A CULTURAL APPROACH
TO ADULT ILLITERACY IN MOROCCO

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Abstract:

Cognitive and behavioral aspects of culture, as a unified entity, consist of an array of elements that display strong relationships. This entails the necessity to investigate the elements that enable people to regularize their thought and behavior in accordance with the environment in which they live. Elements like ethnicity, religion, language, and gender constitute the ingredients into which culture can be anatomized. The present article is an attempt to contribute to the achievement of that goal by scrutinizing the nature and the degree of the role(s) of these elements. Specifically, we try to bridge the gap between theory and practice in the domain of adult literacy /illiteracy in contexts of cultural diversity in Morocco.

Keywords: adult literacy/illiteracy, second language learning, ethnicity, religion, gender, culture

1. Introduction

"*It may not be an exaggeration to say that there are nearly as many definitions of culture as there are fields of inquiry into human societies, groups, systems, behaviors, and activities.*" (Hinkel, 1999, p. 1). While this statement highlights the broad and elusive character of culture, it provides, on another scale, a potential conceptual framework in which we can delimit and circumscribe the interesting phenomenon of adult literacy/illiteracy within cultural studies. Addressing adult literacy in the Moroccan context is needed as illiteracy constitutes a real stumbling block in the way of any real take-off of Morocco since it prevails among nearly 60 percent of its population. Recently, this problem has re-emerged to the surface once again in association with the current fight against poverty and with the explicit aspiration to reach "sustainable development". In brief, the Moroccan society has reached a deliberate awareness of the role of literacy in promoting the country politically, economically, socially and culturally. In this article, we attempt to address adult literacy from a cultural angle and since the eradication of illiteracy has to be accomplished through language, a close scrutiny of the cultural variable is needed in order to characterize the problems related to this phenomenon and think about potential solutions that may be adopted to foster learning in this special type of education. It should be noted that the findings and comments displayed in this article are a result of direct observation

of three classes of illiterate adults in the Moroccan city of Fes, known for the cohabitation of Arabs and Berbers.

2. Literacy, Culture and Language

Morocco as a diverse environment in which communication media between its speakers differ from one region to another clearly depicts a situation of multiculturalism that needs to be investigated. Whereas Standard Arabic is assumed to be a constitutional and a formal (official) language, its use is limited to governmental, official and written uses. On another level, verbal communication is accomplished daily through Moroccan Arabic, Berber, French, and Spanish depending on regions, and also on social class and educational considerations. This diglossic situation, together with the multitude, variation and richness of the Moroccan sociolinguistic scenery, may carry with it a negative impact on learning Standard Arabic by a sensitive category like the one of illiterate adults. The variation may complicate the process of teaching / learning at different levels of language. For example, at the phonological level, differences between the sounds of Standard Arabic and the other media may complicate, and ultimately deform learners' outputs as a result of cacophony. Interference or instances of negative transfer of information from the mother tongue to the target language undoubtedly results in less than perfect outputs. For instance, it is hard to teach a Jebli learner (a person from the northern mountains of Morocco) to utter [q] instead of [?]. Cacophony may also lead to formulations of "false hypotheses" as communicative strategies since illiterate adults try to approximate the target language with a less than enough linguistic repertoire for communicative reasons. To progress in learning, illiterate people have access to previous knowledge of their L1 (Moroccan Arabic or Berber) in order to express themselves in a new language which is substantially different from what they have already acquired in childhood. This interference operates at both linguistic and cultural levels since learners most of the time attempt to express categories of their L1 that have no place in the target language and vice versa. Hence variation constitutes a real challenge for the teacher as it demands from him to be a cross- cultural interpreter who has to identify errors, describe them, understand their origin, and provide an alternative feedback if learning is to be facilitated at all.

The relationship between culture and literacy development in many cultures has already been documented in a variety of settings. Au & Jordan (1981) investigated native Hawaiian communities; Heath (1983) conducted a longitudinal ethnographic study of literacy learning among African-American and European-American children and their families; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines (1988) studied inner-city African-American families; and Spindler & Spindler (1990) dealt with the Menominee (Native American) culture. Besides, Abt-Perkins & Rosen (2000) state that "*Research on culturally relevant and responsible instruction clearly shows that knowledge of students' family, community and socio-ethnic cultures--their languages, literacy practices, and values--can help teachers address the interests and build on the skills of their students*" (p. 254).

