English in Education and Academic Research in Tunisia: In Memory of the Late Professor Tahar Labassi

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Abstract

This paper discusses the status of English in the education system in Tunisia with a particular focus on the use of English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). It begins with a brief account of the history of teaching English in Tunisia as a country belonging to the Outer Circle of the Model of English as pioneered by Braj Kachru. Then, it comments on the status of English within the language landscape in the country and the contemporary dynamics of language policy in Tunisia. The discussion of the language landscape in Tunisia, the status of English in general, and its use for research purposes draw primarily on the intellectual work of late Professor Tahar Labassi (1956-2020). The paper also provides a road map for better language teaching in Tunisia as well as conditions for better visibility of Tunisian researchers as diagnosed and developed by Professor Labassi.

Keywords: *Language policy; Tunisia; English; French; Professor Labassi; ESP; ERPP*

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Introduction

Within the research arena, English enjoys an unparalleled and unrivaled position as the default language of science. It is "the premier vehicle for the communication of scholarship, research, and advanced postgraduate training" (Mauranen et al. 2010, p. 634). Such ubiquity of English raises questions about the possible "privilege" of Inner Circle scholars and the possible "disadvantage" of scholars from Kachru's (1985) "Expanding Circle of English" or the Outer Circle. Indeed, such demarcation needs a revisit since the recent literature has contested the accuracy of such demarcation. This demarcation seems less marked when it comes to the use of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP) (Hyland, 2019; 2016). This paper attempts to find a trade-off between these divergent perspectives with reference to late Professor Labassi's perception of the debate among scholars in the Tunisian context.

The debate about the status of English and languages in contact, in general, is not new as it dates back to the early days of independence. The language policy in Tunisia has always been shifting grounds. This seems to be triggered by the cultural and socio-linguistic development in the country as well as the top-down linguistic policy, which swings in favor of one language or the other (Abdeljaoued & Labassi, 2020; Battenberg, 1997). By and large, the linguistic policy in Tunisia is characterized by instability, lack of a clear vision, and 'fashionability'. In the 1970s and 1980s, English was taught at the secondary school level for four years. At the university level, training in the English language stops for most students except for those majoring in English. The 1980s witnessed a turning point change in the language situation. First, the language situation was marked by the escalating functional rivalry between English and French (Daoud, 2001). Second, it was also marked by a commitment to the promotion of science and technology and a growing interest in English as a necessary tool to access science and technology from original resources rather than relying on translation into

French (Battenberg, 1997; Daoud, 2001). This culminated in the introduction of ESP courses to all students after the passing of the controversial 1998 education reform (Labassi, 2009b; 2010). The late Professor Labassi (10 December 1956 - 26 January 2020) was involved in the debate about the status of English in general and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in particular.

Professor Tahar Labassi was a scholar of the highest integrity, a profoundly secular intellectual, and a perfect trilingual. He gained his reputation as a scholar through competence and character. His contributions to academic research in Tunisia are recognized, and his intellectual brilliance is evident. He will be missed in academia as a scholar who was at the forefront of serving the community. Labassi was also a speaker and writer who went far in defending his point of view, yet, who was tolerant of divergent opinions. Students will remember him as the teacher-advisor who encouraged critical reading and not just reporting and a mentor who was intolerant to violation of research rigor and ethics. My first encounter with Professor Labassi was at the Faculty of Manouba during a postgraduate course titled 'Text Linguistics' where he introduced us to Bakhtin, de Beaugrande, Swales, Dressler, and many others.

Education and Career

Professor Tahar Labassi was Jerbian and proud of it. He attended the primary school on the island before relocating to Beja to attend secondary school. After that, he studied at the University of Tunis where he obtained a bachelor's degree in English language and literature. In 1980, he started teaching English at secondary schools, and in 1991, he moved to Tunis on secondment to teach ESP at The Faculty of Sciences. In the meantime, Labassi pursued his postgraduate studies at the Manouba Faculty where he obtained a DEA (equivalent to an MA) in 1996 and a Ph.D. in Linguistics in 2002. His DEA thesis is a generic study of chemistry research articles' introductions and his

Ph.D. thesis is a generic and diachronic study of research article abstracts. He obtained a tenured position at the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences of Tunis, (FHSST).

