The Tifinagh Script in Teaching the Amazigh Language in Moroccan Primary Schools: Teachers' Perceptions and Policy Realities

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to analyze the opinions of the Amazigh language teachers concerning the appropriateness of using the Tifinagh, Arabic, or Latin scripts for the language's writing and instruction, as well as their accordance with official policy orientations. There exists a conflict between the proposed linguistic planning with regard to Amazigh language policy and planning and its realization on the ground. The study used both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The results show that there is a considerable tendency for adopting the Tifinagh script. 85.4% of respondents considered it the most suitable choice for advancing the Tamazight language teaching and learning.

Key words: Amazigh Language; Tifinagh; Language Policy and Planning; Primary Education.

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Introduction

The situation with the language planning and policy in post-colonial North Africa is far from being ideal. It is particularly evident in Morocco, where Tamazight has seen both its restrictions and its renaissance. The latter began in February 2003 when the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) adopted the Tifinagh writing system for the Tamazight language (Boukous, 2014). Later, thanks to the new constitution of 2011, Tamazight became an official language of Morocco, alongside Arabic. The situation with the Amazigh language and its orthography is complicated, despite the official recognition, because the successful implementation of the language in education still depends on many factors.

First of all, the problem lies in the choice itself of the writing system, which has been controversial for a long time in the Amazigh public. Before the official adoption of the Tifinagh, there were three options: to use the Arabic script (due to its sacredness), the Latin one (due to its simplicity and international popularity), and the Tifinagh (due to its authenticity) (Ennaji, 2009; Sadiqi, 2014). Even though most scholars have agreed that the adoption of the Tifinagh is necessary to ensure the language's prosperity (Boukous, 2014; Marley, 2005), there are still some critics who believe that it might be challenging for children to learn.

Indeed, children have to learn three writing systems in the primary school. These include Arabic, Latin, and Tifinagh. However, the discussion of the choice between them is usually held mainly at the theoretical level. There is not enough research on how exactly the use of the Tifinagh writing system works in primary schools and whether it is beneficial for children in the long term.

The current paper aims to contribute to the discussion by identifying whether the Moroccan educational system, primary school teachers, in particular, are ready for the implementation of the Tifinagh in favor of the Latin and Arabic ones. I believe it is essential to investigate this issue since teachers are the link between policy and practice. They have to base their teaching on official documents (such as the White Book) and consider students' interests. At the same time, it is not clear how exactly the teachers perceive the new language policy.

Therefore, the current study will address the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of primary school teachers concerning the suitability of the Tifinagh script for the introduction in the first stages of education compared to the Latin and Arabic ones?

2. How do these perceptions relate to the official policy documents and the expectations held by teachers towards the newly adopted language?

The research questions will be investigated to identify the practical application of language planning and policy in Moroccan primary education. The investigation of teachers' perceptions will allow me to analyze the suitability of using the Tifinagh writing system for teaching Tamazight to young learners. Finally, the findings will provide implications for further research and recommendations for the target population.

Literature Review

1. Language Planning Theory and the Symbolism of Script Choice

Language planning is traditionally split into status planning (allocating functions to a language) and corpus planning (normative decisions on graphization, codification, and

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vocabulary expansion) (Fishman, 1974; Kloss, 1969). The debate around script choice is rarely a technical or linguistic exercise when dealing with unwritten or newly standardized languages. It becomes highly political and ideological (Coulmas, 2003).

The Moroccan government's debate over the graphization of Tamazight prior to 2003 consisted of three options, each with a heavy ideological charge. These include the following:

- The Arabic Script, favored by conservative and nationalist groups who stressed Islam and national unity and who saw a common script as an integration into the Moroccan linguistic environment.

- The Latin Script, supported by linguists, secular minds, and early Amazigh activists. They argued that Latin offered immediate global recognition and computational flexibility and was already familiar to pupils through their French lessons.

