

## **Reframing Language Roles in Moroccan Higher Education: Context and Implications of the Advent of English**

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### **Abstract**

Morocco is a multilingual society where different languages are in use. Besides the national and official languages, Moroccans also use a number of foreign languages among which are French, Spanish, and English. Over the last few years, foreign languages have acquired more space and prestige, especially in the educational system. In this respect, the Ministry of Higher Education is promoting the position of the English language through ministerial notes imposing it as a requirement at the doctoral level and for the recruitment of new university professors. With the spread of English as the international language and the language of research and science, current debate concerns also the language of instruction in science streams. The aim of the present study is to address three main research questions, namely (i) what status does English have in Morocco in general and in Higher Education in particular; (ii) what is the language policy, if any, that organizes the growing of English in Morocco; (iii) what are the causes and implications of the growth of English as the language of science in Morocco. This research intends to (i) reveal the conditioning factors for the spread and promotion of English in the Moroccan higher education (ii) investigate the potential implications of the growth of English on the other foreign languages and particularly the languages of instruction languages, namely Arabic and French. The study adopts a mixed approach making use of a survey to collect Moroccan university students and education professionals' opinions about the impact of the Moroccan English language policy. The study will also analyze the official documents and discourses and the academic literature.

**Key words:** Language policy, language roles, language system, science Medium of instruction

## Introduction

As an integral part of the education system, Higher education in Morocco has gone through series of reform attempts with the aim to improve the system. The National Charter for Education and Training, the Emergency Plan, and subsequent documents and decrees all prescribe a series of reformist measures that aim at improving the quality of teaching and matching graduate competencies with the potential job-market. However, language is a main issue of the Moroccan system of education and university education in particular. After controversial subsequent policies, Moroccan higher education maintained French as the language of instruction in the faculties of sciences, economics, and schools of engineering and technology. However, cross-border factors such as globalised economy, job opportunities, science and technological breakthroughs have instigated growing demand for the learning of English and its mastery in the Moroccan university.

Calls advocating the updating of the university's language policies so as to match the developing globalizing world, where English is the main tool, have again reshuffled the students' language needs and generated an evolving multilingual education. Within this context, the Moroccan linguistic situation and language policy is undergoing significant development and change. Progressively, English is becoming the instruction language of varied courses and majors in both public and private institutions. The establishment of Al Akhawayn University in 1995 by Hassan II was the beginning of an official shift in the language of instruction. Other private institutions have followed and adopted English as the medium of instruction, but the public institutions have never considered this. The issue of introducing English as the medium of instruction is addressed two decades later after the evaluation of the Moroccan Higher education system with the aim to improve its quality and boost the students' employability and professional success.

## Moroccan Language Educational Policy

Different languages are used in Morocco depending on the domain or context, the subject matter, the interlocutors. While *Darija*, widely known as Moroccan Arabic, and Amazigh are in principle used in informal domains, Modern Standard Arabic, French, and English are the languages of the formal domains. Many researchers (Marley 2004 ; Sadiqi 2006 ; Elboubekri 2013, Zouhir 2014) claim that Morocco is a model of multilingualism and multiculturalism thanks to its rich language system. Morocco's language diversity and cultural pluralism has resulted from Morocco's rich history and geographical position as the gate to both Africa and Europe has enriched its linguistic landscape.

Language policy has been a controversial issue for the Moroccan education authorities since the independence of the country. Among the questions the authorities had to consider in the 2003 and 2007 reform plans as well as the 2009 emergency plan the mastery of foreign languages, namely French and English. A whole module was devoted to them. Yet, the lack of means and trained staff has not led to any results. The 2014 last reform has reconsidered the whole issue and decided otherwise. Recently, however, many public institutions have become

aware of the importance of English for research and professional success and for international mobility.

Though the authorities seem to encourage the initiative, no clear strategies have been announced concerning the introduction and promotion of English (Moustaoui (2006, p. 33). Moroccan language policy has been, for decades, marked by the absence of a clear vision. The Arabisation process implemented in Morocco after the independence concerned the public system has recently been implicitly held responsible for the failure of the system of education. Arabic gradually replaced French as the language of instruction since 1965. By the year 1988, all the scientific subjects were arabized and Modern Standard Arabic became the language of instruction and the Moroccan education system a completely Arabic-based system.