Labassi was an abundant researcher and course designer. He designed course manuals to teach ESP and vocational English both in Tunisia and abroad. For example, in Tunisia, he designed teaching booklets for the Tunisian Ministry of Vocational Training and The Virtual University of Tunis. Abroad, he designed a course booklet for engineers at the behest of the Australian College in Kuwait. He also participated in and organized many conferences at home. Abroad, he was a plenary speaker in many international conferences in Spain, Malaysia, Kuwait, the USA Singapore, China, UK, and Brussels. At the professional level, Labassi helped create Tunisia TESOL, a hub for Tunisian English language teachers. Throughout his teaching career, Labassi was an avowed trade unionist. Erfani (2019) introduced him as the deputy general secretary of teachers' syndicate with a chair at the General Syndicate of University Teachers, an affiliate of the Tunisian General Labor Union (TGLU); for which he was a consultant before and after 2014. He was not only an abundant researcher but also a passionate server of the community. For example, he was a regular reviewer in many journals, including AJAL. Despite his ill health, he kept teaching, advising students, and taking part in vivas and conferences.

At the political level, Labassi had two short experiences. In 2011, Ahmed Ibrahim, the then minister of Higher Education (MoHE), appointed him as head of his cabinet during the short-lived Mohammed Ghanouchi government. During this short term, Labassi orchestrated the brave decision of shutting police stations in the Tunisian universities (Abdesslem, 2020). In 2018, desperate for a change in the political landscape, Labassi founded, with others, 'Mouatinoun Initiative' for which he ran at the legislative elections in 2019. At the administrative level, he was elected head of the English department and later deputy dean and dean of the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences of Tunis, Tunisia.

French and English: 'Butin de Guerre' and 'Unavoidable Tool'

Labassi's perception of Tunisia's linguistic scene is unique. It is perhaps influenced by the fact that he is a by-product of 'L'Etat de Independence'. In many areas, especially in education, the young state took up from where France had left off. Labassi, and his peers, who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, were taught by French expatriates. These teachers helped transpose the French model of teaching. The model was reputed in the country for its rigor and intolerance to mistakes. The Tunisian French-educated elite took over this policy. During this time, Labassi developed his mastery of French, which espouses articulation and refinement. Readings from Camus, Foucault, Said, Fanon and many others forged his personality and shaped his perception of justice, freedom, and the value of human life. When asked about his special relationship with the French language, Labassi often enjoyed quoting Kateb Yacine's famous epigram "le Français est notre butin de guerre" (French is our spoil of war). Since the early days of the protectorate in 1881, French has been a dominant language and the medium of instruction for most of the subjects at the secondary and tertiary levels. Although it seems waning, France's influence in Tunisia is deep-seated despite the litany of laws and decrees on Arabization. French is still "the privileged foreign language" (Jrad, 2004 in Labassi, 2009b, p. 14) and "the language of prestige" (Hawkins, 2008, p. 362).

Labassi's attitude towards the linguistic situation in Tunisia is also distinct. He perceived the language landscape in Tunisia through the lens of a trilingual. He was critical, both in his writings and in informal conversations, of the reductionist orthodoxy of English vs. French and the demonization of French and branding it as the 'language of the colonizer'. Such a narrative, he believed, does not render the reality of the linguistic situation in Tunisia, nor does it help in an informed understanding of the state of affairs. He often argued that French is not antithetical to English and that languages cannot be qualified as 'good' or 'evil'. Ipso facto, French is not a remnant of

colonialism, nor is English the flagship of neocolonialism (Abdeljaoued & Labassi, 2020). Of course, it may be hard to deny the global demand for English and its special status as the lingua franca of research and the currency for successful intercultural communication. Here, I am tempted to quote Burchfield (1985), who states:

> English has also become a lingua franca to the point that any literate, educated person on the face of the globe is in a very real sense deprived if he does not know English. Poverty, famine, and disease are instantly recognized as the cruelest and least excusable forms of deprivation. Linguistic deprivation is a less easily noticed condition, but one nevertheless of great significance. (cited in Swales, 1993, pp. 283-284).

