THE ROLE OF LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND IN SHAPING STUDENTS' READING PROFICIENCY IN VIRTUAL SETTINGS: A CORRELATIONAL STUDY

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Abstract

This research draws from the linguistic relativity hypothesis and sociocultural literacy perspectives to investigate how students' linguistic backgrounds influence their digital reading practices in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. Specifically, it examines the impact of Algerian Arabic and Berber languages on digital literacy habits among university students. Utilizing a sociocultural approach that views reading as a social activity, a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative analyses was employed to ensure the credibility of the findings. The study surveyed students from two different Algerian universities situated in cities where the inhabitants primarily speak different native languages, namely Kabyle and Arabic, respectively.

The data were collected through a questionnaire and analysed using both statistical and content analysis methods. Results reveal contrasting reading practices between Arabic and Berber speakers, with Arabic speakers emphasizing cognitive benefits of reading, while Berber speakers view it as a cultural tradition, particularly evident in their digital literacy habits. Digital literacy, for Berber speakers, represents both freedom and a continuation of their oral heritage, shaping their preference for narrative texts. In contrast, Arabic speakers lean towards descriptive texts. In conclusion, this study underscores the influence of linguistic backgrounds on Algerian EFL students' digital reading behaviours.

Keywords: Algerian EFL students; Correlational study; Reading proficiency; Linguistic background; Virtual Settings.

1. Introduction

Considered as a crucial aspect of the new literacy, digital reading has stimulated the interest of many researchers. An appreciable amount of research (e.g., Coiro, 2003; Anderson, 2003; Hamdan *et al.* 2010) has been devoted to understanding the correlation between the new technologies and learners' reading practices whose aim is mainly to attempt to understand how learners develop the needed strategies to comprehend online texts. Some scholars believe that the strategies and the skills "*for the study of printed texts are […] the same for electronic texts*" (Hanrahan & Madsen, 2006, p.03).

These strategies include, among others: critical skills and analysis of texts, sensitivity to generic conventions, awareness of how different social and cultural contexts affect the nature of language and meaning, the understanding of how cultural norms and assumptions influence questions of judgment, etc. (Lee, as cited in Hanrahan & Madsen, 2006, p. 58). Other scholars, on the other hand, counter this view and contend that unlike paper-based texts, hypertexts provide readers with more opportunities to interact with the text; hence, electronic reading requires different strategies (Lawless et al., 2003; Nowak, 2008; Chen et al., 2011).

In EFL contexts, a plethora of research articles were published during the last decades to explore digital reading issues. Nevertheless, much focus was put on the study of digital reading from a cognitive standpoint and little attention was directed to the impact of sociocultural factors on digital literacy. To fill in this gap, the present study is an attempt to explore the impact of the mother tongue (L1) as a sociocultural variable on Algerian EFL learners' reading practices. It revolves around a core question: whether the participants' cultural schemata embedded in their different mother tongues influence their reading practices.

The choice for this variable is motivated by the fact that each community has its own historical, linguistic and sociocultural characteristics (Boukra, 2012). Therefore, I have thought it is a profitable academic contribution to scrutinize the Berber and Arabic EFL students' distinct reading practices in the light of the historical and cultural differences that lie between the two communities.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 Literacy from a Sociocultural Perspective: Within the scope of the sociocultural approach, literacy is conceptualised as a set of practices (as opposed to skills) that are grounded in specific sociocultural contexts. It challenges the conceptualisation of literacy grounded in psychology. During the last decade, literacy as social practice has been widely investigated and developed by many scholars based at the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre in the United Kingdom (Perry, 2012, p. 54). This approach in considering the nature of literacy is also called 'New Literacy Studies' (NLS) (Gee, 1991; Street, 1993). It draws upon ethnographic perspectives and anthropological theory.

