

Mathematics and the language of instruction in Morocco: alternating between French and Arabic over the last 60 years.

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In Morocco, since the late 1950s, the choice of the language of teaching mathematics¹ has experienced constant change. This choice still arouses debate within Moroccan society. The language of instruction in mathematics has changed four times over the past 60 years; it switches from French to Arabic or vice versa almost every decade. The first two changes took place during the 1960s and 1970s and concerned primary education. Thus, the first change (from French to Arabic) took place in the early 1960s and the second change (from Arabic to French) took place in the early 1970s. As for the third change (from French to Arabic) which concerned both primary and secondary education, it was implemented during the 1980s. The implementation of each of these changes generally encountered technical difficulties (such as: pedagogical choices, qualification of teachers, preparation of textbooks, etc.), in addition to difficulties of a political and ideological nature which are linked to the visions and convictions of the various actors involved in education (Al Jabri (1986), Laabid(2019)).

The fourth change (from Arabic to French) targeting secondary education began in 2015. This return to French has resulted in the creation of international options for the baccalaureate. In these types of baccalaureate, the scientific subjects (mathematics, physics-chemistry and natural sciences) are taught in French, English or Spanish². These options coexist with the ordinary baccalaureate where these subjects are taught in Arabic. The creation of these options has been reinforced by a recently adopted law on education. This introduced the principle of “linguistic alternation” which authorizes the use of foreign languages for the teaching of certain specific contents. The adoption of the principle of linguistic alternation has sparked much debate within Moroccan society and especially a strong negative reaction from certain conservative circles.

Supporters of this approach insist on the pragmatic side of this principle insofar as it endows the education system with richness since it offers Moroccan students the possibility of learning science in several languages. The opponents of this trend see it rather as an abandonment of the Arabic language and try to place the debate at the ideological and political levels. For example, the titles of the references El Hilali (2019), Jandari (2019) and El Kabbaj (2019) testify to these attempts.

In this communication we present, on the one hand, a description of the different changes of the language of instruction by explaining their methodology and the arguments justifying them; and on the other hand, the main arguments that fueled the debates caused by these changes.

References

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¹ In fact, this change concerned, in addition to mathematics, physics-chemistry and natural sciences.

² Note that among these optional courses, those of French are dominant.