Nevertheless, this 'special status' of English should not turn into a fracas that legitimates the suppression and the oppression of French, Arabic, or other languages. According to Labassi, it is not English *versus* French; rather, it should be English *and* French. He nicely caught this when he stated that "the prestige of French should remain undiminished, but policymakers have to respond to the urgent need to promote the teaching of English as the unavoidable tool to communicate with the rest of the world" (2009b, p 11). Hence, a much healthier attitude towards the linguistic landscape in the country would be to 'depoliticize' our perception of the languages in contact in Tunisia and think outside the confinements of ideologies.

One of his great worries was the populism of the Tunisian policymakers, before and after 2011; populism vis-a-vis the languages in contact in Tunisia, what education system to embrace, and how languages should be taught. A glaring example of this uninformed state policy is the 1998 education reform about teaching ESP at university and the teaching of English at the primary and early secondary education. These decisions were taken in the aftermath of Ben Ali's failed state visit to South Africa due to the language barrier (Battenberg, 1997). Despite its laudable aim, the decision was

ad hoc because the stakeholders intervening in the field were not consulted (Labassi, 2009a). Following the decree and starting from 1999, hundreds of English language graduates, who were trained to teach English for general use, were recruited to teach ESP at the Tunisian university (Labassi, 2010; Raddaoui, 2017). The results were uninstitutionalized practice with untrained teachers who were left to struggle with course design and lack of resources (Labassi, 2009b). Courses were a one-size-fits-all hodgepodge that failed to reflect the students' needs. For Labassi (2009a), the policy of teaching ESP in Tunisia is barren because it insured ESP courses with no apparent need for it while depriving those in urgent need for English such as researchers and postgraduate students from EAP courses for example. In La Presse (2016), Labassi denounced this policy. He states:

> When we discuss economics, we invite economists, when we talk about medicine we invite doctors. However, we don't feel the need to invite linguists when we talk about language. This is the first blunder. The language problem is as complicated, if not more complicated, than economics or medicine because it touches upon several sociological, psychological, and political aspects. (Author's translation from the original text in French)

In this article, Labassi calls upon language specialists, who are on a daily encounter with students, to have their say in the discussion about the education system since they are entitled to know what policy is suitable.

The debate on language policy

One of Labassi's outstanding studies is his 2010 comparison between teaching ESP in Tunisia and Brazil. The paper "Two ESP projects under the test of time: The case of Brazil and Tunisia" is a response to Holmes and Celani (2006) who tracked the successes and failures of the ESP project in Brazil in 25 years (1985-2005). Labassi

mapped the researchers' seven conditions of sustainability on teaching ESP in Tunisia. At that time, 2010, the ESP project in Tunisia failed almost all the conditions of sustainability. In his comparison of the two ESP projects, Labassi states that one of the problems of teaching English, in general, is the state policy that lacked vision. He concluded that we should break up with the unsustainability of the state educational policy if we wish to rectify our system. Now, ten years after the article was published and despite the changing of the regime[2], which bought favorable conditions for change, nothing has yet happened. However, one glimpse of hope is perhaps the growing ESP hubs and non-governmental ELT associations that have helped bring the scattered community of ELT professionals together.

ESP teachers still use 'imported' materials and commercial books, often, irrespective of students' needs and levels. In the words of Raddaoui (2017), "with no pre-service training or in-service teacher development programs in ESP, those instructors find themselves plunged in a 'homeless' job without any knowledge of the apposite teaching approaches and the subjects of the target students" (p. 2). Another failed condition is *Assistance to promote ESP campus prestige*. ESP teachers are still a 'shifting' and insecure community. They are still perceived, by the authorities, academia, and even by themselves, as 'less prestigious', alienated, and caught between two entities; they are not academics, nor are they secondary school teachers.

