

English Language Education in Algeria as an Investment in Developing Human Capital

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Abstract: The rise of English as the lingua franca that is widely recognized and adopted as a means of communicating between people of different mother tongues, has brought changes as well as challenges for the language industry. Hence, learning the dominant language in the world has become a real investment in human capital. Moreover, economic studies have revealed that fluency in a dominant language is important to economic success and boosts economic efficiency. This study attempts also to shed light on the educational reforms adopted by our government, regarding the improvement of foreign languages education to explore the extent to which Algeria is ready to invest to develop language as human capital.

Keys words: English Learning, human capital development, lingua franca, educational reforms

JEL classification codes:

ملخص: يعد الانتشار الواسع للغة الانجليزية باعتبارها لغة التواصل العالمية بين مختلف الأفراد تحديا كبيرا للصناعة اللغوية. و عليه، فقد أصبح تعليم و تعلم هذه اللغة المهيمنة دوليا استثمارا حقيقيا و فعليا في رأس المال البشري. فقد أوضحت العديد من الدراسات الاقتصادية بأن التمكن من اللغة المهيمنة يعد عاملا مهما في تحقيق النجاح الاقتصادي و الدفع بالأداء الاقتصادي. و من هذا المنطلق ارتأينا أن نسلط الضوء على الإصلاحات التربوية التي اتخذتها حكومتنا في مجال اللغات الأجنبية و تحسين تدريسها للوقوف على مدى استعدادية الجزائر للاستثمار في تنمية اللغة باعتبارها رأس مال بشري.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تعلم الانجليزية، تنمية رأس المال البشري، الإصلاحات التربوية، اللغة السائدة.

تصنيف JEL: ... ،... ،... (وضع ترميزات التصنيف إجبارية)

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Introduction:

Human potential is increasingly becoming the main driving force in developing a country. As a result, all kinds of investment in intellectual, physical and spiritual aspects of human development have become so beneficial and crucial for society. Accordingly, Investment in education, culture, etc. is regarded as highly effective and conducive to a more rapid accumulation of human capital from an economic point of view.

Human capital refers to the stock of knowledge, habits, social and personality attributes leading to productive labour and producing economic value. As Baptiste (2001) states : *‘The term human capital refers to knowledge, attitudes and skills that are developed and valued primarily for their economically productive potential’¹*. The notion of humans as capital dates back to the eighteenth century when **Adam Smith** introduced this concept in his book « **Wealth of Nations** ». It is also worth mentioning that the American economist **Theodore Schultz** greatly contributed in the development of Human Capital Theory, asserting that the knowledge and skills people acquire are a product of deliberate investment that increases national output.

Human capital is affected, both implicitly and explicitly, by education which plays a major role in accumulating human capital and increasing economic growth. Thus, improving human capital in a country has to focus on education as a significant indicator and decisive factor of this capital accumulation and productivity. In this respect, it is asserted that :

« Dans la théorie du capital humain, l’éducation est considérée comme un investissement que l’individu effectue en vue de la constitution d’un capital productif. Cet apprentissage est coûteux, mais en retour, les connaissances acquises apportent à l’individu des gains dès lors qu’elles sont mises en œuvre dans le cadre d’activités professionnelles. »²

This quotation insists on the strong connection between human capital and education. As such, in the theory of human capital, education is regarded as an investment made by the individual in order to constitute productive capital. Such a learning is expensive, but the payoff is the acquired knowledge that would be very fruitful once it is put into professional practice.

Within this regard, our country has carried out a series of reforms and positive changes in the development of an effective teaching and learning methods in order to promote and enhance the level of its students and enable them to be more globally oriented. As a consequence, a special attention has been placed on the development of foreign language learning system believing that language knowledge, especially English, is very important and can have direct effect on productivity. And here, we may wonder if there is a relationship between language knowledge and productivity and how can language become an economic variable? Has our country really managed in developing more effective language learning?