Today, Moroccan education has grown very complex and language roles seem to overlap in many areas; different languages are at students' disposal to learn throughout their school careers. El Kirat (2010, p.33) claims that the Moroccan situation is an exemplary model where people learn a language according to the value they believe it adds to their educational and professional success. Language diversity grants students the advantage of choosing complementary languages to study according to their individual tendencies. However, though language diversity offers students a range of language choices, the issue of the main language of instruction is the subject of controversy due to the conflicting views and trends among the authorities.

The current puzzle indicates that the former policies were rather implemented at random and haphazard. Former studies, (Elboubekri, 2013, p.1931; Tomaščík', 2010, p. 15), criticized the Moroccan former language policies, especially the Arabisation process, and argued that it had "come to a halt" and failed to meet its goals. This insensitive choice has completely disregarded the Moroccan linguistic and cultural diversity, which ought to be considered a legacy rather than a colonial hostile stain. The arabization of the education public system has deprived generations of the mastery of French and has progressively put Moroccan students, especially science and technology students, into difficulty. The integration and promotion of Modern Standard Arabic could have been done without the exclusion of French, for "choosing languages implies giving priority to some without, however, rejecting the others" (UNESCO, 2003, p. 251). In effect, the language issue remains the real challenge the Moroccan education system has to overcome.

### **Moroccan Language Policy and Medium of Science Instruction in Higher Education**

Morocco has been trying to reform its system of education so as to empower the young generations. Moroccan Higher education has been subject to inclusive review and subsequent amendments in response to the local and international challenges and demands and the new global quality standards. In this vein, higher education authorities have made attempts to restore and upgrade education to be a real engine of social development and progress. Yet, an evident disparity between the official discourse and the practical applications manifests in the illusive language policy of higher education. The language of instruction remains one of the fuzziest areas characterized by the lack of information and inconsistent practices in the public system. French is still the means of instruction in most faculties of science and for most technical majors.

Despite its non-official status, French is the vital engine in education despite the fact that the Moroccan constitution and official documents do not name them (El Kirat, 2010, p. 140).

Marley (2004) affirms that “*French is never mentioned by name although at present this is the language of science and technology in much of higher education*” (p.31). Tomaščík (2010) also maintains that “*French is a dominant language in technical, law and economics departments of higher education institutions*” (p.8). French is reportedly rejected by large factions of the Moroccan society (Maurais & Morris 2003; Sadiqi 1991) due to the poor quality of teaching, coupled with rejection and negative attitudes towards the language owing to lack of mastery and fluency. Interestingly, the arabization process has not enabled Modern Standard Arabic to maintain prolonged domination. Indeed, Moroccan education system has for long been an arena of language tensions, which seemingly brakes the wheel of reform (Marley, 2004, p. 28). For most specialists and experts the arabisation policy has failed to achieve the aspired educational objectives, and the educational system has experienced critical deterioration according to local and international reports. Recently, the decision of the “Conseil Supérieur pour l’Education, la Formation et la Recherche Scientifique” (Higher Council for Education, Training and Scientific Research) to readopt French as the language of instruction for scientific subjects has revealed the prestigious position French still enjoys in Morocco.

### **English in Moroccan Higher Education**

The spread of English as the international language and the language of science and research has induced the state to reflect on the status of English and its promotion through official documents including Ministerial notes and official speeches. This has given an apparent boost to English. Buckner, reported in Sadiqi’s (1991), also argues that “*the rather negative attitude toward French indirectly increases the popularity of (and hence the positive attitude toward) English, a language without any colonial connotations*” (p. 215). In fact, English has seized its international popularity to head towards the major roles in higher education.