The second article, "On responsible uses of English: English for emancipation, correction, and academic purposes" (2008) shifts focus to what Labassi calls "the responsible uses of English". The paper argues that English has become one of the essential tools for a better future in Tunisia as a developing country. Labassi finds interesting additives and new domains of use for English. Examples of these include English for Solidarity Purposes (ESP), English for Correction Purposes (ECP), and

[2] I am using change of the regime rather than 'revolution' because Labassi had strong reservations against the use of the term 'revolution'. He thinks that what happened in Tunisia cannot be qualified as a revolution.

English for Emancipation Purposes (EEP). In the Arab-Francophone community, English can be used to reach out to a larger audience. Talking from personal experience, using English, Labassi gave his 'fights' against internal injustice a much louder noise and a far bigger magnitude. Of course, Labassi alluded to Tunisia when talking about the oppressive regimes. He used expressions such as "a North African" or "a Francophone country". The quote below showcases this:

> After the failed political, economic and linguistic policies of postcolonial regimes, particularly in some Francophone regions, English has become an instrument for an unavoidable confrontation with oppressive rulers. English is the language with which intellectuals speak to the world to communicate their anger, fears and hopes, as well as their attempts to participate in current academic, scientific and political debates. Some intellectuals in non-Anglophone regions of the world, such as North Africa, find it hard to defend the view that breaking the walls of intolerance has to go through the medium of English, given that this language is now considered by many, including some Critical Linguists in the West, an additional threat. (Labassi, 2008, p. 407)

Thus, English can serve noble causes and be a weapon of resistance when the local languages fail. The second role is the use of English for solidarity purposes. Before 2011, Tunisian trade unionists used English not only to interact with their fellow trade unionists abroad and gain their sympathies but also to harass and expose the oppressive regime in front of international organizations. The third role is the use of ECP. As an outspoken intellectual, Labassi believed that English is useful to repair the image of the Arabs, which is damaged by fundamentalism. As he states, English can promote a counter-stereotypical image of the Arabs. While it would take a long time to change the perception of the Arabs as 'fundamentalists', English can serve this end by giving informed public opinion a channel to advocate a brighter counter-image of

the Arabs. He takes this debate further and states that English can save future wars by promoting world peace.

Labassi's (2009a) article aimed at illuminating the complexities of academic publishing by addressing the low visibility of off-network scholars and advocating for their rights for equal treatment away from "the rhetoric of useless denunciation" (Labassi, 2009a, p. 248). This article started by addressing the issue of center-periphery demarcation. Living on the outskirts of the community, periphery scholars have problems of access to research articles and books. Funding and enabling research are still demarcating the center and the periphery. Another contributing factor to this demarcation is the poor management of the available resources which most universities on the periphery suffer from. Labassi stated how Tunisian universities got subscriptions to journals that no one reads, stored new computers that researchers are not allowed to use. Now, years after Labassi's calls to rationalize human and material resources, nothing has been done so far to improve the research environment. It is pertinent to acknowledge, in this gloomy situation, the long-awaited decree by the MoHE to allocate financial resources to encourage research. Yet, one major deficiency of the decree[3] is that it, strangely, excluded novice researchers and PhD students from these research incentives. The decree stipulates that only researchers who are recruited for tenured positions can have access to funding. It, thus, excludes those who are in dire need of such funding.

Labassi (2009a) stated that scholars from the Expanding circle of English, and Tunisian researchers in particular, fail to reach internationality because they cannot package their research in English. In the same article, Labassi, tried to find the root causes of what Canagarajah (1996) called "the one-way traffic in knowledge between center and periphery" (p. 459), where the periphery is just a consumer of knowledge

[3] The ministerial decree N° 1128 issued on December 5th, 2019.