1-Language as an economic variable:

From a purely economic perspective, language can be seen as an exchange-facilitating institution, just as important as other economic institutions. Thus, the recognition of language as an economic variable may be based on four simple ideas³ :

First, regarding the communication values of language, the economic stability of a society can be enhanced when its members can communicate with each other in one language. For example, most production and consumption activities involve teamwork and mutual exchange and require understanding the same written and verbal instructions in a common language. In contrast, communication in languages that not everyone understands tends to hinder mutual interaction and slow economic activity.

Second, there is a strong connection between language and cultural identity, which also influences people's decisions about the language they use for communication. This attitude is noticed because people in many societies have preferences for using their native language as they highly value it because it was received from their ancestors and defines their identity. In particular, some consumption goods, such as books, songs, and television programs, have an important linguistic component and reflect cultural identity.

Third, language contributes to human capital and can be developed in the same way as other productive skills. People can acquire or improve their language skills by studying languages in schools and universities, conversing with others, and so forth. Many people, especially those who belong to a linguistic minority, learn new languages because they want to expand their abilities to communicate and, by doing so, be more productive and earn higher wages. When deciding what languages to learn, people tend to choose a language that has the highest financial returns. Language learning, like other investments in human capital, has opportunity costs.

Becoming familiar with a new language takes time and resources that could have been devoted to other activities. In a given labour market, the interaction between supply and demand will determine the amount of language learning that takes place. Supply depends on the composition of workers' native tongues and second language skills. Demand is determined by the various production processes, the technology, and the languages of customers and producers.

Fourth, letting individuals pursue their own interests in acquiring language skills may not lead to an optimal outcome because the advantages of using a language depend on the number of other people who speak it. There is an externality in the use of languages that is not taken into account if people pursue only their self-interests. When language is viewed mainly as a tool of communication, the natural tendency is to converge toward the efficient outcome of using a single language. Some individuals may value their cultural identity as members of a group, as reflected in part by their native language, but may nevertheless decide to switch to the language that yields the highest economic value.

2--Language as human capital:

Globalization has involved drastic changes in the global economy. Many countries have extended their investment in various economic areas which have resulted in world integration. Such an integration has made communication among different people inevitable. Thus, the use of a commonly accepted and understood language has become necessary and attracted the attention of many scholars and economists. As a matter of fact, many reflections from an economic perspective have developed and emerged under the umbrella of 'Economics of language', viewing language as an object of choice.

Economics of language as a discipline dates back to the mid-sixties, when **Jacob Marchak** evoked a number of questions pointing out the normative branch of communication economics, namely:

'the search for communication systems best suited to a given goal; or more generally, best suited to a given scale of values ('utilities' is the economist term). It searches for a system that would maximize the average achieved value; it being understood that the average is weighted by the probabilities of the various contingencies.'⁴

Marchak tried to open the scope of discussion about the value of a given communication system and how it can fit for a given goal. Such a feature has made some languages known more than others and given them a special status in the past as in the present. Moreover, these languages are said to dominate for an undetermined length of time.

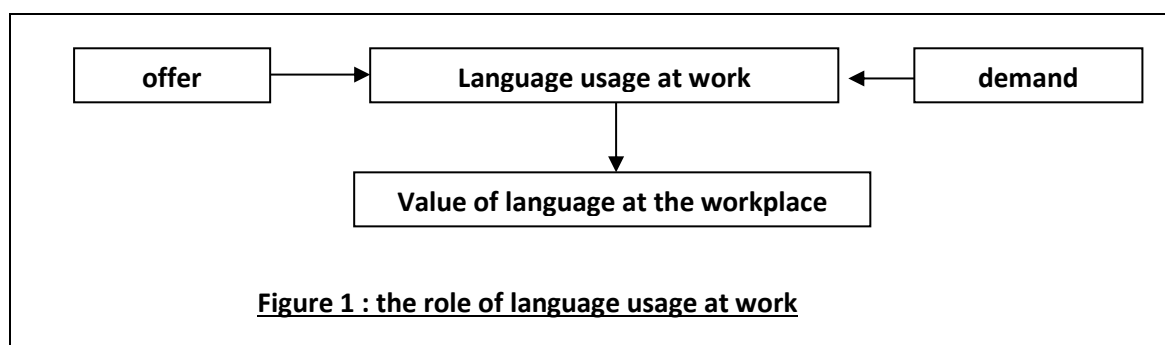
Economics of language stressed the existence of a close relationship between the explorations of language optimization and economics. Therefore, language which is considered as a viable tool in human economic activities, has economic characteristics such as : value, costs, utility and benefits. The contributions of economics of language can be represented in terms of four generations of studies⁵ :