To draw a distinction between NLS and traditional approaches to literacy, Brian Street (1984) makes a distinction between two models of literacy: 'Autonomous model' and 'Ideological model'. The autonomous model assumes that literacy is viewed is neutral and universal. The ideological model, on the other hand, suggests that literacy varies from one sociocultural context to another. To borrow Brian Street's words, "*the ideological model of literacy offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy practices as they vary from one context to another*". It permits the shift of focus from the universal' view of literacy to the local one.

At the core of literacy as social practice lies the distinction between 'literacy events' and 'literacy practices'. In this context, Barton and Hamilton (2000, p.8) describe events as "*observable episodes which arise from practices and are shaped by them. The notion of events stresses the situated nature of literacy […] it always exists in a social context*". As for literacy practices, they describe them as "*the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives. […] literacy practices are what people do with literacy*" (p. 8). Put simply, literacy event is the actual act of reading, but literacy practice is broader since it includes the reader's values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships that shape and determine the reading event.

In order to provide a detailed explanation of the nature of literacy and draw a difference between literacy events and literacy practices, Barton and Hamilton (2000, p.8) outlined six propositions:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts;
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life:
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible and influential than others;
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices;
- Literacy is historically-situated;
- Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making.

These propositions elucidate literacy as a social practice by emphasising the role of a variety of factors in determining the reading events. The text is a mediator of the reading process and the sociocultural- historical background of the readers shapes the reading event.

2.2 The Algerian Linguistic Repertoire: Situated in the Northern part of Africa, Algeria has been the target of various foreign invasions. As a result of this contact with foreigners during several generations, the Algerians have been profoundly influenced by many civilisations (Phoenician, Carthaginian, Roman, Arabic, Turkish and French). The impact brought about by these invasions is still, more or less, visible in some practices, traditions or places in different parts of the country.

The Berbers represent the natives and the oldest population of Algeria. They are also referred to as 'Imazighen' which is the plural of 'Amazigh' meaning free man. Their language, Tamazight, is the oldest language of Maghreb (Montagnon, 1998, p. 21). It is also known as the 'Berber language', but the natives prefer Tamazight over Berber (Ouahmiche et al. 2017). In the seventh century, the Arabs began to conquer North Africa and quickly convert the Algerian population to Islam. Some Berber groups oppose this new authority mostly in the Aures and Kabylia where the Berber language with its different varieties is still the first language of the majority of people.

In 1830, French troops invaded Algerian territories and settled there for more than a hundred years. Around the mid-twentieth century, the Algerian revolutionary war broke out to claim the Algerian autonomy. In 1962, Algeria achieved its independence from France. After independence, two languages were taught in the Algerian school: the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and the French language. Also known as 'classical arabic', MSA is a standard variety of Arabic with huge prestige for its association with the sacred text (Qu'ran). It is the official language of the country as it is stipulated by the constitution since 1963, and it is mainly used in very formal contexts. As for the French language, it is considered as a foreign language. The Berber and Algerian Arabic were considered as vernacular languages.

Some years later, crucial changes in the Algerian linguistic landscape emerge. "*Algeria's leadership embarked upon an ambitious arabization policy to transform the country linguistically and to achieve independence and distinctiveness*" (Benrabah, 2013, p. 90). According to Dreni (2009, p. 285), "*The selection of Arabic in language planning in Algeria has always been considered as an anti-colonial act against French, which was solely taught at primary, middle, secondary and university levels from 1830 to 1962*". Indeed, three important factors motivated the Arabisation policy. First, the Arabic language (MSA) represents the cultural side of independence as opposed to French which is the language of the colonizer. Secondly, Arabic is the language of the sacred text. Finally, Arabic is the language of the Arab nation (McDougall, 2006, p.338). In April 2002, Tamazight was officially attributed the status of 'national language'. It was viewed as a crucial component of the Algerian identity together with the Arabic language and Islam.

