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Title of Project

Language Policies in Tunisian Higher Education:
Tutors' and Students' Language Use and Perceptions
Regarding the Status of English

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**TIRF Research Topics Investigated**

Language Planning & Policy English as a Medium of Instruction

Bio

Aicha Rahal obtained her doctoral degree from Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Hungary, and is a researcher in linguistics, celebrating 12 years of research (2014–2026). Her scholarly interests include language pedagogy, sociolinguistics, language policy, and psycholinguistics. She is the author of many research papers and of two forthcoming books on language acquisition, as well as the co-editor of the book *World Englishes and Language Assessment*. She was a former online teacher assistant with the U.S. Department of State and the University of Oregon. In addition, Aicha was the laureate of the Africa Award, Liverpool 2019.

Final Report**1 Introduction****1.1 Motivation and Rationale for the Research**

This research investigated language policies issues in Tunisian higher education. According to Daoud (1996, 2001), admitting that Tunisian's language policies are arbitrary and uniformed, and most are implemented following a top-down approach and they neglect the role and the needs of teachers, students, parents and linguists. Another issue is the mismatch between the real needs of stakeholders and the decisions of policymakers (Rahal 2024; Rahal, 2021). This dissertation, sought to highlight these concerns and underscore the importance of involving educational stakeholders in the development of language education policy (LEP) and in shaping meaningful reforms in higher education. Moreover, the literature on the language situation and language policy context in Tunisia remains relatively limited. Existing studies on language

attitudes suggest that many Tunisians, particularly university students, favor English as a more prominent language in higher education.

This dissertation provides a comprehensive picture of the current status of English in Tunisia by foregrounding the voices of tutors and students. It also identifies areas for further research on the promotion of English in higher education. Additionally, it offers tutors and students an opportunity to express their perspectives on enhancing the status of English and integrating it as the language of instruction in higher education. The research aimed to raise awareness of the current situation in Tunisia and highlight the initiatives proposed by tutors and students.

This research investigated the political and academic rationale behind the Tunisian Language Policy (LP) with the aim of identifying a balance between political considerations and linguistic. The findings make a significant contribution to language policy research. Specifically, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions by examining the role of linguists in LP development and considering how language experts might be more effectively involved in policy formulation. Additionally, this research may inform future reforms of the Tunisian higher education system.

1.2 Research Objectives and Research Questions

This research explored how Tunisian university students and tutors perceive the current status of English, including patterns of use, language preferences, and the motivations underlying its use. It also investigated their attitudes towards using English Medium Instruction (EMI) in higher education and the anticipated outcomes of implementing EMI. In light of these objectives, this dissertation addressed the following overarching research question: a central question: How do Tunisian university tutors and students perceive the current status of English, including its use, policy, and promotion? The following are specific sub-questions guided the study:

- 1) To what extent and in what contexts are Arabic, French, and English used in Tunisian higher education?
- 2) What are the functions of language switching?
- 3) What are norms that govern language choice and language switching?
- 4) What are the Tunisian university tutors' and students' perceptions of the frequency and preference for using English and the reasons for its use in higher education?
- 5) What are the Tunisian university tutors' and students' perceptions of the promotion of English and its use as a medium of instruction in higher education?
- 6) What regulations should the Tunisian government and the Ministry of Higher Education implement to promote the status of English, according to the informants?

2 Research Methodology

Table 1 below summarizes data collection methods employed in this study, including observations, questionnaires, interviews, and desk research.

Table 1

Summary of Research Design

Data Collection Methods	Informants/ Data	Data Validation Tools	Data Analysis Methods	Research Questions
Observations	50 observations including classrooms, corridors, libraries, and canteens.	- Member Checking	Qualitative content analysis of the observation charts using the Constant Comparative Method (CCM).	1) To what extent and in what contexts are Arabic, French, and English used in Tunisian higher education? 2) What are the functions of LS? 3) What are the norms that govern LC and LS?
Questionnaire	100 Tunisian university tutors, researchers, and students.	- Content Validity: Think-aloud protocol - Internal consistency: Cronbach's Alpha	-Closed-ended questions: Quantitative analysis. -Open-ended questions: Content analysis using the CCM.	4) What are the Tunisian university tutors' and students' perception of the frequency and preference for using English and the reasons for its use in higher education? 5) What are the Tunisian university tutors' and students' perceptions of the promotion of English and its use as a Medium of Instruction in higher education?
Interviews	10 Tunisian professors	- Expert judgment - Pilot interview - Member Checking	-Content analysis of the interviews using the CCM.	6) What regulations should the Tunisian government and the Ministry of Higher Education implement to promote the status of English, according to the informants?
Desk Research	Policy documents (educational laws, reports, speeches, etc.) and academic journals.	-Build-in a checking system: using a variety of sources, analyze, and compare them to find consistency	-Qualitative content analysis of LP documents using the CCM.	