- The first generation of studies tended to look at language as an ethnic attribute, viewing language knowledge as an important aspect of ethnic identity and membership. As such language knowledge may offer job opportunities through ethnic enclaves. A person is ascribed to a group that uses the same language. Such an ascription may (negatively or positively) affect that person's socio-economic status, particularly his earnings.
- The second generation of studies emphasized the human capital nature of language which opened the way to a different perspective on language. Particular language skills could therefore be perceived, similarly to other types of skills, as an area in which individuals and societies could profitably invest, as a source of economic advantage.
- The third generation of studies regarded the importance of the two dimensions jointly. Language is not merely seen as an aspect of identity or as a valuable type of skills. Instead, it is considered as a set of linguistic attributes which together impact socio-economic status.
- The fourth generation of studies attempted to investigate the relationship between language and economy, focusing on the role of economic variables as explanatory factors of linguistic variables. For example : the effect of prices or earnings on individual patterns of language use or on the dynamics of language.

Within this regard, economics can be an effective tool for evaluating the effect of language policies, mainly in terms of costs and benefits of different policy options. According to **Lazear** model of language as human capital⁶, individuals acquire a language only if the benefits outweigh the costs. Such benefits are measured by their ability to increase opportunities for trade and to what extent language knowledge can affect production and consumption.

Another economic aspect of language appears in regard to the second and foreign language acquisition in which language can also be treated as human capital, enabling an individual to acquire financial means and improve his living standard. In such cases the desire and motivation for knowledge accumulation (command of a second or foreign language) represents a pure linguistic stimulus.

The aim behind learning a different language is not to improve one's communication with neighbours, nor to get to know their cultural and historical backgrounds; it means that one is learning a second or foreign language primarily because this is an investment into his knowledge. For an individual, the knowledge of language is basically the accumulation of intellectual capital which, as an investment, brings him short-term profit (such as a better salary), and long-term profit – easier access to foreign markets, the knowledge of culture and mentality of a market contributing to a more sovereign and easier business making. The link between language and economy can be placed within the framework of offer and demand which focuses on the role of language at the workplace (see figure 1 below)⁷.



3-The importance of English language learning:

English is on the upswing internationally. It holds a special place in today's world as the universally accepted and unchallenged lingua franca that seduces a large number of non-natives. As a matter of fact, there are a number of reasons which make its learning very important such as :

- ◆ English is the most commonly spoken language in the world. One out of five people can speak or at least understand English.

- ◆ English is the language of science, aviation, computers, diplomacy, and tourism. Knowing English increases the chances of getting a good job in a multinational company within home country or of finding work abroad.

- ◆ English is the official language of 53 countries.

- ◆ English is spoken as a first language by around 400 million people around the world.

- ◆ English is the language of the media industry. Those who speak English, won't need to rely on translations and subtitles anymore to enjoy their favourite books, songs, films and TV shows.

- ◆ English is also the language of the Internet. Many websites are written in English. The knowledge of English enable us to understand them and to take part in forums and discussions. Moreover, English is ranked the first and most popular language online, representing 25% of worldwide internet users. China was ranked second with a 19.4 % share, due to the fact that it is the country with the most internet users worldwide. (see Appendix 1 below).

- ◆ Since English is spoken in so many different countries there are thousands of schools, colleges and universities around the world that offer programmes in English. Speaking English gives the students lots of opportunities to find an appropriate institution and course to suit their academic needs.

- ◆ By learning English, we will also learn about other cultures and explore new cultural possibilities which help us to broaden our view of the world and experience new and diverse locations.