14 year later, within the framework of constitutional amendments of 2016, Tamazight was promoted to the status of a 'national and official language' in Algeria. Article 4 of the constitution states that: "*Tamazight est également langue nationale et officielle*" (Tamzight is also a national and official language). This was the result of a long-term claim of the Berbers in Algeria, mainly Kabyle speakers who have struggled for the survival of Tamazight. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the Algerian constitution does not state any article as regards the Algerian Arabic. The latter is a vehicle of daily communication in several parts of the country and it seems to be perceived as a continuum of the MSA.

Nowadays, the Algerian sociolinguistic situation is considered to be very complex and rich that is why it has been studied by several researchers. It is characterized by linguistic heterogeneity as a result of the coexistence of several languages that are: the Berber languages in its various varieties (Kabyle, chaoui etc.), Algerian Arabic in its various accents in addition to French and English. These languages belong to different language families (ouhmiche et al., 2017). Arabic is a Semitic language, Tamazight is a Chamito-Semitic (Afro-Asiatic) language, French is a Romance (Indo-European) language, and English is a Germanic (Indo-European) language.

The Algerian sociolinguist Khaoula Taleb Ibrahimi (1995) claims that the Algerian linguistic landscape is characterized by the presence of three linguistic spheres: The Arabic Sphere: this sphere is represented by an important number of Algerians who speak the Algerian Arabic with its different accents in different parts of the country. The Berber-speaking sphere: The Berbers were the first inhabitants of the Great Maghreb According to the history of Algeria. The Berber language in its various varieties is still spoken as a L1 of an important number of Algerians in different parts of the country.

The sphere of foreign languages: Algerians have always been in contact with foreign languages that influenced and continue to influence their linguistic landscape. In addition to historical reasons, as it has been presented earlier, many factors contributed to the presence of foreign languages mainly French and English within the Algerian society. Immigration, media, and social networks play a vital role in the spread of these languages mainly among teenagers and students.

2.3 The Mother Tongue as a Sociocultural Variable: the mother tongue is a crucial part of the factors of ethnic identity, as it conveys a particular culture (Abu, 1995). As it has been presented earlier, the Algerian linguistic landscape is characterized by its diversity. Its main peculiarity is the coexistence of two mother tongues: Berber and Algerian Arabic with their various accents. *"The linguistic legacy in Algeria is consolidated by a profound cultural and religious heritage, where the masses of the people have become polarized"* (Ouhamiche et al., 2017).

Berber or Tamazight consists essentially, of Chaoui, concentrated mainly in Khenchela, Batna, Oum Bouaghi, and Tebassa; with yet lesser attendance in other regions like Soug Ahrass, Setif, Annaba, and Biskra, Kabyle which is spoken predominantly in Tizi Ouzou, Bejaia, and Bouira, and Mozabite which is of prevalent appearance in Ghardaia. As regards the Algerian Arabic, it is derived from the classical Arabic. According to Bensafi (2002), the gap between the Classical Arabic and the Algerian Arabic began with the Spanish settlement (1509-1555) by the phenomenon of borrowings. This cut has been increased during the French colonization of Algeria (1830-1962) when the French language was the main means of communication in various social and administrative domains.

These two languages convey two distinctive sociocultural features and ideologies of its speakers. The Algerian Arabic is the L1 of the largest part of Algerians (Chemami, 2011). According to Salem Chaker, around 25% of the Algerian population uses a dialect of Berber and the Kabyles represent two-thirds of all Berber speakers.

The kabyles relate to the mostly active group of Berbers who claim their linguistic and cultural specificity. Mourad Boukra (2012) highlights the major difference between the two groups by making reference to the identity crisis among the Berbers and mainly the kabyles. The Algerian Arabic speakers do not call into question the use of classical Arabic in the Algerian school. It is perceived as part of the language that they use in their daily life. In His book *Sociologie d'Algerie"* (1958), Pierre Bourdieu describes in some detail not only 'Arabic-speaking peoples' but Kabyles, Shawia, and Mozabites, each of which had its own distinct culture and traditional social order.