or a producer of knowledge which is invisible. Facing such a debilitating condition, calls were voiced to give periphery and off-network scholars chances to publish regardless of the quality of their research. Labassi (2009a) had strong reservations against such suggestions. He rejected calls for positive discrimination and publication quotas for off-network scholars for three reasons. First, this would be "somewhat unrealistic and might be counterproductive" (p. 248). Second, blaming the Anglophone scientists or countries for non-anglophone scientists' difficulties misses the point and can only suppress the underpinnings of the real issues at the Expanding and Outer Circles of English. Claims of bias against non-Inner circle submissions proved to be unfounded and unsystematic (Abdeljaoued & Labassi, 2020; Salager-Meyer, 2008). Second, if applied, this policy would undermine the whole process of peer reviewing which ensures that only good research passes the gates. Third, it would be perceived as charity from editors and reviewers from Inner Circle towards scholars from the Expanding Circle. As Labassi states, language-exterior problems such as accessing computers and research articles are no longer burning issues; they are no longer as extreme as the cases reported in Canagarajah (1996). In addition, access to resources does not seem to be decisive in the core-periphery demarcation. Even the mastery of English does not seem to be so anymore. Already, research within the last decade has pointed to the fact that English is perhaps no longer the center-periphery demarcating factor (Abdeljaoued & Labassi, 2020, Hyland, 2016). Labassi offered a roadmap to mitigate the situation at the periphery. For Labassi, off-network scholars must stop lamenting over their conditions and focus on what needs to be done to break the debilitating isolation. One strategy in this vein is collaborating with scholars from the Inner Circle. This strategy boosts periphery scholars' self-confidence and helps solve the recent publication deficit, if any, by gaining access to generous authors' copies of published articles. The strategy can be fruitful in enhancing English language

proficiency by socializing with scholars from the core in seminars and research sojourns or sabbaticals.

In his paper, "English-only conferences: What did a non-native speaker expert note?" (2010b), Labassi gave another perspective to the debate on the visibility of researchers who use English as an additional language. The whole research paper is built on notes that a researcher from the chemistry department took while attending an English-only conference. The scholar, whom Labassi called 'expert', wrote the expressions he did not understand when his peers spoke. It is a truism that scholars from the Expanding Circle need English not only to access scientific knowledge but also to participate in seminars and network with other members of the disciplinary research community. This can only extend their visibility. Scholars from the core Inner Circle can give nonnative scholars the chance to know about the latest research trends and secure publishing opportunities. Another disadvantage that labassi noticed was the deficit in rhetorical skills to anchor the audience's attention both in writing and speaking. Lacking the necessary rhetorical skills and failure to find words to express one's ideas can be frustrating. In the words of one of the respondents in Pérez-Llantada, Plo, and Ferguson (2011), "the native wraps the audience around his little finger using a joke that I cannot tell" (p. 23). This gets more troublesome when scholars from the center use metaphors, idioms, and other rhetorical features of expressing themselves "in a sophisticated manner" to borrow words used by Flowerdew (1999, p. 254). These alternatives and less direct forms of expression, such as metaphors, are the dimensions of language use where meaning is the result of the cross-domain mapping. Unpacking the meaning in these expressions is particularly difficult for non-Inner Circle scholars because they miss the necessary cultural knowledge and context to grasp the meaning. According to Labassi (2010b), these rhetorically complex expressions are a linguistic handicap since nonnative speakers cannot understand these expressions; worse still, they can misinterpret them. Respondents in

Abdeljaoued (2017) talked about "the beauty of the language and the charm of the expression" as manifestations of the native speaker's competitive edge. Similarly, Abdeljaoued and Labassi (2020) found out that Tunisian scholars lacked the rhetorical skills necessary to package meaning. They concluded that in "an education system that gives priority to syntactic and linguistic accuracy, rhetorical components such as reader expectations, critical thinking, and voice do not seem to figure in the repertoire of strategies that students are trained to deploy" (Abdeljaoued & Labassi, 2020, p.10). In his discussion with his expert-respondent, Labassi (2010b) expressed his surprise at finding out that Tunisian scholars fell short not only when writing to the audience from the core but also when speaking during conferences. While Tunisian scholars have no problems understanding technical and domain-specific English, the difficulties are with 'general or natural English'. Listening and speaking problems during consortia seem to be more marked.