English has undoubtedly become the most influential language due to its status as the language of the most powerful economies in the world. On an international level, it is the only language that grows and counts,

« Depuis le milieu du XIXe siècle, le rôle de l'anglais n'a fait que croître. Le déclin de l'empire britannique n'a pas entraîné le recul de la langue (cf. le sort du français), bien au contraire. L'anglais n'est pas une langue internationale, à l'instar de l'espagnol ou du russe, mais c'est une langue mondiale, en raison de la puissance économique et culturelle du monde anglo-saxon (États-Unis) et du rôle croissant des médias. »⁸

This states that since the middle of the nineteenth century, the role of English has done nothing but grow. The decline of the British Empire has not entailed a corresponding decline in the language (compare the fate of French) – quite the contrary. English is not an international language, in the same way as Spanish or Russian, but a world language, a consequence of the economic and cultural strength of the Anglo-Saxon world (The United States) and the increasing role of the media.

The idea that English is the only language worth considering internationally has motivated the choice of many language learners. Because of this, the numbers of English learners around the world has exponentially increased. It is estimated that over 1.5 billion people are studying English worldwide and this number is expected to reach 2 billion by the year 2020. (Appendix 2 below shows the number of learners of the most common studied languages in the world).

3- *English Education in Algeria and educational reforms:*

Since its independence in 1962, Algeria has adopted several educational reforms to meet the requirements of the changing globalized world and the knowledge economy. Regarding the languages learning, the situation was so complex and the decisions were influenced by a set of cultural, historical and political factors.

The first phase of reforms witnessed the adoption of the Arabization policy whose aim was to establish arabic culture and identity and eradicate all the traces of the French existence, especially the language which was a terrible remainder of 132 years of colonization. In this respect,

«L'arabisation est devenue synonyme de ressourcement, de retour à l'authenticité, de récupération des attributs de l'identité arabe qui ne peut se réaliser que par la restauration de l'arabe est une récupération de la dignité bafouée par les colonisateurs et condition élémentaire pour se réconcilier avec soi-même»⁹

Arabization is regarded as the process of healing back to the authenticity, retrieving the Arabic identity attributes that can only be achieved only through restoring the Arabic language, regaining the dignity denied by the colonizers, and an essential condition to reconcile with oneself.

To regain such identity attributes, hundreds of Arabic teachers were imported from the Middle East, namely, Egypt, Syria and Iraq. However, this number of teachers could never compare with the thousands of French and Algerian-French teachers who had been sent to secondary schools during the 1960's and 1970's. As a consequence, this policy was criticized because it ignored the population linguistic diversity and the lack of teachers.

The second phase of reforms (1976-1979) was the turning point in the Algerian educational system. Arabic was declared as the language of instruction of all subjects except sciences and medicine courses¹⁰. In that period, English was taught in the middle school at the age of 13 which is not beneficial for learners¹¹. The delay in learning English and the little exposure to this language make the student much influenced by their mother language or by French.

The year 1993 marked the beginning of the third phase when the possibility of introducing English in the primary school was examined. Such a process aimed to enhance the foreign languages teaching at an early age by giving the opportunity to primary school pupils to choose between French and English as a compulsory foreign language. The proposal was very important, however, the program was experienced only in some primary schools but stopped because the majority of parents preferred French to English.

The drastic changes in the Algerian educational system came by the mid of the year 2002. The rapid change in the global economy and social market has made it necessary for Algeria to keep pace with the developed and developing countries, and this could never be achieved without re-assessing the educational system. In the same context, prior to his election as Head of State in April 1999, candidate Abdelaziz Bouteflika often repeated in public the expression 'doomed schooling system'. He argued that:

« Le niveau a atteint un seuil intolérable, au point où le diplôme algérien qui était reconnu par la Sorbonne, Harvard et Oxford jusqu'au années 80, n'est plus accepté pas même par les universités maghrébines. Les étudiants tunisiens et marocains venaient en Algérie pour étudier la médecine et la pharmacie. Aujourd'hui, c'est l'inverse qui se produit. »¹²

He was claiming that the level has reached an intolerable threshold to the extent that the algerian diploma, that was recognized by universities such as Sorbonne, Harvard and Oxford till the 80's, is no more accepted even by Maghreb universities. Moreover, he added that Tunisian and Moroccan students came to Algeria to study medicine and pharmacy. Today, it is the reverse that occurs.