The massive growth of English and the apparent change in the linguistic needs of Moroccan students for academic and professional opportunities is progressively leading to the spread of the English language. Sadiqi (2006) accounts for the spread of the learning and teaching of English in Morocco by referring to globalization, tourism and media, music (p. 3). Sadiqi argues that English has undergone a tremendous rise, which allowed its introduction in different areas of life such as economy and education becoming a veritable rival of French in the Moroccan schools and universities and putting French and Arabic at an evident disadvantage stake.

Moroccan complex language landscape and the dispersion of English in the education system has enticed abundant analyses and explanations. In her (date?) study, Buckner asserts that English experiences a vast and fast growth in Morocco (p.213). She refers to a variety of indicators which promote the position of English in Morocco such as people’s positive attitudes towards it in relation to comparatively foreign languages, notably French and Spanish, which are icons of colonial ordeal through public’s lens. Buckner’s research findings reveal that Moroccans commonly believe that English is the language of future opportunities. Since Morocco is seeking to reform its education system and empower the quality of training, its youth value the learning of English and consider it a highly useful tool to have access to the advanced world, where English is the exclusive means of communication.

Buckner quotes Sadiqi (1991) and Ennaji (2005) affirming that despite the evident time lapse between the two studies Moroccans welcome the use of English in diverse areas of public life because they believe it would have a positive impact on their educational and professional careers (p.217 & p. 218). English is thus viewed as a prestigious language in people's perception due to its reportedly positive impact on graduates, who seek better educational and employment opportunities. Certainly, the spread of English has enriched Morocco's complex linguistic landscape. Buckner's (date?) survey reports that "*eight out of ten Moroccans believe that all Moroccans should learn English*" (p. 240). Her findings significantly account for the booming English learning and teaching and denote that English language would take the lead in few-years time.

In regards to higher education in particular, Buckner's (date?) survey has proved that more and more students are majoring in English studies at the university across Morocco. This intriguing finding enticed the British researcher to seek the real factors underlying this paradigm shift in language education from the students' perspectives. The data analysis revealed that students commonly think of "*English as a key to social mobility that allows them to bypass the constrictive influence and the colonial legacy of French*" (p. 241). Indeed, the author cites other factors, such as employment and immigration, which urge Moroccan students to opt for studying English in higher education. Yet, she significantly spotlights the utility of English in itself in comparison to French, which does apparently no longer sufficiently appeal to people's interest anymore.

The progressive increase of English instruction in the Moroccan higher education reveals that a change is underway in the Moroccan educational policy. It also indicates that language tangle in Morocco is unceasing. Zouhir (2013) addresses Moroccan language policy and approached different aspects of the English boom in Morocco. The author reports that English is being increasingly used in business, which led to economic investment and globalised markets; a situation precipitated by the permeation of English into this Arab Muslim country; not to mention that employment opportunities are more and more requiring graduates' mastery of the English language. Hence, more and more institutions are opening up on English and seeking to provide English-based instruction for students seeking outstanding careers (p. 44). Evidently, Zouhir's study implies that the pragmatic instrumental motivation swells the promotion of English in higher education.

### **Methodology**

The present study is exploratory and adopts primarily a quantitative approach for data collection. The hypothesis underlying the study predicts that the perceptible growth of English in the Moroccan education would reshuffle positions and functions of the main languages used for instruction. The study addresses the complexity and aftermaths of language diversification in the Moroccan education system in general and higher education in particular. Its objective is to assess people's opinions about language diversity and how the advent of English would affect power balance and language policy in higher education.

University teachers of science, technology, and economics in addition to graduate and postgraduate students of the same majors constitute the target population for the present study. Their views will provide insightful findings about the issue under study. Research should

primarily yield informative data which account for the problem in question and inform future action plans (Badaoui, 2012, p: 33 & 29). Hence, surveying teachers and students' opinions would help readers to take a closer look at the situation and understand the participants' views on their academic and professional pathways. University is the essence of the study and, in effect, teachers and students are greatly concerned by the language policy issues.