Similarly, in his book *la genése de la kabylie*, Yassine Temlali (2015) accounts for the historical factors that make of the Berber (more precisely Kabyle) and the Arabic speakers in Algeria two culturally distinctive communities. Starting from these sociocultural differences between Arabic speakers and Berber speakers in Algeria, my aim is to depict the extent to which this difference in ideology is reflected in their reading practices.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants: EFL students enrolled in an MA course from two Algerian universities were selected as participants of the study. The two universities are located in two different linguistic environments to fit the purpose of the research. The first is Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi-ouzou, where the L1 of the majority of the students is Tamazight, and the second is Ali Lounici University of Blida, where most students' L1 is Algerian Arabic. A total of 344 students participated in the empirical study.

3.2 Questionnaire: In order to account for the participants' practices and perceptions, a questionnaire was used. The latter is a research technique which is likely to help researchers to gather as much information as possible about opinions of the participants and gain more relevant insights about their reading practices. The questionnaire is made up of thirty-nine (39) questions. It is composed of various types of items including open-ended questions where the respondents are allowed room to provide their own opinions, and closed-ended items where they are asked to choose from a range of pre-determined alternative responses.

In terms of structure, the questionnaire follows the standard format of questionnaires. It starts by introducing the objective of the study, and promising complete confidentiality to the participants. The introduction also explains to the students the way they are required to answer the different questions. Then, three sections follow: 1) participants' Profile, 2) Background and Practices, and 3) Attitudes.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedure: The data collected from the questionnaire are analysed according to a mixed-methods approach, which involves the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis. Statistical analysis is used to analyse the quantitative data arising from closed-ended questions of the questionnaire. Statistical analysis relates to well defined mathematical procedures ranging from descriptive statistics to multivariate analysis. The results have been converted into frequencies or means. As for the qualitative data arising from the open-ended items, they have been analysed by means of Discourse Analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Different Perceptions: Developing Cognitive Abilities Vs Cross-cultural Practice: The results indicate that the reading habits of Berber and Arabic speakers during their childhood are slightly different leading to their divergent practices as adult students. To begin with, Berber students used to read stories in French and Arabic, while Arabic speakers used to read only in Arabic.

In addition, Berber speakers were used to hear stories from their parents, while Arabic speakers were used to have stories read on them by their parents. As a consequence, their perceptions of reading are different. Berber speakers plan to read stories for their future kids; believing that reading is a window to other cultures. As for the Arabic speakers, they intend to adopt the two modes together, telling and reading stories. They believe that reading is a way of developing the cognitive abilities of their kids. In addition, they are aware that telling stories is part of the Algerian cultural background and they need to transmit it to their kids.

Surprisingly the rate of the Arabic speakers who want to keep the oral tradition of storytelling is higher than the Berber speakers who mainly choose reading over telling stories. It can be concluded then, that multilingual reading practices of the Berber speakers lead them to perceive reading as a cross-cultural practice, while the Arabic speakers who were used to monolingual reading at early stages of their life lead them to perceive reading as a way of developing cognitive abilities. Another significant result is the fact that Berber speakers are motivated when they are asked to read aloud.

One of the reasons behind this behaviour is that Berber tradition wanted stories to be heard collectively. Like mediaeval Europe, Berber learners were used to have stories read on them. So, like speaking, reading aloud is perceived as a common practice within the Berber community. A posible explanation of these differences may be found in some historical background of the two communities in Algeria. Language is a symbolic mediation tool which is claimed to be collaboratively and culturally constructed (Lantolf, 1994). This suggests that members of different communities shape various symbolic mediation tools through time.

These tools and artefacts are constructed under specific cultural and historical conditions (Lantolf, 2000). Each society, and every generation is characterised by some traits and features that shape these tools and artefacts which are likely to have a profound impact on the way individuals conceptualise phenomena. As far as the Arabic and Berber speakers are concerned, some historical factors have made of the two communities different in Algeria. In his book, *La genése de Kabylie*, Yassine Temlali refers to the differences between the Algerianist and the Coranic schools in Algeria.