- The Tifinagh Script, promoted by Amazigh cultural movement leaders, who claimed that the script is an authentic Amazigh writing from antiquity and one that would preserve Tamazight's historical autonomy.

As Sadiqi (2014) observes, language planners were asked to consider a number of ideological options. Choosing either the Arabic or Latin scripts meant increased politicization and marginalization of stakeholders. Script choice became the ultimate test of political compromise and of pedagogical practicality.

2. Institutionalization: IRCAM, Policy Realities, and Corpus Standardization

The choice of script came in February 2003, when the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) officially chose Tifinagh as the script for the teaching of Tamazight in Morocco[1]. This choice was adopted by Royal Decision (Dahir) and established Tifinagh as the sole script for Tamazight literacy in Morocco's public schools.

Scholars have discussed the implications of this decision from various angles. Boukous (2014) argues that the official codification of the Tifinagh marks a milestone in Tamazight's revitalization. By establishing a common written script, Tamazight moved from being an oral medium into a domain involving expanded communicative reach. Boukous (2014, p. 11) notes that this marked Tamazight's attempt to "modestly join the club of written languages," which boosted its symbolic weight in the national linguistic market (Bourdieu, 1991). Similarly, Ennaji (2009) highlights that unifying the Tifinagh script was an important step to standardization, enabling the production of common textbooks and curricula for the various dialects (Tarifit, Tamazight, and Tashelhit).

On the other hand, sociolinguistic critics argue that the choice to utilize the Tifinagh script prioritized political neutrality over pedagogical effectiveness. Marley (2005) observed that while Tifinagh served to enhance Amazigh identity and preserve Tamazight's autonomy, its adoption of a new script presented immediate logistical problems for teachers and students. Also, the initial strategic documents, such as the White Book, suggested the adoption of the Latin script for ease of adoption. In divergence with this, the IRCAM decree presented a clear conflict of purpose and practice at the beginning of Tamazight's institutionalization.

3. Pedagogical Realities: Multi-Script Literacy and Cognitive Challenge

While much scholarly attention is given to macro-level debates of state policy, micro-level research explores how these decisions affect children in primary schools. A key issue of North

[1] It is noteworthy that teaching the Amazigh language in Morocco started in 2003 with 807 teachers (Sadiqi, 2011; Idhssaine, 2022). During the school year 2023-2024, The number of these teachers rose to 1817. (El Boutakmanti, 2026)

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African language learning is the cognitive burden of multi-script learning. In Morocco's primary education system, young children must learn to read and write in three distinct scripts. These include Arabic (written right-to-left, cursive abjad), Latin (written left-to-right, alphabet used for French), and Tifinagh (written left-to-right, geometric alphabet).

Marley (2005) and Abouzaïd (2011) highlight the controversy in the academic field about the challenge of script choice on young children. On the one hand, some practitioners find it easier to teach the Tifinagh to young children because it is geometric in form, and the writing process resembles shapes (drawing). Others, however, argue that the addition of a third distinct script in their early years is overwhelming children and inhibits their fluency in Tamazight and the other subjects. Proponents for the Latin or Arabic scripts argue that building upon an existing orthography will reduce the time needed to achieve reading proficiency (Abouzaïd, 2011).

Coonan (2007) observes in research on Cape Verdean Creole (CVC) that top-down script choice that ignores the realities of the classroom or flexible orthographies often leads to enduring friction in implementation. In Morocco, teachers at the primary school level are the ultimate policy enactors, and their attitudes towards the Tifinagh script are key to achieving fluency in Tamazight.

Methodology

To examine the perceptions of primary school teachers towards the Tifinagh script and its use, a mixed-method research design was chosen that combined quantitative survey data and qualitative descriptive data.

1. Participants

The population was determined as primary school teachers of Amazigh language who taught Tamazight in public schools in Morocco. In order to gather a representative sample of the population, the teachers that were invited to participate in the research had to meet certain criteria. First, the teachers had an extended practical experience from teaching Tamazight to the primary school students. The sample included teachers of different fields of primary school education. Finally, the pool of participants included only those who were involved in the active implementation of the state Amazigh language educational policy.