To collect teachers and students' views, the study uses the questionnaire for it is a versatile and relevant instrument to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. It also offers the possibility to reach a large sample through the use of the internet and the research software form for using questionnaires. This research has used Google Docs to form survey sheets which are shared through social media with both teachers and students from the faculties of Sciences in Fez and Kénitra mainly. Data is automatically collected through Google Drive and responses are presented through Excel and Word Office programmes. The ultimate aim is to check people's opinions about the language issue and have their impression about its impact on language diversity and their academic and professional lives.

The questionnaire starts with eliciting participants' background information such as gender, major, position, institute, etc. Then, it moves to core questions which constitute the major inquiries driving this research endeavour. Basic questions intend essentially to elicit the informants' scale evaluations of the language policies in higher education their own perspectives. Multiple choice questions offer participants with a range of options which designate and assess the efficiency and success of higher educational language policies. Some questions elicit additional explanatory statements through which participants account for their particular choices. Worthy of note is that all questions and choices are bilingually phrased in English and French to attain larger participation in the survey as assumedly not all participants can understand and respond in English.

The study surveyed forty five Master students and fifteen university professors from the Faculty of Sciences - Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University in Fez and the National School for Applied Sciences - Ibno Tofail University in Kénitra. Teachers and students have responded to the online questionnaire and expressed their views towards the issues raised. The table below illustrates the population sample. A discernible, but plausible imbalance between male and female and teachers and students participation can be attributed to a variety of factors such as willingness to participate, real numbers in these majors, presence and use of social media, etc. The table below sums up the figures.

### **Results: Moroccan Language Policy**

The issue of language policy is raised in question six in the survey, which seeks to determine the participants' evaluation of the state's general language policy. The question intends to illicit the students and teachers' opinions about languages the state enforces or inclines to favor over others in different sectors of public life including the administration, the media, business, education, and the like. Responses are overwhelmingly negative vis-à-vis this particular point as numbers starkly reveal the participants' discontent and disagreement with the state's language policy. Interestingly, only 10% maintain that these policies are "*well planned*" and 5% "*had no idea*" about how functional and useful official language policy is. However, 40% have reported that

these policies are “*random*”, while the largest majority adopted a fairly negative stance and held that language policy is generally not well planned.

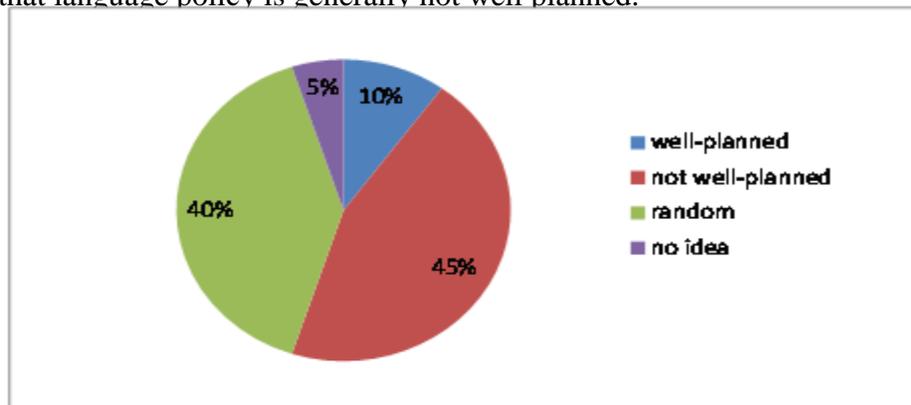


Figure 1. Participants' view of educational language policies

As Moroccan education system constitutes the essence of this research, participants were asked to evaluate the educational language policy and language use in their universities and colleges in particular and in Moroccan higher education in general. More than two-thirds judged the language policy adopted as “*unsuccessful*” and one fifth reported that it is *very “unsuccessful*”. The hypothesis underlying the study which assumes that Moroccan students and teachers may not be totally satisfied with language planning in Moroccan education reveals to be true and disclose a deep gap between the official policies and the participants' dispositions. A starkly insignificant number of the informants maintain that language in higher education is “*successful*”. The majority claims that it is “*very unsuccessful*”.

