International Journal of Educational Development 53 (2017) 151–162

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Educational Development

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedudev

Full Length Article

Politicized pedagogy in Morocco: A comparative case of teachers of English and Arabic

Gareth Smail*

University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 4 April 2016
Received in revised form 27 October 2016
Accepted 22 January 2017

Keywords:
Language
International development
Arabic
Pedagogy
Curriculum reform
North Africa

ABSTRACT

This article examines how Moroccan language teachers perceive good teaching practice. References to learner-centeredness factor prominently in these perceptions, paralleling the policy discourse of the Moroccan government. Language teachers report a varied field of good practice, wherein teachers of English uniquely benefit from patterns of professional development funding, pedagogical research, and symbolic capital. This analysis suggests that discussions of language pedagogy in Morocco cannot be clearly separated from the politics of language. Engaging with literature on the *contingent* nature of pedagogical knowledge, this article emphasizes the importance of considering pedagogical politics through local frames in addition to global ones.[1]

1. Introduction

For the last 15 years, the government of Morocco has made education reform a top national development priority, and this effort has been underwritten by consecutive rounds of World Bank loans and foreign technical assistance.[2] Despite some success in expanding access to primary and secondary education, the government and its donors have repeatedly noted that its embrace of learner-centered pedagogy (LCP) has done little to affect the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms (See CSE, 2008a; World Bank, 2005; World Bank, 2013: 16). Most Moroccans with a stake in the education system would agree with this assessment; few would argue that Morocco's pedagogical reforms since 2000 have had a significant or broad-scale impact on how teachers do their jobs, or the resources available to them. Yet, this pessimism about the quality of public education generally, and teacher practice in particular, has not amounted to a rejection of learner-centered pedagogy on a conceptual level. Indeed, teachers, students and parents have reported a sweeping cultural shift toward concepts of learner-centeredness in perceptions of what constitutes good pedagogy.

This article foregrounds the perspectives of a particular group of Moroccan language teachers within the context of this normative shift toward LCP. The Moroccan context offers a vivid example of how ideologies about the role and use of language lurk just beneath discussions of what constitute good language pedagogy. Moreover, the often neglected perspective of teachers adds both nuance and explanation to uniformly negative assessments of pedagogical quality in Morocco (cited above), which mirror those made about the Arabic-speaking world (World Bank, 2008) and the developing world more broadly. By highlighting the self-reinforcing connections between inequality of resources, language ideologies, and norms of good teaching, I make the case for further research into how both discourse about pedagogy and its enacted practice might be shaped by power and resource asymmetries within a single context.

In the following analysis, I compare the perspectives of secondary teachers of English and Arabic to reveal a significant disparity in how teachers of either language report on the possibility of good pedagogy within their classrooms and schools. Often equating good teaching with learner-centeredness, my findings show that teachers of both languages tend to view English as the most innovative and learner-centered subject in the curriculum, while Arabic instruction and learning is widely regarded as in a state of crisis. I argue that this imbalance results from a mutually reinforcing relationship between inequality in pedagogical resources on the one hand, and on the other, language

* Correspondence to: 3700 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, United States.
E-mail address: smail.gareth@gmail.com (G. Smail).

[1] Key Acronyms: Learner-centered pedagogy (LCP); Ministry of National Education and Professional Formation (MEN); National Charter for Education Reform (CNEF); High Council for Education/Conseil Supérieur de l'Education, de la Formation, et de la Recherce Scientifique (CSE); Programme d'Urgence de l 'Éducation National Education Emergency Program/Nationale (PUEN); Modern Standard Arabic (MSA); Competency-based Approach/Approche par Compétence (APC);

[2] Major funders have included the World Bank, African Development Bank, Spain, France, the European Union, and the European Investment Bank.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2017.01.007
0738-0593/

ideologies that equate Arabic with tradition and English (as well as French) with modernity, mobility, and economic access, all seen as related to the purpose of learner-centeredness. Perceptions of language pedagogy in Morocco therefore remain deeply linked to social, political and economic roles of language, even as pedagogical principles like those of LCP are cast as transcending, or perhaps even correcting, these contextual factors.

In turn, my analysis engages with the literature on the *contingent* nature of pedagogy, which asserts that educators interpret pedagogical knowledge through the lens of material, cultural and political context (Vavrus, 2009; Vavrus and Bartlett, 2012). By showing how the possibilities of good practice can vary *within* the same setting, this article illustrates how in the case of language teaching in Morocco, such contingent understandings are not merely local variations of the global discourses they reference. Rather, the application of pedagogical knowledge like LCP interacts with asymmetries of power, prestige and resources that are simultaneously local and global in nature. Read with a politicized view of discourse on good teaching, the teacher reports in this study suggest that there is no singular Moroccan incompatibility with LCP in terms of resources, culture or systemic incentives. Rather, LCP discourse is deployed as a reference to pedagogical modernity within a local cultural politics in which some languages are ideologically and materially positioned as modern, and others are not.

