination systems favoured the French language whereby a high level of proficiency in this language ensured success irrespective of achieving a comparable proficiency level in Arabic. Consequently, these schools were accused of promoting French at the expense of the native language, Arabic, and these accusations were underscored as some schools imposed French as the obligatory language of work and play. Furthermore, the majority of students in the French schools were Christians, which resulted in educational inequalities in favour of the Catholic and Maronite communities. For instance, during the academic year of 1942-1943, the year of Lebanese independence, the French schools enrolled 39,513 students distributed as follows: 34,758 Christians, 2,507 Moslems, 1,544 Jews, 631 Druze, and 73 other (Matthew & Akrawi 1949:461).

On the other hand, the British and American missionary schools had to adapt their programmes to emphasise French rather than English in order to enable their graduates to enter the civil service. In fact, the number of English schools dwindled to only 26 in 1945-1946, and these institutions enrolled 1,902 students (Matthew & Akrawi 1949:481). These schools naturally wanted to teach English, but opted to teach French starting at grade 1 and to introduce English at

grade 4. Likewise, some newly established German and Italian schools as well as public schools followed the French pattern. However, there existed wide gaps in the quality of instruction between the French schools and the remaining schools which followed their pattern, and this resulted in further educational inequalities in favor of the Christian Catholics and Maronites who managed to receive quality education.

The imposition of French as a requirement for entering the civil service led to its spread as a language for schooling. French naturally became much in demand in that context, though there does not seem to have been a revival of French on a large scale basis across Lebanon. Rather, Arabic remained the mother tongue widely used in almost all ceremonial, societal, and communicative functions. Likewise, English persisted as an instructional language and managed to gain grounds in the independence era and in contemporary Lebanon as we shall see below.

The Independence era (1943-1975)

Lebanon achieved independence from France in 1943, and thus faced the problem of developing a sense of national solidarity among its youth. It attempted to do so through organising its school system by amending article 11 of the 1926 constitution. In 1946, decree #6968 legislated that all school subjects be taught in Arabic. English was also introduced as another option as a foreign language on a par with French. Further to this decree, another decree #7000 legislated that the teaching of Arabic language become obligatory in all schools, national and foreign. All foreign schools were required to use the official Lebanese curricula but were allowed to follow the instructional methods of their choice. Likewise, decree #7004 stated that candidates for the official examinations at the end of the intermediate and secondary classes (corresponding to the end of 9th and 12th grade respectively) could take the examinations for science and mathematics in a foreign language (French or English) or in Arabic.

In 1950, decree #7000 was amended to exempt foreign schools from teaching Arabic; however, private Lebanese schools were still required to do so. Foreign schools were also allowed to add to the official Lebanese curriculum if they so wished and they were given the right to grant their own certificates.

In 1968, decree #9099 stated that the four cycles (Pre-school, Elementary, Intermediate, Secondary) should *in principle* use Arabic as the medium of instruction for all subjects except foreign languages and literature. It also added that English/French could be used as the medium of instruction for mathematics,

science, and old languages. Later on, the Educational Conference on Proposed Curricula recommended in 1974 the use of Arabic exclusively for teaching all subjects in all cycles.

A reading into these decrees reveals (1) a trend to strengthen the role of Arabic in the Lebanese schools, (2) a tendency to enforce the adoption of the national curricula by all schools operating in Lebanon, be they local or foreign, private, or public, and (3) an attempt to organise foreign community schools in a manner that goes along with their practices anywhere else.

However, decrees #6968 and #7000 seem to have been emotional and improvised in nature and did not take into consideration the realities of the job market. They also did not seem to have sufficiently considered the socio-economic and educational incentives of knowing foreign languages. It turned out that these policies were dissociated from planning as no serious attempts were made to simplify Arabic and institute it as an official medium of instruction, so that these decrees seemed to be mere expressions of national pride triggered by independence. In addition, the phrasing of the decree # 9099 took away its power by stating that Arabic, in principle, should be the language of instruction at the primary level, while the decree re-introduced English and French as instructional languages at the intermediate and secondary levels.