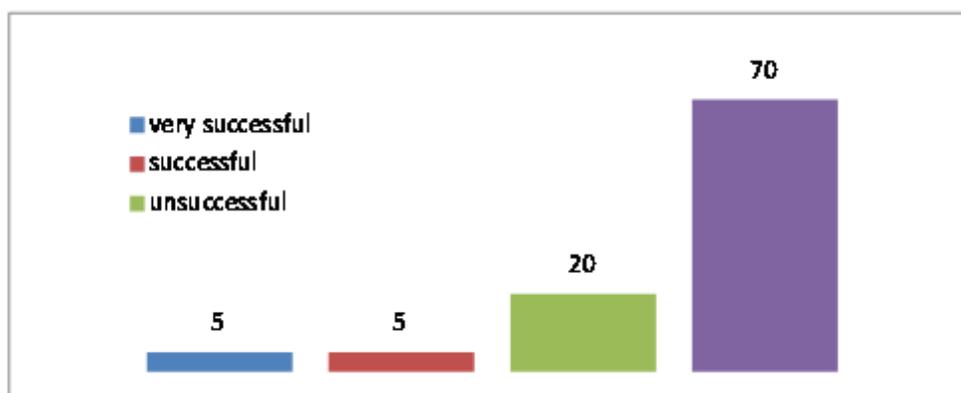


Figure 2. Language Policy in Higher Education

Explanatory reasons the participants provided to account for their choice concerning this question substantiate their profound disaccord with the current language use in public universities. Many participants showed displeasure with working policy; in this respect, a respondent maintained that the present language policy “*does not take into consideration the students' needs*” and that “*it has not been able to respond to the job market demands yet*”. This shows that the state's linguistic vision constrains the students' academic achievement. Other respondents criticized the language issue in education as being “*pointless*” and “*imprecise*” and maintained that language education in high schools is “*mediocre*”, “*inadequate*”, and “*not*

*appropriate*” to higher education’s language policy. In this respect, a participant affirmed that the French language is a hurdle for most university students because of their low proficiency lack of fluency of the language.

The study investigated the participants’ opinions about their preferred language of instruction for science and technology major in higher education in order to identify their inclinations and mainstream thoughts about this very central point. The results prove that English is a highly attractive choice for both teachers and students. Only 13% opted for French as a medium of instruction in higher education; while the majority (i.e. 79%) claimed that English is the best language for teaching and learning science and technology. The chart demonstrates that English largely took over all languages and turned out to be a highly attractive choice among students and academicians.

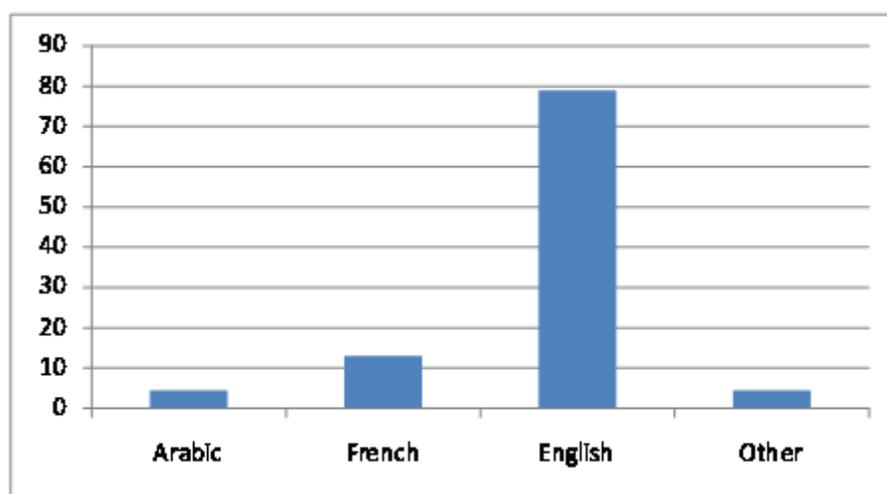


Figure 3. Participants’ preferred language of instruction

This prevailing trend supporting the use of English as a means of instruction instead of French and/or Arabic is unshakable and significant in visioning language roles in higher education. Responses to the following question back up the former uniformity about the value of English as they approve of its promotion in higher education. More than 78% reported that the promotion of English at the university is “*very necessary*”, while only one respondent considers it was “*unnecessary*”. Unquestionably then, public opinion gives validation for the English boom in Morocco and reinforces its increasing popularity in academia. This general tendency has not resulted in a vacuum, but has rather emanated from a firm belief that English has become a vital prerequisite for educational and professional success.

