

A Fulbrighter's Experience with English Language Teaching in Tunisia: The Land of Mosaics

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Mosaics—slivers of tile in shades of red, blue, brown, black, and white jigsawed together—are on display throughout Tunisia. Some form geometric designs; others reveal gods and goddesses, warriors, lovers, ships, and, of course, all types of fish. The mosaics are sometimes multilayered. They tell of the waves of civilizations which have come to Tunisia. Punic mosaics with pink stone surfaces flecked with fragments of glass or marble give way to Roman creations with intricate patterns of triangles and diamonds. Native North African mosaics with circular compositions and frequent portrayals of rural and marine scenes are replaced by Christian representations with colored blocklike shapes and later motifs concerning martyrdom and resurrection. Finally, Byzantine mosaics with cut glass and figurative representations appeared.

These mosaics are delightful yet haunting because of their ambiguity. They suggest that beneath the dusty surface lie ornately textured and colorful layers which are often hidden from the hurried traveler. They also warn that it is impossible to entirely reconstruct or reconcile all of the experiences of Tunisia.

From 1995–1997, I served as a Fulbright senior lecturer in TEFL and applied linguistics at the University of Tunis.¹ I applied for a grant to Tunisia because I was interested in discovering how an emerging North African country has successfully encouraged multilingualism. I hoped to apply what I would learn to the language situation in California.

Preparation

My initiation into the Fulbright experience was a bit unsettling. After applying for a sabbatical from California Polytechnic State University and being notified early in 1995 that I had been selected for a Fulbright award in Tunisia, my family and I waited for a contract and, more importantly, a check for travel and living expenses. Despite frequent telephone calls (on our part) and assurances (on their part), nothing arrived from Washington, DC. Subsequently I have learned that my experience is not uncommon. In my case the contract and then the check arrived two weeks before our departure. I was informed that I was one of 800 American grantees who would travel abroad under the Fulbright program. With our possessions compressed into eight bulging pieces of luggage, my wife and I with two toddlers embarked on our journey to Tunisia with another child to join us after completing his academic school year.

"A modest program with immodest aims" was how Senator Fulbright described the 52-year-old program which bears his name. To date, over 200,000 individuals from around the world have participated as lecturers, researchers, and students. Richard Arndt (1993) explains the success of this program in *The Fulbright Difference*: "No other nation in the world's history ever set out to carry on exchanges with virtually every other country in the world...No formal government-sponsored exchange program ever succeeded in persuading dozens of participating nations to share in its costs" (p. 1).

Senator Fulbright had been inspired to create the program based on his experience as a Rhodes scholar. Originally it was conceived of as a post-graduate experience for students and researchers. Later, of course, lecturers were invited to join. I doubt whether the good senator ever envisioned baby bottles, toys, and a collapsible crib being squeezed into a Fulbrighter's luggage next to books and computer equipment. In fact, at a conference several years before his death, the senator exclaimed that the Fulbright program had been conceived of for graduate students and not "faculty with their 'whole damn families'" (quoted in Robins & Robins, 1993, p. 114). Despite Senator Fulbright's reservations, my experience in Tunisia was greatly enriched due to my family's presence.

Teaching

The Fulbright Commission in consultation with the Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education placed me as a professor in the English Department at the University of Tunis I. Following the French university system, faculties in Tunisia are categorized accordingly: the University of Tunis I designates the faculties of letters, arts, and human sciences; the University of Tunis II deals with the faculties of sciences and medicine; and the

University of Tunis III concerns the faculties of law, economics, and business. I have seen it written that the University of Tunis is one of the oldest higher education institutions in the world. This claim is only partially accurate. Zitouna University, the Islamic studies institution founded in 732, was incorporated into the University of Tunis in 1961; however, the other faculties were only created after independence in 1956.

My students' English language proficiency level was impressive. English, of course, is their fourth language—after Tunisian Arabic, Classical Arabic, and French. In spite of the fact that Tunisia has a level of linguistic homogeneity not found elsewhere in the world (an estimated 99% speak Tunisian Arabic), Tunisians have a remarkable ability to learn other languages. Certainly this predisposition for language acquisition has been aided by two related factors: First, Tunisians have had a history of invasions and contact with neighboring countries due to their geographic position; second, as a small country with limited natural resources, Tunisians are obligated to communicate with speakers of other languages particularly for purposes of trade and tourism. In addition to the four languages previously mentioned, it is not uncommon for certain Tunisians to speak German and/or Italian.