In fact, in 2000 the Algerian government came to admit that education 'failed', and according to many educationalists, the Arabic monolingual system implemented during the post-colonial period was the source of that failure. But the language that should be focused on at this time should be English which is the dominant language of the world and the global market.

As a matter of fact, English was introduced as a first foreign language after the 2000 reform due to its status as the language of science and technology used in lifelong learning nowadays. Thus, it came to displace French and create a new kind of linguistic conflict. As stated by Miliani (2000) ,

« In a situation where the French language has lost much of its ground in the sociocultural and educational environments of the country ; the introduction of English is being heralded as the magic solution to all possible ills- including economic, technological and education ones. »¹³

Algeria has made a step forward for the introduction of English as the first foreign language, but it still has to do a lot for the purpose of enhancing English language learning, setting the objectives of studying English as a 'foreign language' and overcoming the gaps that are observed in the English language curricula at the different levels including the secondary education:

« The English syllabus in secondary education in Algeria is narrowly defined and restricted to a collection of functions that are randomly selected...however, the major lack of harmony between the various official documents is over the degree of specificity of overall objectives : instructions in the English syllabus are not in harmony with those in new lines and pedagogical instruction. »¹⁴

The goal of the English course is not only to learn some rules of grammar and syntax, instead, the learners has to develop the necessary skills that enable them to have a general commend of 'Real-English' for use outside the classroom, in meetings, in communication with their friends who speak English and as a way to earn money, particularly in our globalized world where the scope of localization and freelancing is becoming greater and greater.

Conclusion:

- ❖ Education and English language learning should occupy an important place in developing human capital in modern world. Therefore, modern requirements and

criteria for teaching and improving the English language learning should be implemented.

- ❖ In order to guarantee a more efficient learning of English, more work is to be carried out in the creation of interactive learning tools and various forms of distance education, including the development of modules in different directions for organizing distance learning form of education, retraining and advanced training of teaching staff, creating multimedia educational products and supplements to textbooks and teaching manuals, developing a national effective system of English language assessment.
- ❖ Developing human capital requires considerable investments from both the individual and the country. Investment in human capital includes the cost of education, study of English language in particular and foreign languages in general, the accumulation of professional experience and knowledge about the labour market in the process of job seeking.
- ❖ The methodological principle of return on investment in human capital means that investment in it should be cost-effective, that is, the accumulated human capital is expected to bear the investment returns. The international experience shows that investment in human capital, particularly in education, from early childhood to adulthood, contribute substantial returns to the economy and society and to economic growth.
- ❖ It should be emphasized that the English language is becoming a universal platform which helps to simulate a global community and supports the model of free exchange of information among people from different language communities. Without the knowledge of this language, it is virtually impossible to stimulate professional growth, which is certainly reflected in the development of human capital of a country. In the modern world, the English language is positioned as a tool for successful integration of countries into the world community.
- ❖ It is undeniable that our country has achieved important gains in its educational policy, but the hardest work is yet to come. Nevertheless, teaching English in our educational institutions needs deeper planning at all levels of education for the challenges facing such education are many, like : « *how to support the development of teacher identity, how to bridge the gap between theory and practice, how to find the balance between subject studies, how to contribute to a higher status of teachers and how to prepare teachers for the needs of the 21st century.* »¹⁵