In this respect, the investigation of the participants’ views about the presumed impact of mastering English on one’s educational and social life has revealed that 88% believe that English will have a great promising impact in their careers. The overwhelming majority show positive attitudes vis-à-vis a possible adoption of English as a means of instruction or, to say the least, as a major language taught for mastery rather than mere basic communication skills. On the contrary, only 8% believe that proficiency in English would not be of significant use. Students believe that English has become a crucial requirement for employment and research and is an

added value to their personal and academic background. These figures substantiate and support the former findings disclosing unanimous recommendation of the use of English as means of academic instruction.

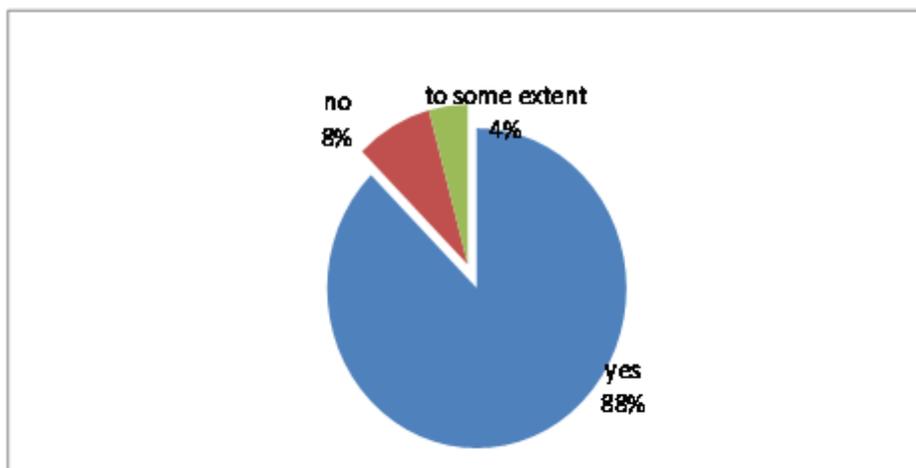


Figure 4.  
The positive impact of English on students

From quite a different front, this massive growth of the demand for the use of English in Morocco, and in Moroccan universities and higher education very specifically, would supposedly threaten the positions and roles of the conventional languages, namely Arabic and French. The survey also sought to reveal the participants' stands about this particular aspect. A large majority asserted that French and Arabic are *to some extent*, at stake given the relentless development and spread of English. The study revealed balanced positive and negative stances about the impact of English on the other languages. Apparently, the increasing use of English in technical, scientific, and economics majors in higher education evidently threaten the other languages in use.