Research by Labassi opened unchartered avenues for Tunisian researchers. One worthwhile research is a large-scale study that investigated the linguistic situation in post-2011 Tunisia. Another research area is the reasons why interdisciplinarity in Tunisia failed. In an inaugural lecture[4] at the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences of Tunis, Tunisia, Labassi underscores that no discipline is 'an island'. Disciplines are interconnected, especially during these tricky times of globalization; as he states: "no discipline is capable, on its own, of understanding the complexity of today's life" (author's translation from Arabic). Here, Labassi invoked the philosophical concept of 'Pensée Complexe' (Edgar Morin). During this lecture, Labassi warned against the perception of the soft sciences as supplementary to the hard sciences; this view, he states, "causes catastrophes".

[4] The Faculty of Human and Social Sciences of Tunis has a long tradition of inaugural lectures. Professor Labassi delivered this lecture at the beginning of the academic year 2016-2017. He talked about the failure of interdisciplinarity in Tunisia and the lack of visibility of research conducted in the country.

Labassi and politics: 'The loser who was right'

Labassi was a patriotic Tunisian who dreamed of seeing his country free, prosperous, and democratic. He was not isolated from what is happening around him. He spoke out courageously about the social and political issues in pre- as well as post-2011 Tunisia. He was a politically sharp figure and avowed critic. As an avid and outspoken proponent of individual and academic freedoms and human rights, Labassi used social media to share his principled critiques of the political scene. His posts were also autobiographies incognito. He used to have daily, health permitting, early morning Facebook posts. These texts were an angry outcry of protest against the political scene after 2011. He challenged the idea of a one-party state and always took pride in thinking *differently* from the mainstream and the dominant narrative. During Ben Ali's rule, Labassi and others created a counter-hegemony through a culture of resistance and challenge to the oppressive regime. In post-2011 Tunisia, Labassi contended that the political situation did not improve much. This perhaps can find credence in the failure of the left and secular ideologies in their fights against the conservative right-wing parties and mainly the Islamists. However, for Labassi, losing elections is, by no means, the end of the fight as long as you do what you believe is right. The quote below is a remarkable autobiographic note about how to be a '*loser*' and to be '*proud'*. On the eve of the second round of the 2019 presidential elections, Labassi posted the following:

> I voted for Halouani (0.95%) against Ben Ali, and I lost, I voted for Ahmed Ibrahim (1.57%) against Ben Ali, and I lost, I voted for El Kotb in 2011 and I lost, I voted for Zbidi in 2019 and I lost, I voted for Mouatinoun in the legislative elections, and I lost. In the second round of the presidential elections, I decided to lose before even voting. However, I do not know why, I take some pride in all these losses. I committed them in my soul and conscience according to my readings and calculations, which I shared with others. We made the wrong calculations, but we were right; we had to be wrong. I belong to the camp of losers who are right. (Author's translation from French).

Conditions for a successful language teaching in Tunisia

Labassi (2016) believes that we have been engaged in a policy of 'Anglicization' of the country since the 1990s, but we have "met all the conditions to make this policy fail. No consultation of experts, manuals produced by non-specialists in record time" (Labassi, 2016; author's translation). The failure of the education system in Tunisia to cater to the students' needs and the failure of ESP project, in general, are evident. Labassi aptly states that this state of affairs should be acknowledged, in the first place, if we wish to move forward and find solutions to our education system. He believes, we have done nothing except "perpetuating failure" (Ibid). International tests such as PISA expose the reality of education in Tunisia, and Tunisian students' results are not a source of pride[5]. Labassi believes that one instance of this failed education system is Tunisians' recourse to short-term solutions to circumvent the challenges imposed by the education system. As he states, "in the absence of a clear language policy which, in my opinion, will not see the light in the foreseeable future …, Tunisians are falling back on their own resourcefulness" (Labassi, 2016, author's translation from French). Examples of these short-cut tactics include sending children to private schools, finding someone to translate research from French into English, and paying for courses at AMIDEAST, The British Council, or any of the private training centers which, the Tunisians believe, have the magic answers to their English language needs. Unfortunately, when it comes to the mastery of English, Tunisians pay from their income in attempts to catch up. Labassi (2016) stated that Tunisian students pay to have the "highly in demand" English language courses, not the de-contextualized English they have at university. In La Presse (2016), Labassi said:

[5] https://factsmaps.com/pisa-worldwide-ranking-average-score-of-math-science-reading/ (Last visited 25 January 2021)

> We have been engaged in a policy of "Anglicization" of the country since the 1990s, but we have done everything to make this policy a failure. No consultation of experts, teaching manuals are made by non-specialists in record time, no teacher-trainers nor prior training for trainers. To remedy these problems, we made recourse to the British and the Americans, who sent their consultants/experts who do not know the Tunisian context and who issued the same recommendations to the Chinese, Saudis, Thais, or Japanese. (Author's translation from French)

According to Labassi, a few measures need to be taken to lay the foundations for an education system that meets international standards. First, we need to stop the linguistic prejudice and the barren rhetoric of language supremacy. It is true that English is now a must-have tool if one wishes to communicate across cultures, yet that does not mean we should overlook French and Arabic. Second, it is an urgent exigency to reform the education system to meet the burgeoning local needs for English. In this vein, it is crucial, Labassi believes, to create a national center for learning English attached to the Ministry of Higher Education. This center would issue certificates attesting to the candidates' level of English (a Tunisian TOEFL). Informed specialists in collaboration with foreign experts should decide the framework, the conception, the programs, and the content of the tests[6]. Third, according to Labassi, it is crucial to stop the 1998 decree which generalized English language teaching to all undergraduate-level students at the Tunisian universities. Labassi believes that only postgraduate students need to study English, since they need it to publish their research. Students from the humanities and social sciences are perhaps not in need for English courses, which are simply a revisiting of the grammar that students had at the secondary school or a translation of technical terminology from French into English. Fourth, to ensure a good quality of future English teachers, Labassi advocated for admission tests with a

[6] Labassi dreamed of seeing The Faculty of Human and Social Sciences of Tunis a model to test this project before generalizing it on all Tunisian universities and institutes which offer English language studies.

limited number of successful candidates each year. The fifth requirement is the exigency to prepare adequate programs for teaching the language at primary levels. The pedagogy and the content of the programs for the first contact with English are critical. Hence, it is vital to ensure success conditions for the students' early contact with the language. One case in point is the teaching of English to sixth-grade students. Labassi advocated for delaying English teaching by one year rather than jamming the students' already heavy schedule. In Tunisia, sixth-grade students' first encounter with English is secured by primary school teachers. These instructors are not English language specialists, nor are they trained to teach English. In most cases, they have a rather unsatisfactory mastery of the language.

Conclusion

In this paper, I attempted to give a Tunisian perspective to the debate on the use of English in the Expanding Circle; namely using English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP). I tried to position English within the Tunisian language landscape. My exposition drew on Professor Labassi's contributions to the academic scholarship in Tunisia. I argued that his perception of the language policy in Tunisia and languages in contact, in general, is quite avant-gardist. First, his attitude towards the language situation in the country was nurtured by both his readings, research, and the socio-cultural context in which he grew up. This perhaps can give credence to his utter rejection of the linguistic prejudices against French and English. As a linguist and pacifist, he detached the language from the perception of the 'colonizer' and warned against the rhetoric of mutual exclusiveness of English and French. Second, he is one of the scholars who denounced the fickleness of the language policy in the country. Although he was an advocate of the promotion of English, he rejected the country's policy of 'Anglicization' because it was parachuted

without consulting language experts or preparing the necessary staff and materials. The problem for him is with the implementation not with the decision per se.

The paper revisited Professor Labassi's recommendations for better visibility of Tunisian scholars as well as better teaching of ESP and ERPP. Labassi argued that in spite of the progress made in getting access to research articles through memberships in scientific journals, many immediate actions need to be taken in order to improve the research environment in Tunisia.

The paper was written with 'heart and soul'. It may have drifted away from the established perception of academic writing as "objective and detached" as conditions for community-bound academic practice. Nevertheless, how can one be distant when one writes to honor a scholar's life? Like many other students and academics, I owe much of my academic development to Professor Labassi.

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