2. Research Design

The data were collected using a survey as a tool for distributing the items and capturing the participants' responses. The quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis were used to address the research question. The survey consisted of two key questions:

- What script do the participants prefer when it comes to teaching Tamazight to primary school students?

- What rationale do the participants offer when choosing between the three developing options for Tamazight?

3. Analysis

The quantitative data obtained from the closed-ended question were analyzed using descriptive statistics in order to determine the frequency distribution of responses. As for the qualitative component, the responses to the open-ended question were analyzed using thematic analysis. The responses were divided into categories developed on the basis of recurring

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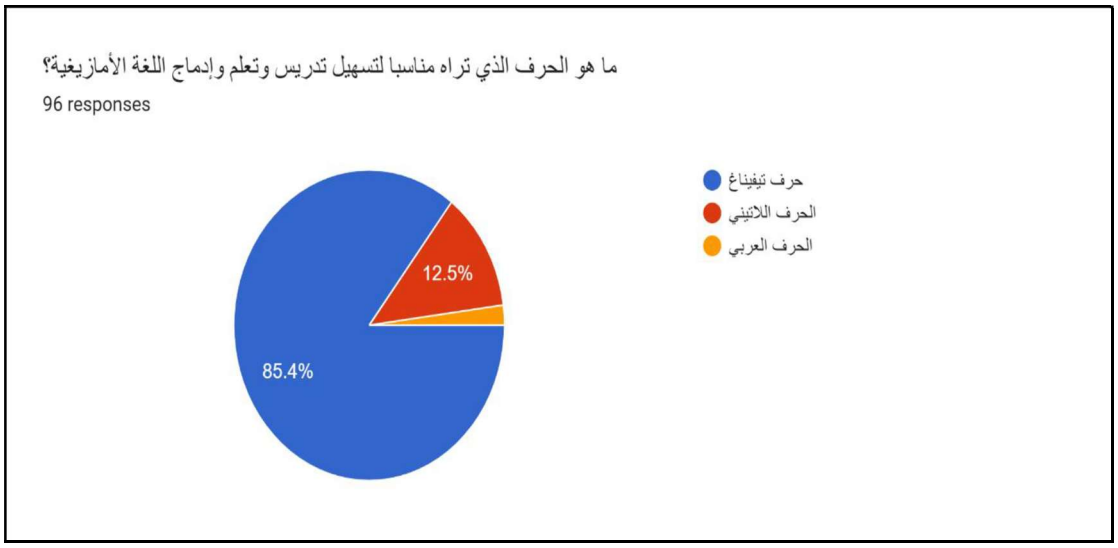
themes. The themes were defined by means of analyzing the respondents' answers, including the explanations provided in support of their views. Three main themes were identified: pupil familiarity with scripts, "cognitive burden / script overload," and perceived visual simplicity of the orthography. The findings were compared to the official reports on language policy, including the White Book and IRCAM recommendations, in order to establish the degree to which the observed tendencies correlated with the officially promoted language policy.

Findings and Discussion

1. Teachers' Perceptions: Script Preference in Tamazight Instruction

The obtained results indicate that respondents tend to use the Tifinagh script for teaching, learning, and introducing the Amazigh language in Moroccan primary schools. As can be seen from Fig. 1, 85.4% of participants consider it to be the most appropriate writing system for didactic purposes. Meanwhile, only 12.5% of respondents have expressed their approval of the Latin script and 2.1% of the Arabic script.

Fig.1. Teachers' preference regarding the optimal script for the Amazigh language teaching, learning, and integration



Source: Prepared by the author based on data from the study.