After the first world war, in order to legitimise its colonisation of Algerian territories, the French authorities adopted a colonial policy that consisted mainly of building schools and spreading education in Kabylia. This specific region has been chosen on the basis of some historical background and the physical features of its inhabitants who were perceived as descendants of Europeans (Romans). Accordingly, two distinct types of schools were spread in Algerian territories: Algerianist school in Kabylia and the Coranic school in other parts of the country. Learning by heart different chapters of the Coran was the key principle of teaching in the Coranic schools.

In the light of the results presented above, one can claim that reading in several languages at early stages of life is likely to have life-long offshoots on the part of learners. Developing the habit and the culture of reading is the key to knowledge acquisition and skills' improvement. Centuries ago, reading was considered as a discriminating factor among communities. The manuscript was accessible only to the elite class of society. Later, the arrival of the Gutenberg printing press ended such discrimination by making the printed word available to all.

Nowadays, the arrival of the new technologies leads to the emergence of new reading habits that are generally viewed pejoratively. They are consuming a big slice of time and reducing the amount of time spent on reading printed books. However, no discriminatory aspects of digital reading among various communities are reported in the literature. Simply put, the differences observed between communities are mainly explained from a cognitive perspective. Conversely, the present study goes further in the analysis of the obtained results to interpret and explain some phenomena from a sociocultural perspective.

Lantolf &Thorne (2006) claim that "*learning is embedded within social events and occurring as an individual interacts with people, objects, and events in the environment*". Similarly, John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) state that sociocultural approaches highlight the relationship between social and individual processes in the co- construction of knowledge. It is "*based on the concept that human activities take place in cultural contexts, are mediated by language and other symbol systems, and can be best understood when investigated in their historical development*" (p. 191). Indeed, no discrepancy in terms of cognitive abilities is noticed among Berber and Arabic speaking communities in the Algerian context.

However, the different literary background and the reading habits of children who grow up in these communities lead to the emergence of unexpected and different reading practices among Berber and Arabic EFL students in Algeria.

4.2. Digital Literacy: Echoing Freedom and Continuing Oral Tradition: The results of the study show some reading practices which are particular to either the Berber or the Arabic Algerian EFL students. In the print-based environment, Berber speakers view reading as a channel to get access to other cultures. This is what leads them to like reading more than the Arabic students. In addition, as it has already pointed to, they do enjoy reading aloud and reading classes. Furthermore, they do prefer traditional libraries over the digital ones.

In the digital environment, Arabic speakers seem to be acquainted with digital reading more than their Berber counterparts. As a matter of fact, the percentage of Arabic speakers who have already read a book or a novel on screen is very important. Berber speakers spend less time online. Nevertheless, in terms of abilities, Berber speakers seem outperforming the Arabic ones. They tend to explore hyperlinks to get access to new or additional information while Arabic speakers, generally, prefer ignoring hyperlinks. Another distinction between the two groups of students is observed in terms of text types. In the digital environment, Berber speakers read academic texts and books chapters while Arabic speakers prefer academic texts and magazines.

These findings show that Berber speakers are better digital readers. Indeed, they perceive digital reading as a practical tool to get information. What makes their digital reading process easier is their linguistic background. I do believe that the fact of reading in several languages at early stages of their life lead them to increase their will to get in touch with other cultures via reading. Accordingly, I can safely claim that encouraging children to read in different languages is likely to increase their cultural open-mindedness and their cognitive abilities alike. In addition, a significant explanation is the correlation between their multilingual background and their abilities to easily interact with hypertext.

Indeed, the etymological name of the Berbers is 'Imazighen' that designates freedom. This value of freedom is reflected in their attitudes and their digital reading abilities since do not perceive reading as a linear process. In his book *Weaving the web*, Tim Berbers-Lee explains the dimension of freedom as related to digital reading by referring to reading hypertexts. He states "*the vision I have for the web is [...] a vision that provides us with new freedom, and allow us to go faster than we ever could*‖ (p. 01).