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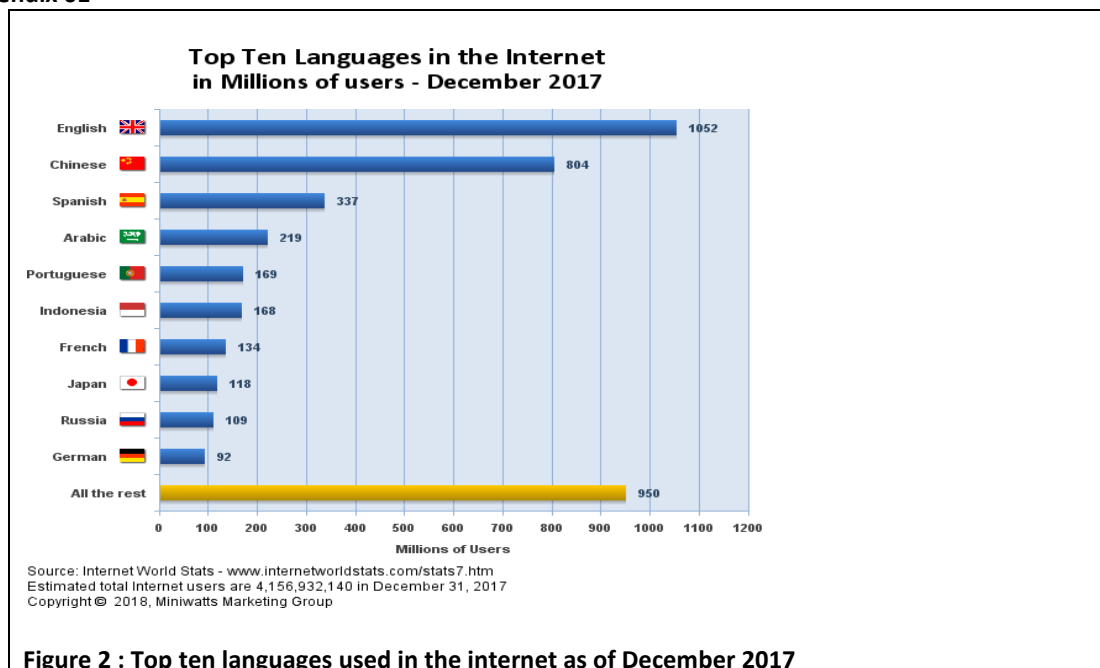
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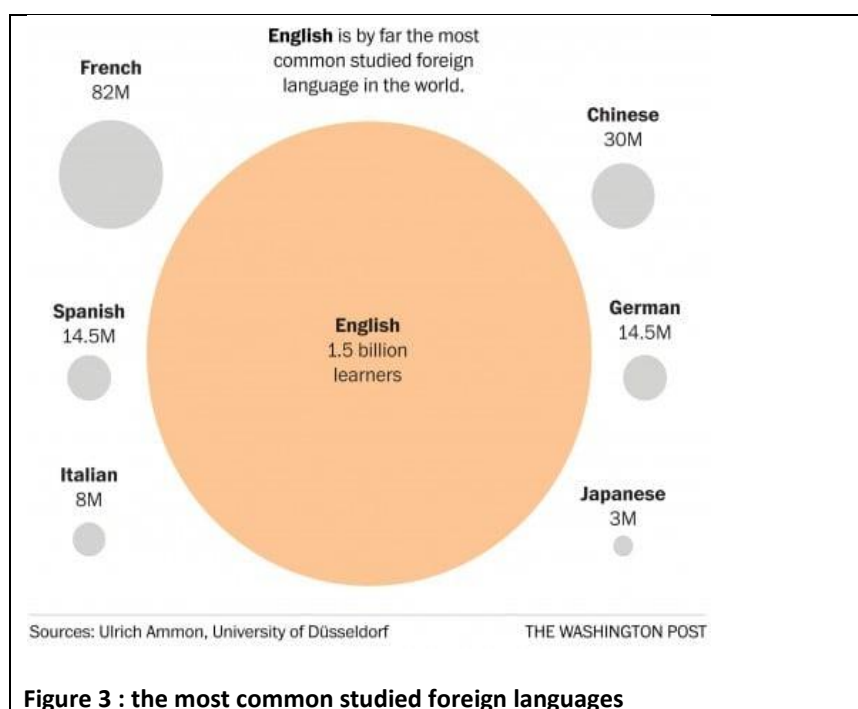
Appendices:

Appendix 01



Source: Internet World Stats

Appendix 02



Source: Ulrich Ammon, University of Dusseldorf