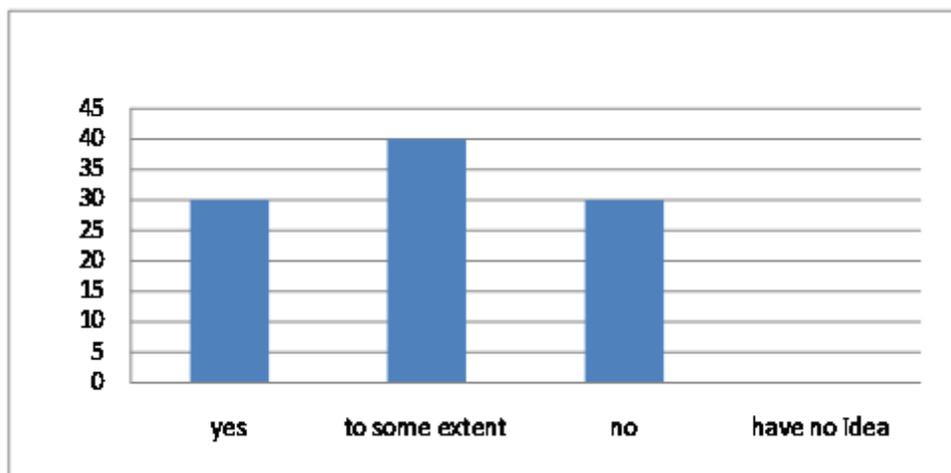


Figure 5. Perceived impact of English on other languages

Respondents tried to account for their views on the possible impact, which is negative overall, of promoting English in the Moroccan higher education. Hence, they maintained that the other languages “*will not be used a lot and their roles will be undermined*” one respondent reports. Another respondent claimed that English growth “*would influence the position of French since it will take over its status as the first foreign language in the country instead of French. For Arabic it makes no difference in case English or French is prioritized*”. Respondents unanimously stated that English will certainly have an adverse effect on the languages in use, which is deserves consideration and attention.

Nonetheless, the thorny question whether French or English ought to be the first foreign language in academic instruction seems to trace its way to end in the light of the unanimous agreement about the utility of English nowadays. In this respect, one respondent argued that “*English is needed. There is nothing to argue for in this point, but ignoring French and Arabic could lead to some linguistic problems*”. The results have clearly shown that language policy in the Moroccan higher education is somehow vague and volatile, for language roles seem to overlap or change according to time and context. Following question elucidates this negative outlook inasmuch as a large fraction of respondents holds that the future language policy is unclear. Significantly, a smaller portion equally disagreed with whether language diversity will persist longer.

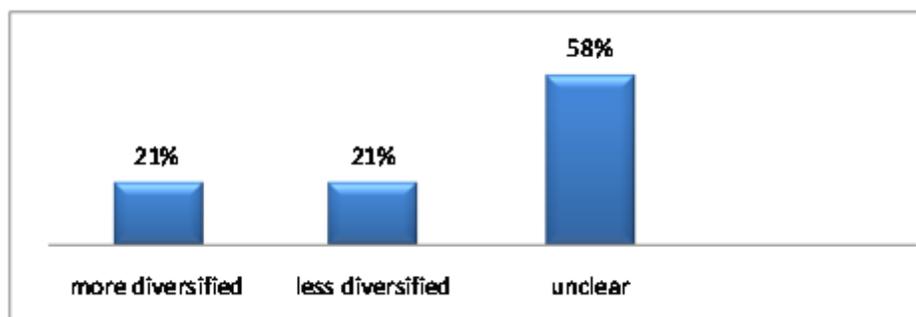


Figure 6. Participants' view of the linguistic future

These results show an elusive portrayal of the state of languages in the Moroccan higher education and show that the university population is unaware of the real tendencies of the higher educational policy of the kingdom. The mainstream tendency reveals an evident uncertainty about the future state of the art in the Moroccan higher education. The responses reflect an overall pessimism regarding a potential efficient policy that starts from the students' short, medium, and long term objectives.

## Discussion

The present study revealed that most of the university students and teachers involved in the study believe that language policy in higher education is unwise and generally irrational and random. In this respect, Lahlou (2009) maintained that the Moroccan education system and university lack a *clear identity* (p. 4). Subsequent unclear short-sighted educational language policies have put the future of the nation and its citizens at stake. The participants in the survey

have expressed their absolute dissatisfaction with the instable pointless language policy, which they consider as random and unsuccessful in regards to their individual needs and aspirations. Language diversity appears to have negative implications on language planning inasmuch as it complicates the choice of a certain language as an exclusive medium of instruction, which takes into consideration the evolution of the global education and linguistic needs to integrate the global labour market. The overwhelming views endorse the promotion of English as a teaching medium for science and technology streams in higher education. The advent of English has fueled language competition in higher education in a larger context where each language encloses within itself myriad considerations of identity, culture, politics, economics, and power. The data revealed that the increasing growth of English in the Moroccan universities will certainly truncate other languages' roles and undermine their use not only in graduate instruction but also in undergraduate studies.