Another linguistic difficulty related to social and cultural facts that faces both an illiterate learner and his teacher is the heterogeneous nature of the classroom as nearly 70 percent of the learners in the same class differ in cultural and regional belongings. Thus the teacher must take all these differences into account especially when dealing with changes

relative to modifications of behavior, habits, beliefs, and false ideas. In Morocco, especially in areas of linguistic overlap where classes consist of both Arabs and Berbers, the above issues should be handled with care. Even at the technical level, if explanation is done in Moroccan Arabic there is a risk that the other half of the class will not get the message. In this respect, the teacher's duty is to develop a course where a smooth transition from one culture to another is a must; additionally, it is necessary to train teachers to be able to master the three languages: Moroccan Arabic, Berber and Standard Arabic. There has always been a particularly stimulating celebration of the cultural similarities among diverse cultural groups by some educators as a way of uniting all cultural groups. However, learning to acknowledge and understand cultural differences should be an ongoing process in any diverse society like Morocco. Ethnographic inquiry facilitates the task for teachers to learn from their students and the communities in which their students live. It is also an inevitable means that helps teachers develop an understanding and appreciation of diverse backgrounds and lifestyles. For Gay (1994) "*deeply ingrained cultural socialization becomes problematic in education when the schooling process operates on one cultural model to the exclusion of all others, or when culturally different people are expected to set aside all their cultural habits as a condition of succeeding in school*" (p. 5).

It should be noted that the category of illiterate adults are special in terms of motivation, attitudes, learning styles, personality, and in terms of maturation. Having started learning at a relatively old age, the degree of accumulation, self-esteem, and meta-awareness in general may constitute an inhibiting factor. To face this impediment, the only solution is to form instructors who are culturally informed i.e., teachers should be familiar with the needs, perceptions, and the requirements of an optimum learning environment and adopt strategies in harmony with the above characteristics. Abt-Perkins & Rosen (2000) think that a base of culturally informed teaching knowledge enables educators to create "*collaborative and culturally sensitive classroom environments, cultural patterns in classroom verbal interactions, and other cultural dimensions of reciprocal interaction and dialogic instruction*" that encourage "*the participation and engagement of the diverse students in their classrooms*" (p. 254). Additionally, Smith (1998) believes that culturally responsible teacher education "*prepares teachers to be respectfully sensitive to the cultures of their students, to learn about and know the cultures of their students, and to use understandings about how culture influences learning in their day-to-day planning for teaching students*" (p. 20). From this perspective, it seems clear enough that humanistic approaches to language teaching are highly required as adults are attitudinally and affectively delicate persons who need to be treated as special cases, preferably in a relaxing atmosphere. Research studies in literacy have demonstrated that if we welcome and value learners, they become more academically performing (Kohl, 1994).

3. Literacy and Religion

Religion plays an essential role in the Moroccan society (Islam is the constitutional religion of Morocco); therefore, the correlation between literacy and religion should be addressed. As Bowker (2002) puts it, there is no known society in which religion has not played a part. For De Waal & Malefijt (1968), religion is a force that significantly interacts with other cultural institutions like the family, law, marriage, politics and education etc. The interaction between

religion and culture is so dynamic that some writers like Eliot (1962) and Vernon (1962) consider that the two entities form an indivisible whole. For Vernon (1962) "*We do not talk of religion and culture…but rather emphasize that religion is culture*" (p. 39). One of the salient characteristics of the adults who attend courses in illiteracy eradication centers is the important fact that the majority of the subjects are senior citizens; in fact, one of the reasons behind their enrollment in such programs is the strong desire to become able to read the Quran (the Muslims' holy book). This religious impetus is motivated as the old population is more conservative than the younger one. For this part of the population, religion is not only an end among others; it is a priority.

The tendency on the part of old learners to perceive religion as a driving force makes us wonder whether we can subsume religion under one of the two categories of motivation as agreed upon in the current literature on second language learning. It has been widely accepted that there is a distinction between 'integrative" and 'instrumental' motivation: the desire to identify with and integrate into the target-language culture, contrasted with the wish to learn the language for the purpose of study or career promotion (Gardner & Lambert, 1959, 1972). It seems obvious that it is hard to link religious motivation exclusively with any one of the two types at the detriment of the other. Motivation is hard to characterize not only at the level of religion, but also at the level of learning in general: the choice is difficult as motivation may be seen as integrative since illiterate adults aspire to become full citizens but within their own community! It is also instrumental, but needs-oriented and the needs here are highly specific and culture- bound. The majority of adult learners are eager to master Standard Arabic so as to be able to learn the Holy Quran, to read newspapers and medical information, or just to understand what is going on television. This situation, along with others, points towards the necessity to overhaul theories of second language acquisition to embrace a population of learners that has special characteristics and needs. This can be accomplished only if the gap between theory and practice is bridged by field work. Unfortunately, the high financial cost of field work hinders the accurate characterization of the nature of the problem and as a consequence we end up with poorly trained instructors in third world countries like Morocco.

4. Literacy and Gender

It is undeniable that gender as an element of the learner variables package has a role to play in language learning (Grace, 2000; Norton, 2000; Nyikos, 1990). Generally, there are two schools of thought concerning research on gender. The first theoretical view holds that the pressures exerted on individuals through the process of socialization causes gender differences in language learning (Crawford & Gentry, 1982; Slavin, 1991). From this perspective, gender is created through manners and deeds which are linked to culturally prescribed roles. These roles often perform context specific communications which insert the two sexes into models accepted by their cultures (Norton, 2000). Opponents of this view hypothesize that gender differences in language learning are due to physiological dissimilarities between men and women. For instance, Oxford (1993) points out that men process language through the left hemisphere of the brain and women through the right hemisphere. However, he believes that hemispheric and socialization functions can be minimized if individuals are motivated to achieve some

cognitive, social, or language use skills. In this respect, we prefer to use the term "gender" instead of "sex" because whereas the latter refers to biological dissimilarity, the former carries a social connotation (Ellis, 1994; Sunderland, 1994). According to Ellis (1994), the term "gender" is preferred because "sex" does not capture all that it requires to explain the linguistic behavior of people.