Consequently, Arabic did not spread as a medium of instruction on a large scale basis, despite policies proclaimed nation-wide. As was the case in many other Arab countries following independence, the established policies were hasty and did not result from careful planning (Smock & Smock 1975). The zeal for independent national identity made the policy makers overlook the fact that foreign languages (French and English) were deeply rooted in the Lebanese educational system. Consequently, these foreign languages remained dominant as instructional languages as many private schools ignored decree #6968 and continued to use French and English in teaching mathematics and science even at the elementary level (Eido 1984). The successive national governments appear to have remained silent, which helped to develop an attitude that classical Arabic was difficult to learn and to utilise as a medium of instruction.

The difficulties involved in utilising classical Arabic as an instructional language were acknowledged by the Arabic Language Society (ALS) which called for the simplification of Arabic grammar, morphology and syntax as well as for the promotion of classical Arabic in educational centres and mass media (Saleh 1982). However, as indicated earlier, there were no serious attempts to reform and manipulate Arabic in order to facilitate its use in order to serve the educational and ideological tendencies of the Lebanese community. Furthermore, there were other obstacles facing the adoption of Arabic as a medium of instruction, such as lack of qualified teachers, scarcity, if not absence, of teacher

training programmes, limited reference materials, and conflict between the various dialects of spoken and classical Arabic (Shaaban 1993).

Beside the difficulties involved in using Arabic as a medium of instruction and lack of action on the part of the successive Lebanese governments to address those difficulties, there were economic incentives which contributed to the spread of foreign languages as instructional languages, particularly English. The Lebanese people started to feel the importance of English as the language of science and technology shortly after the end of World War II and the growing international influence of the United States of America. Furthermore, the discovery of oil in the Arabian Gulf and Saudi Arabia motivated the Lebanese to learn English as the language of international business. Consequently, English began to take precedence over French and this partly explains the current phenomenon of introducing English as a foreign language in the French-oriented schools.

The demand for English was also reflected in the practices of the Centre For Education Research and Development (CERD) which was established by the Lebanese government in 1971 as a unit within the Ministry of Education that was entrusted with the responsibilities of introducing educational planning, revising curricula, compiling textbooks and defining requirements and objectives for official examinations. The Centre started its efforts by developing a curriculum for the English language along the lines of current methodologies. Meanwhile, the Centre simply translated a series of science books into Arabic to be used in the Islamic schools of southern Lebanon. Thus, it appeared that on the eve of the Civil War (1975), English was gaining ground as a medium of instruction in Lebanon's schools at the expense of other languages, including French.

The Civil War (1975-1989)

The Civil War broke out in 1975 and continued unabated until 1989. This eclipsed all legislation, created a chaotic educational situation, rendered the running of official examinations impossible, and deepened the old hostilities, cultural and otherwise. This period was also marked by a remarkable increase in the number of private schools that spread all over the country, mainly for commercial purposes. Most of these private schools adapted their practices to their own ideologies and interests without inspection from the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, the war had a tremendous negative impact on education where standards declined sharply as a result of the lack of discipline, loss of instructional time, destruction of school facilities and loss of qualified faculty.

During the war years the use of foreign languages – especially English – as the media of instruction continued to rise. Most of the private schools that were

established during this period adopted English as an instructional language, even in the elementary cycle, and irrespective of their ideological or religious orientations. Furthermore, four new English-medium universities were established mostly in typical French-oriented regions and along sectarian lines: Notre Dame University (Maronite and Catholic), Balamand University (Greek Orthodox), Al Manar (Sunni Moslem), and The Lebanese American University (Protestant). In addition, English was introduced as a compulsory foreign language at the University level in St. Joseph and the Holy Spirit University, especially for science subjects where students need to consult references written mainly in English. This contributed to further educational inequalities among the classes of the Lebanese society as it resulted in an elitist educational system which opened the doors of quality education and future life chances for those who could afford to attend expensive private schools with strong English programmes (Mosa 1991).

Despite expansion in the quantity of schools to cover all the Lebanese territory, there were wide gaps in the teacher qualifications and instructional programmes of the various schools. Yet, all students have been required to go through the same national examination system, and this closed off access to quality education for a large percentage of students from the lower socio-economic classes, the majority of whom fail the official as well as entrance examinations to the English-medium universities.

The present situation

In 1989, the Lebanese Parliament agreed to a new constitution that is better known as the Taif Accord. This accord put an end to the Civil War and laid the foundations for the modern Lebanese state as it settled the issues of national identity and belongingness that has divided the Lebanese throughout their modern history.