3 Results

3.1 Language Practices in Tunisian Higher Education

Observations in informal settings revealed the use of several languages, including Arabic, French, English, Spanish, other languages. A notable degree of multilingual interaction was observed, with speakers drawing on multiple linguistic resources during communication. Language Choice (LC) and Language Switching (LS) in informal settings can be attributed to several factors, reflecting the speakers' multilingual repertoires and their individual preferences. In some interactions, speakers switched from one language to another to comply with their interlocutor's LC. However, in other interactions, speakers used different LCs. The interplay between Arabic and French in the speech of female speakers may serve for prestige purposes, as French is perceived as the language of modernity in Tunisia.

Classroom observations revealed considerable variation in language use. Some classrooms operated within a monolingual instructional framework, using a single language of instruction. In other classrooms, French is the primary medium of instruction, with Arabic and English serving as support languages. The results suggest that these three languages fulfill complementary functions within the classroom context: French is the language of instruction; Arabic is used to facilitate students' comprehension; and English is used to clarify key terms.

Several norms govern LC and alternation practices. The first norm involved the exclusive use of French as the medium of instruction, with tutors discouraging the use of other languages. The second norm was characterized by the exclusive use of English as the instructional language. A third norm involved shared preferred languages between tutors and students, with those languages adopted as the medium of classroom interaction. Observations in informal settings also revealed instances of conflicting norms, such as situations in which students refused to comply with the language choice established by a librarian.

3.2 Language Beliefs

The questionnaire results demonstrated that English is used in various domains, including education, work, research, and communication. In education, 55% of respondents agreed and 29% strongly agreed with the statement “I study English at university as a subject” (Reason b). These findings indicate that English is widely recognized as an academic subject within Tunisian higher education. Furthermore, a significant portion of the respondents acknowledged the importance of English for achieving high scores in proficiency exams such as TOEFL and IELTS, with 37% agreeing and 37% strongly agreeing.

Proficiency in English has become a requirement in the workplace. The ability to communicate effectively in English is often considered a prerequisite for employment. Therefore, the statement “I use English in my work” (Reason g) was rated high, with 29% agreeing and 39% strongly agreeing. Moreover, the results showed that English is a key requirement for job opportunities both in Tunisia and abroad, 43% of the questionnaire respondents strongly agreed, and 45% agreed with the statement: “I learn English to get a better job in Tunisia” (Reason d). Additionally, 31% agreed, and 55% strongly agreed with the statement “I learn English to get job opportunities abroad” (Reason e). Taken together, these findings suggest that English proficiency is viewed as a valuable form of linguistic capital that can enhance employability and career advancement in both national and international contexts.

Academic research also emerged as significant motivation for using English. The statements “I write my academic/scientific articles in English” (Reason h) and “I give presentations/lectures in English” (Reason i) received some of the highest levels of agreement. The respondents equally agreed: 50% agreement (34% strongly agreed and 22% agreed) with the first statement and 50% agreement (32% strongly agree and 24% agree) with the second statement. Besides education, work, and research, English was used for communication, mainly on social networks. Forty-four percent of the respondents agreed, and 33% of them strongly agreed with the statement “I use English in social networks” (Reason m). These results suggest that English functions as an important language of international and digital communication.

3.3 Promotion of the Status of English, Arabic, and French

The findings concerning languages of instruction revealed diverse perspectives among respondents. Ninety-two percent of the questionnaire respondents agreed that courses should be taught in English rather than French. Additionally, 61% and 52% disagreed with the statements “University courses and exams should be conducted in Arabic” (Promotion of Eng. vs. Arb. and

Fr. a), “French should remain the language for instruction of university courses and exams” (Promotion of Eng. vs. Arb. and Fr. b), respectively. These findings suggest that the majority support the implementation of EMI in higher education.

The results of the open-ended questions and the interviews identified several practical strategies to enhance the status of English. These include creating university clubs, organizing training sessions for both tutors and students, and increasing English teaching hours in the curricula. Notably, these strategies are short-term solutions, indicating that the questionnaire respondents and the interviewed professors were aware of the situation of the country, which may impede radical changes and the implementation of EMI. The suggested strategies also highlight the necessity of involving local stakeholders in developing the status of English at the institutional level (Rahal, 2024).

In addition, the informants emphasized the role of central actors, particularly the Ministry of Higher Education (MHE), in expanding English instruction and supporting the implementation of EMI. The respondents overwhelmingly acknowledged that EMI could facilitate communication with individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, promote interaction with the international community of researchers and educators, and enhance international mobility (Macaro, 2015).

3.4 The Use of English as a Medium of Instruction

The questionnaire and interview results revealed positive attitudes towards the use of EMI in HE. The questionnaire respondents and the interviewed professors argued that the use of EMI can improve the English proficiency of both tutors and students, thereby enhancing better career prospects and advancing academic research.

Although positive attitudes towards implementing EMI in HE were identified, the questionnaire respondents and the interviewed professors also noted several challenges, which can be classified into micro-level and macro-level issues. The micro-level issues included limited English proficiency among both tutors and students, as well as a lack of teaching resources. The macro-level issues pertained to LP concerns, such as the discrepancy between top-down decisions and bottom-up needs and the absence of clear plans and strategies to enhance the status of English.