Early research on gender differences in second language learning tends to maintain females superiority over males. Ehrlish (2001) explains this superiority by relying on the proven superiority in verbal communication. Despite the general inclination to adopt this view, it should be noted that not many researches have carried out studies on the relation between gender and language learning strategy choices. To cite only a few findings in this domain, we can refer to Politzer (1983), who found out that women use more strategies in learning, and Ehrman & Oxford (1988) who claim that women use more general study strategies, more functional practice strategies, and more searching, communicating and self-management strategies.

In Morocco, as far as illiterate adults are concerned, there is the significant observation that women outnumber men in terms of enrollment and attendance in illiteracy eradication centers. This is not surprising once we take into consideration two variables: age and occupation. The majority of illiterate women are above the age of forty and they are housewives. This means that they have to find out means to spend afternoons in company of other women; in other words, what motivates women's positive response is socialization. In addition to this factor, religious courses (explanation of the Holy Quran and Alhadith (the prophet's sayings)), when considered in correlation with age and occupation (the majority of men work), provides another source of explanation of the degree of attendance by women. A third argument one may advance to motivate women attendance is the psychology of the Moroccan (and generally the oriental) man, a psychology characterized by a strong sense of ego and self-esteem. Taking the risk of enrolling in an educational setting where he will be subject to evaluation (in which he may fail) on a par with women is a situation he cannot tolerate.

5. Implications of Adult Illiteracy at the Cultural Level

Pinpointing sociolinguistic, cultural, and linguistic difficulties is of a paramount importance for all the actors who participate in this delicate, but stimulating learning/teaching operation. It should be emphasized that what is at stake here is a highly sensitive population, which constitutes a special category of learners; they are special subjects at all levels: biologically, socially, developmentally, psychologically, and above all culturally. The high degree of sensitivity necessitates a special formation of instructors at the cultural level in order to make them avoid some pitfalls. One pitfall according to Rosaldo (1989, p. 8) is the inability of educators to know enough about every culture. No singular body of knowledge, book, method, training program, or course will teach all there is to know, and educators may not have time or opportunities to continue their multicultural learning. He adds that a limited understanding also may lead to a "false comfort". A second error that instructors should be careful about is a tendency for schools to address diversity only on the surface level. Barrera (1992) and Willis (1995) have argued that the use of literacy approaches that appear to support the language and

literacy of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds must be coupled with teacher knowledge and commitment. If not, the result is a "tourist approach" that focuses on celebrating holidays and festivals, glorifying heroes or exceptional people. Also, literacy must be understood as a socio-constructed process--one that builds upon students' prior knowledge to make meaning. As Nieto (1999) argues, often in the zeal to address issues of diversity, the goal of academic achievement is forgotten. The last pitfall to be avoided is the excessive focus on cultural differences as this unmeasured celebration may lead to a division in the group instead of unity. This matter, especially in Morocco where the issue of Berber culture/rights is still debated, should be considered carefully.

From the line of argumentation developed so far, it is imperative to stress three objectives that should direct any learning/teaching operation for illiterate adults. First, we should cut with school traditions as systematic teaching is not valid from a social, educational and cultural viewpoint for illiterate adults. These people are different from ordinary students in so far as social roles are concerned; hence, their instruction should not be a copy of primary school teaching; for example, there should be flexibility in devising pedagogical principles, timetables and methods of teaching which should be more humanistic and learner-centered. To achieve the above aim we should change our educational space from school–centered to a social and cultural space in which learners are given strategies to be self- taught. Second, a pedagogical change has to be implemented. We cannot solve the problem of illiteracy simply by applying the experience of teaching children on adults; this aim cannot be achieved if we do not form teachers in a different way. Finally, teaching illiterate adults should have objectives that are carefully planned in an agenda that takes into consideration learners' situations and expectations. The key to the future pattern of education and teaching in Morocco, and all Africa, is to be found in the goals which it has already set. These goals are built up into a picture of a system that is national, democratic and modern. These aims are expressed in broad political, cultural and economic terms, but sometimes they refer to more specific aspects of education such as providing people with a minimum of skills necessary for them to take place in society, equipping them with the skills needed for seeking further knowledge, providing them with a vocational training that will eventually enable them to be self-supporting, and finally helping them to appreciate their cultural and moral achievements.

6. Conclusion

All learning/teaching operations directed toward illiterate adults should take into consideration the what and the how (the process of learning itself) of learning. To improve the academic achievement of adults from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, educators must be responsive and sensitive to the variety of cultures in Morocco and the elements that make up these cultures, especially language, ethnicity, religion, and gender.

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