On the educational scene, two major objectives were established and were later formulated in the *Plan for Educational Reform* (1994) and *The New Framework For Education in Lebanon* (1995) as follows:

"To form a citizen... Who is committed to the Arabic language as an official national language and able to use it efficiently and effectively in all domains... [and] who is proficient in at least one foreign language for the activation of openness to international cultures to enrich and be enriched by them" (CERD, 1995:36).

Thus far, these two principles have not changed much in the current affairs in the schools of Lebanon, except for the adoption in public schools of the principle

of introducing a third language in the intermediate cycle. However, despite lip service paid to the cause of Arabic, the trend to strengthen foreign languages, especially English, has continued and was underscored by decree #5589, which was passed in 1994. This decree stipulated that any of the foreign languages (English, French, German) may be used as an instructional language in all of Lebanon's schools whether foreign, private or public at the pre-school and elementary levels.

A careful reading of decree #5589 indicates a reversal of the trend to strengthen Arabic as a medium of instruction in Lebanon that prevailed, on paper, in the era of independence (1943-1975) and of the Taif constitution of 1989. Furthermore, plans are now very well underway to modernise the Lebanese educational system, revise curricula, and train foreign language teachers on a large scale basis. This indicates that foreign languages, especially English, are likely to continue to spread in contemporary Lebanon irrespective of the political and socio-economic changes that may occur in the country.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the language-in-education policies in the light of Lebanon's political history. The review revealed that (1) the importation of French, and later its imposition as a medium of instruction during the French mandate (1921-1943), led to inequitable education in favour of the Catholic and Maronite communities, (2) the promotion of Arabic as an official language and subsequently as a medium of instruction in the era of independence after 1943 was dissociated from planning and, as a result, was ineffective, and (3) the spread of English as an instructional language in contemporary Lebanon has been directed by economic considerations. It should also be noted that despite the spread of French and English as instructional languages, the strength of both languages remains limited to the context of education, and are not widely used for ceremonial, societal and communicative functions.

Ghazi M. Ghaith is Assistant Professor of language education at the American University of Beirut. His main interest is methods of second language (L2) teaching and L2 reading and writing. Address for correspondence: American University of Beirut, Department of Education, Beirut, Lebanon. Fax: 1 (212) 478-3838. E-Mail: <gghaith@layla.aub.ac.lb>

Kassim A. Shaaban is the Chairperson of the English Department and the Director of the Centre for English Language Research and Teaching at the American University of Beirut. His main interest is teacher training.

References

- Eido, R. (1984) *Nadwat taalim al-alum wa al-riyathiat billughat al um fi al marhala al mutawasita* [Conference on the teaching of science and mathematics at the intermediate level]. Unpublished manuscript.
- El-Zein, N. (1991) *Al lughat: al lughats al ajnabiyah wathhuha wa al talim biha wa ather thalik fi alwahda* [Language-foreign languages: status and medium of instruction and the impact of that on national unity]. Unpublished manuscript.
- Jabbour, G. (1992) *Lughat al taalim fi Lubnan: Al lughat alajnabiyah hia al saeda* [Language of instruction in Lebanon: Foreign language is dominant]. Unpublished manuscript.
- Kurani, H. (1949) *Report No.7. The Year Book of Education*. London: Evans Brothers.
- Matthew, R. D. & Akrawi, M. (1949). *Education in the Arab Countries of the Near East*. Washington: American Council on Education.
- Mosa, M. A. (1991) Al tarbiyah bein al huriyat wa al tanakuthat. [Education between freedom and contradictions]. In *Binaa Al Jumhuriyah al Thania* (211-220). Beirut: Annadi al-Thakafi Al-Arabi.
- New Framework for Education in Lebanon* (1995). Beirut: CERD.
- Plan for Educational Reform* (1994). Beirut: CERD.
- Saleh, S. (1982). Takweem tajribat al taarib fi al-Mashrek al-Arabi. [Evaluation of the Arabisation experience in the Arab East]. *Al Mustakbel Al Arabi*, Vol.39, 71-78.
- Shaaban, K. (1993) *Al lughat al inkliziyah fi manahij al taalim al thanawi: al waki wa al khayarat* [English language in the curriculum of secondary education: reality and alternatives]. Unpublished manuscript.
- Smock, L. & Smock, M. (1975) *The Politics of Pluralism: A Comparative Study of Lebanon and Ghana*. New York: Elsevier.