Obviously, English is expanding and gaining in popularity among university teachers and students. They do not only approve of adopting English but recommend making of it the language of teaching thanks to its perceived value in academic and professional life in today's global world. These results corroborate Elboubekri's (2013) opinion poll, which provide evidence to the claim that Moroccans tend to use different languages for different functions, but are inclined towards the acceptance of foreign languages in education particularly (p. 1933). Learners and educators consider English language a prime predicament for educational excellence. In this respect, one of the informants stated that « *pour les scientifiques, ils doivent nous enseigner les matières scientifiques en une seule langue depuis le secondaire. En plus la langue de la science est l'anglais et non le français* » meaning that science students should be taught via one language only from secondary school and that English, and not French, which is actually the language of science.

The inevitable power English has acquired seems to undermine the value of French and Arabic, which were the prime means of instruction in the Moroccan educational system for a decades. The novel changes generated in the outset of the new century indicate that English would enhance its status due to its increasing value in the forthcoming years, at the expense of French which has apparently become a less attractive choice according to the mainstream views in this study. Hence, rivalry over prime foreign language in Morocco seems to go tense in the light of the increasing use of English in instruction. Answering the intriguing question whether language diversity is a bliss or advantage seems to be beyond reach in the case of Moroccan higher education, where the field is open to competition and friction rather than to sensible strategic visions.

By and large, all the informants commonly foresee a confused and ambiguous future language policy in higher education. The survey has revealed that language is a big problematic issue in higher education. The participants' responses allude to the state's intervention for a better management of the situation and the maintenance of clear far-sighted policies in language education. Matters are further complicated with the advent of English and its prevalent endorsement by people and institutions. Participants believe, it is high time Moroccan educational authorities promoted English instruction in lieu of French in technical and scientific streams in order to improve access to job market and effectively pursue scientific research.

## Conclusions

The study aimed at identifying the parameters underlying language use and the implications of the current and prospective language situation in the Moroccan higher education. The main objective was to find out about the university students and teachers' opinions about the Moroccan language policy in the education sector in general and the university in particular. The study also addressed issues related to the language of instruction in science and technology institutions. The data analysis and interpretation revealed that the participants were overall not satisfied with the state's policies and planning of language education. Most of the informants maintained that English has a far-reaching effect on the students' careers, which are tightly associated with the evolving globalised education and job markets. The reported status interestingly corroborates El Kirat's (2010) description of the implications of multilingualism in African countries, where she maintains that many of the nations "*consider multilingualism as an important cause of underdevelopment*" (p. 42). Apparently, the conflict of interests and objectives give way to linguistic dilemma for official decision making and further complicates the task of forging definitive policies.

The students and professionals' opinions have validated the hypothesis underlying the present study, which assumes that (restate the hypothesis!). All the participants in the study took a stand against the current pointless language policies and called for a far-sighted language vision, which considers the students' academic and professional success the top priority. They all showed positive stands towards the growth of English in the Moroccan education and supported its promotion as the medium of instruction in scientific and technological streams in particular. All the informants confirmed Tomaštik's (2010) claims that English is nowadays the international language of business, information technologies and science and seemed to have a futurist vision for they argued that "*interest in English is on the rise [in Morocco]*" (p. 11). The participants' views confirmed the literature review which supports the adoption of English as the medium of instruction in the Moroccan university.

The study revealed that the language issue in higher education is undergoing a remarkable upheaval for diverse reasons, the main one being the incessant expansion of English. In effect, the positions and roles of other languages, notably French, which is the major medium of instruction of science and technology majors in higher education, are threatened, for as Zouhir (2013) argues, the English language is imposing itself as a strong language which is invading the space and reducing the domains of use of the French language in the education sector. Reportedly, the growth of a particular language does adversely impact the other languages in multilingual communities. Worthy of note is that students' evolving linguistic needs are at stake in the light of this language tangle, which brakes education reforms in the country. The survey gave compelling evidence for the claim that language is no more a negligible aspect in education; rather, it has turned out to be critically significant not only for individual students but for the entire society.

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