1.1. Learner-centered education as quality and contingent pedagogy

The story of Morocco's education reform has not been wholly unique, as this recent history is interwoven with the politics of international organizations that promote and fund educational development. Throughout this time, discourse about LCP has figured prominently in efforts to define both pedagogical and educational quality (for example, the 1990 World Conference on Education for All, UNESCO, 1990), as well as specific projects to reform curricula, teacher training, and professional development (just a few examples include South Africa, Brodie et al., 2002; Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Malawi, Christholm and Leyendecker, 2008; Egypt, Ginsburg and Megahed, 2008; Namibia, O'sullivan, 2004). LCP generally refers to "a pedagogical approach which gives learners, and their demands, a relatively high level of active control over the content and process of learning" (Schweisfurth, 2013: 20). Considerable literature has examined how LCP as a concept, practice and policy has meant different things to different people, and in its application this has caused confusion and even policy failure (Christholm and Leyendecker, 2008; O'sullivan, 2004; Sriprakash, 2010; Tabulawa, 1997). Indeed, Schweisfurth lays out how LCP can be invoked by advocates from diametrically opposed theoretical camps – like Freirean critiques of schooling on the one hand, and labor market demand analyses on the other (Schweisfurth, 2013: 21–36).

Nonetheless, the prominence of pedagogical reform agendas in general, and LCP-oriented interventions in particular, *do* have a specific political-economic history beginning in the 1980s, which can be traced to a confluence of factors. During this time, much of the developing world (Morocco included) fell into debt crises, which precipitated moves away from state-led employment policies and towards globalized labor markets, and a new prominence of organizations like the World Bank advocating for an "economic returns" model of education development (Heyneman, 2003; Mundy, 1998; Mundy and Menashy, 2012). Meanwhile, the fall of the Soviet Union generated enthusiasm about democratic transition and the role of education in it (Ginsburg and Megahed, 2008). These geopolitical shifts brought a new focus to the pedagogical process as a means of achieving a *quality* of education, rather than its mere provision. It is in this context that LCP came to be referenced in the 1990s and 2000s as a critical component of how education could contribute to economic, political or social development (See Heyneman, 1997; UNDP, 2003, 2005; World Bank, 2008: 88). Left implicit has been the notion that LCP constitutes a transposable best practice, that if replicated could contribute to improved learning outcomes, or alternative skill sets better attuned to labor market demands.

It is in this context that in 1999, learner-centered education was first articulated as the vision for pedagogy for the entire Moroccan curriculum. The National Charter for Education and Training (CNEF) was championed by King Mohammed VI immediately after his ascension to the throne, in a context of transition towards pluralism widely seen as moving away from the heavy-handed tactics of his father (Hassan II, r. 1961–1999). This involved a more diverse and inclusive vision of Morocco's future, and an official place for the Tamazight language (Berber) in primary school and administration.[3] The discourse surrounding the CNEF and its associated LCP reforms endorsed this diversity and envisioned Moroccan graduates as competent multi-linguals.

Consistent with the global emphasis on education quality and its implications for promoting learner-centered pedagogy, the first of the CNEF's major objectives reads:

> "The reform of education and training places the learner, in general, and the child in particular, in the center of reflection and action on learning. In this perspective, it should offer children of Morocco the conditions necessary for their awakening and their development." (MEN, 1999)

It goes on to articulate a vision for learner-centered schools. The CNEF imagines a new Moroccan school that is: "alive, thanks to an educational approach based on active learning, not passive reception, cooperation, discussion and collective effort, not the individual work alone" (MEN, 1999).

As discourse of LCP became prominent in Morocco, it began to surface in MEN reforms, although expansion of enrollment was the initial priority. Morocco's first step towards this vision was the adoption of the *Approche par Compétence* (APC, Competency-Based Approach), a set of curricular reforms that swept Francophone Africa in the early 2000s (Hamouchi et al., 2012; Lauwerier and Akkari, 2013). Rather than focusing on what students should know as an outcome, competency-based pedagogy emphasized concrete skills learners should have, implying that teaching methods focus—in the spirit of learner-centered education—less on the transmission of facts and more on the active involvement of learners. Morocco made adjustments to its textbooks and teacher handbooks, specifying cross-cutting competencies that students were to develop and apply in other subjects and their daily lives. Despite their theoretical ambition, these reforms did not entail considerable investment or reforms to teacher training, student evaluation, professional development, etc. (Hamouchi et al., 2012).

In 2006, the slow uptake of pedagogical reform had become obvious throughout the system. The king responded by reactivating what had become a defunct evaluation body, the *Conseil Superieur d'Education* (CSE, High Council for Education) to issue a report on "the state of and perspectives on the educational system" (CSE 2008a). The CSE's report put teachers and teaching squarely at

[3] Formal Arabic, or *Fusha,* is the official language of Morocco's education system. French is introduced as a second language after two years of primary school, and English in the beginning of Middle School. Tamazight (Berber) has been historically outlawed from public administration and schools for much of the second half of the 20th century, as will be discussed in section 1.2 below. The label assigned to Berber dialects is highly political. Certain activists and scholars reject the term Berber and claim 'Tamazight' as a token transnational Berber identity. I use Tamazight to refer to the curricularized language now taught in schools, and I use 'Berber dialects' to refer to the much more diverse linguistic practices of its speakers.