3.5 Regulations

The findings from the open-ended questionnaire responses and interviews highlighted both the absence of a coherent language policy discourse and the lack, or perceived inadequacy, of existing language policies. Additionally, the interviewed professors argued that the government and the MHE should develop clear strategies and plans to promote the status of all languages, particularly English. Therefore, language policies should be adapted to reflect ongoing changes in the higher education context, including the policies practiced in classrooms.

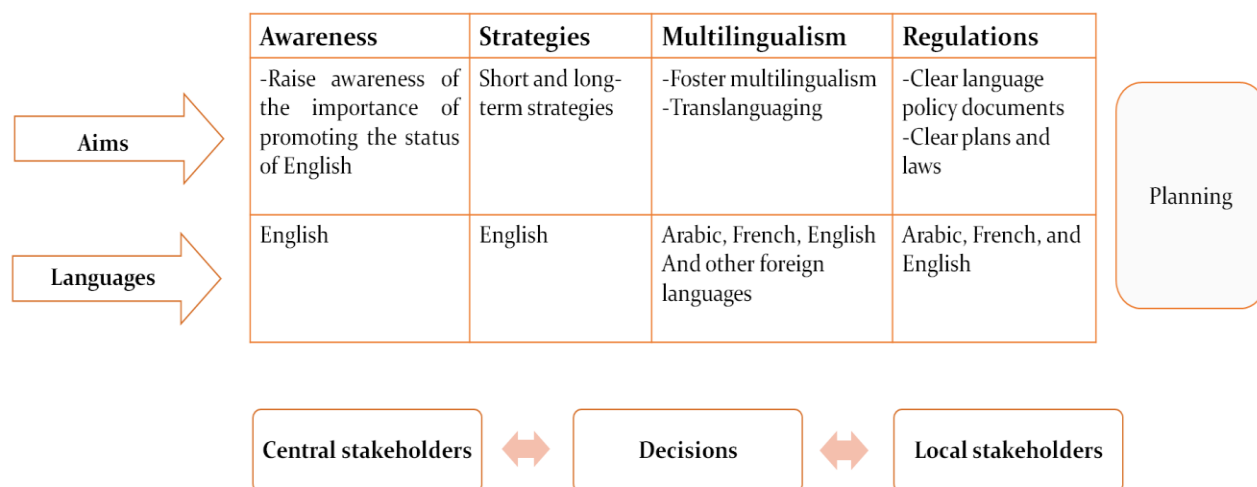
This discrepancy between regulations and the practiced language policy highlighted the need for new educational laws that address local needs. The *Educational Law of 2008* strongly

recommends the consolidation of Arabic and the mastery of “foreign languages,” which remain unnamed. Future reforms should clarify the status and functions of different languages within higher education, specify the languages of instruction, and establish practical mechanisms for enhancing their use and development.

Based on the results obtained from the four studies, the following model (Figure 1) was developed to reach a compromise between top-down decisions and bottom-up needs.

Figure 1

Provisional Holistic Model for Language Policy (Author’s own Figure)



The suggested model calls for an adaptive language policy that acknowledges the voices of all stakeholders and involves them in LP creation and implementation. First, language planning should be a continuous process that incorporates both top-down and bottom-up approaches to address the needs and demands of the local context. Second, regulations should be issued based on the practiced language policy and the perceptions of local people. It is also essential for the MHE and the Tunisian government to effectively translate the needs of local agents into regulations.

Moreover, the proposed model calls for fostering multilingualism. Tutors should consider multilingual practices and adopt new pedagogical methods that actively support and promote multilingualism. Based on the findings, it is suggested that instructional goals in language education should be reviewed and adjusted to meet the needs of today’s multilingual learners.

4 Conclusion

This dissertation provided a theoretical overview of LP as a multidisciplinary field of research. It demonstrates that LP is not a unitary concept limited to language management and regulations;

rather, it includes practices and beliefs. Building on Spolsky's model (2004), the dissertation drew on Bonacina-Pugh's (2012) conceptualization of LP as "an interconnected process generated and negotiated through texts, discourses and practices" (p. 216). In doing so, the dissertation highlighted that "personal experiences [can be] viewed as part of the domain of language policy, since policies are generally created from the top-down, often to meet ideological or political agendas" (Shohamy, 2009, p. 185). Accordingly, this dissertation emphasized the importance of incorporating grassroots perspectives into language policy development and evaluation.

This dissertation also contributed to language policy scholarship by examining the relationship between top-down policy decisions and bottom-up stakeholder perspectives, as reflected in language policies, practices, and beliefs. The findings demonstrated a dynamic interaction among these three components by exploring their ongoing relationship. The suggested holistic model calls for opening a dialogue between all stakeholders and engaging them in decision-making.

Moreover, the findings demonstrated the importance of the use of EMI as an internationalization policy, emphasizing the need for improving the position of English for several reasons. Proficiency in English is thus essential for the international rankings of Tunisian universities, the recognition of Tunisian degrees abroad, and high indexation of Tunisian academic journals.

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