Despite the dominance of Tifinagh, the minority preference for the Latin script (12.5%) carries notable pedagogical justifications. Proponents of Latin argue that primary pupils are already exposed to the Latin alphabet through French language instruction in preschool and primary grades. They affirmed that this familiarity could lower cognitive barriers during Amazigh literacy acquisition. Introducing Tifinagh requires young learners to master three distinct orthographies simultaneously (Arabic, Latin, and Tifinagh), which several teachers reported as a potential challenge in early learning. This reflects the qualitative observations of Abouzaïd (2011), who noted a clear divide among educators: while some teachers view Tifinagh as an intuitive, almost "artistic" script that children enjoy drawing, others highlight the cognitive difficulty of multi-script literacy in early education.

2. Policy Realities and the Ideological Choice of Tifinagh

The survey results have revealed the relationships between the educational policies and their implementation at the micro level. While the initial documents, including the White Book,

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recommended the use of the Latin script to give Tamazight the status of a universal language, the practice has greatly varied in February 2003, when IRCAM decided to officially adopt Tifinagh to standardize and codify Tamazight.

The researchers argue that the decision can be explained by various reasons. First, Marley (2005) confirmed the need to preserve identity and maintain autonomy. Second, Sadiqi (2014) sees that there is an intention to reach a compromise between political parties and achieve credibility. Third, Ennaji (2009) and Boukous (2014) affirmed the necessity to standardize the language and give it a codified form. According to Boukous (2014, p. 11), the decision to use Tifinagh has helped in diversifying the language's communicative functions and domains, thus legitimizing its use in Morocco's Darija linguistic market.

3. Synthesis: Balancing Standardization with Classroom Realities

While Marley (2005) has expressed concerns about the possibility of a third option, the majority of the respondents have shown their support for the decision. In this regard, it can be concluded that the language planners have chosen the option that has gained greater credibility among the target audience. Indeed, the integration of Tifinagh has been legitimized by the majority of teachers, which has ensured its successful institutionalization throughout the past two decades.

However, unlike in Cape Verde, where the flexible approach to language planning has been used to address the needs of the Cape Verdean Creole speakers (Coonan, 2007), Morocco opted for the establishment of a top-down approach. Therefore, the authorities should pay more attention to the pedagogical strategies that can be used to introduce Tifinagh to children to simplify the three-script system and shift to a more inclusive approach to language learning in accordance with the ideas of the respondents and the existing research.

Conclusion

The present study attempted to analyze the opinions of the Amazigh language teachers concerning the appropriateness of using the Tifinagh, Arabic, or Latin scripts for the language's writing and instruction, as well as their accordance with official policy orientations. Overall, 85.4% of respondents who participated in the survey consider Tifinagh the most suitable script for teaching Tamazight compared to 12.5% of Latin and 2.1% of Arabic.

To begin with, the data illustrates that Tifinagh has been widely accepted among the Amazigh language teachers in Morocco. It has been recognized as an officially adopted method of writing Tamazight, which appears to resolve this orthographic conflict. Nevertheless, the qualitative analysis revealed that many interviewees perceive the Latin and Arabic scripts as easier to read and learn. Some participants mentioned that children can quickly learn to read Tifinagh because it resembles drawing.

However, there is a need for further action on the part of the authorities. The new language policy is an essential step towards the recognition and isolation of the Amazigh language. Still, the issue of multi-script literacy is urgent, and the problem is compounded by the fact that students have to learn all three scripts simultaneously. It is noteworthy that while some educators believe that Tifinagh is less complicated and is adopted by children quickly, others note that it may be challenging for young learners.

Therefore, the article recommends that the government take specific steps to support beginner readers and develop bridging strategies so that children can learn to read Tamazight

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using the Latin and Arabic scripts. In addition, the authorities should provide teachers with adequate pedagogical tools to build their expertise in teaching Tamazight. The initial success of the language policy reform and the official adoption of Tifinagh as the standard orthography are without a doubt significant. Yet, it is necessary to provide the teachers and students with the proper support infrastructure, which should be the focus of attention in the coming years.

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