A further explanation of the discrepancy between Arabic and Berber speakers' reading practices may be found in their cultural heritage. Indeed, I do believe that the oral tradition has an impact on EFL digital reading skills of Berber and Arabic speakers. The repercussions of the oral tradition are different in Berber and Arabic communities. It is more visible in the Berber sphere which is mainly characterized by storytelling. My claim, then through this paper, is that the oral tradition helps the Berber to be more efficient in digital reading compared to their Arabic counterparts. Indeed, some characteristics of digital reading make it closer to oral discourse more than the written text. Like the oral discourse, the digital text is abstract and not linear.

So, the Berber speakers have transferred their oral abilities to the digital environment. As far as the Arabic students are concerned, the oral tradition is less visible in their daily cultural practices, but what is interesting to emphasize is the fact that they perceive the oral tradition, mainly storytelling, as part of their cultural heritage and identity. This is what leads them to choose telling stories as part of their future plans for their future kids. In many parts of the globe, orality is defying literacy. Some researchers expect the end of the oral mode as a result of the widespread of digital literacy.

In this context, Steven Roger Fisher states that "*several Neolithic tribes in New Guinea are only now encountering the wonder of writing [...] but in a few short years their children will be active netizens in the wired world of information technology*" (2003, p. 317). It is inevitable, as he states. Nevertheless, starting from the empirical findings of the present study, I can safely claim that the oral tradition in the Algerian context is a cultural heritage and it is related to the cultural identity. So, digital literacy which is perceived as a means to an end, mainly for academic success is not likely to replace the oral tradition. I do believe that it is rather a continuum of the oral tradition in the Algerian context.

4.3 Text Types: Descriptive & Narrative: The text types are broken into three genres: Narrative, Non- fiction and poetry. Each of these genres is sub-divided into specific text types. Adventures, fairy tales and historical fictions are examples of narrative texts. Explanatory, discussion or descriptive texts fall into Non-fiction genre. As for the third genre, it consists mainly of poems. Several types of texts are suggested in the curriculum for Algerian EFL university students. However, the results of the study show that the repertoire of text types that they usually read is limited to narrative and descriptive texts.

They believe that the narrative and the descriptive texts are the easiest to be read. More to the point, a distinction between Arabic and Berber speakers' choice of texts is noticed. While the Berber speakers prefer the narrative texts, their Arabic counterparts prefer the descriptive texts. When asked to explain their choices, the participants of both groups stated that this is part of their reading habits and they used to read these types of texts. In addition, some participants argued that the descriptive and the narrative texts were respectively related to the Arabic and the Berber cultures.

In accordance with this context, Roger Fisher sates that *"as food is with the body, so is reading with the mind. We become what we read"* (2003, p. 316). Berber speakers relate narration to storytelling tradition, while Arabic speakers make reference to the Muslim religious text. What is important to emphasise is that both groups of students are aware that their literary and cultural background lead them to adopt and develop particular reading practices.

5. Conclusion

Within the framework of the sociocultural approach, EFL reading is perceived as a process which is mediated by sociocultural symbolic means resulting in a social practice. In line with principles of the sociocultural approach to literacy, my aim through this study was to explore the extent to which the sociocultural characteristics of Algerian EFL students are likely to have a profound impact on their reading practices.

Unlike the previous studies, the present research has attempted to open up new horizons by comparing the EFL reading practices of two groups of participants using two distinct mother tongues within the same country. The perspective is more sociocultural rather than structural or linguistic. My aim, through this research, is not to focus on any discriminatory perspective among the two communities. I have rather targeted depicting any possible differences between the two groups of Algerian EFL learners in order to suggest any pedagogical implication which is likely to be beneficial for learners and teachers alike.

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