Multilingual faculty meetings in the English department also intrigued me. The code switching that occurs between languages is a fascinating linguistic phenomenon. During meetings, many of my colleagues would offer a contribution in English, only to switch to French upon becoming more earnest and then adopt Arabic when reaching a certain level of enthusiasm or anger.

The Tunisian university system is very elitist, with only a small percentage of students gaining admittance and an even smaller percentage graduating. The students were sometimes confused by my American pedagogical practices. Required attendance, quizzes, group work, and oral presentations were new experiences for many of them. Little incentive exists for these activities or even for research paper writing because 80% of the final grade for undergraduates and 100% of the final grade for graduates is determined by year-end exams. This requirement as well as many others is passed down by the Ministry of Higher Education.

Teaching at the University of Tunis required a flexibility to which I had to become accustomed. Administrators, faculty, and students are never certain when academic terms begin or end and when exams are scheduled. I quickly discarded my syllabi which listed reading assignments corresponding to specific dates and decided to adapt to the environment. For the most part my students were receptive to their courses and my presence as a professor. A few, of course, were skeptical about the entire arrangement.

Textbooks as well as other instructional materials and equipment are in short supply in Tunisia. Universities have copy centers on campus where entire books are photocopied and then sold to students. Without hard currency to purchase texts from the West, universities are practically obligated to violate copyright laws. Students who have only known this type of system are deprived of the pride of book ownership. Moreover, they are less apt to understand and respect practices concerning intellectual property. As for other equipment used in teaching, I was amused when one colleague declared in all seriousness in a faculty meeting, "It is time we embraced new technology in this department. We must acquire overhead projectors for the classroom." Needless to say, access to the Worldwide Web and use of computer CD-ROM is not on the horizon.

English departments in Tunisia are composed of three programs: linguistics, literature, and civilization. Although I had anticipated teaching in the first two areas, I was a bit surprised to be involved in teaching what is broadly known as civilization. I taught graduate-level courses in TEFL theories/methods and American multiculturalism as well as undergraduate courses in psycholinguistics, the American novel, and American civilization. The challenge in Tunisian English departments is to offer university degrees in English within an Arab country using a French educational system. I am certain I learned as much as my students throughout this experience.

Research Activities

I was privileged to conduct research in language policy and planning. Social, economic, and religious forces are altering the language situation in North Africa. Immediately after independence in Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, the linguistic situation was described by Gallagher (1964) as follows: "Language serves as this kind of symbol—of affinities and aspirations, as direction and identification—and as a tool for reordering, re-creating, and seeking propitious ground in which to put down renewed roots" (p. 83).

Today, Arabic is the official language. In Tunisia, for example, the status of Arabic is clearly stated in Article 1 of the constitution: "Islam is its religion, Arabic is its language." French linguistic and cultural influence have continued on in North Africa after the withdrawal of the French, yet they are slowly losing their position in society due to Arabization and Islamization. A gradual decline in the use and status of French is apparent. Berber is yet another language of North Africa. Berberphones account for about 40% of the Moroccan population, 25% of the Algerian population, but less than 1% of the Tunisian population.

Although Arabic, French, and Berber are the principal languages of

North Africa, English is gradually being adopted into various sectors of society. I was particularly interested in examining the issue of second languages in competition—or the continued use of French versus the spread of English. My research activities focused on the increasing use of English in education, government, the professions, and mass media (Battenburg, 1996, 1997).

Fishman (1983) has observed concerning language choice and loyalty, “English is less loved but more used; French is more loved and less used” (p. 20). In North Africa, however, researchers have found the opposite: French is more used, yet English is more loved. A gap exists, of course, between language preference and language use. However, it is significant that while English is increasingly used in former francophone territories, French is not being adopted in anglophone territories.

The competition between English and French in certain Arab and African countries will continue. Since founding their colonies and protectorates, the French have used their language and culture as political and economic tools. While French prestige has declined considerably by the end of the twentieth century, its role on the world stage is enhanced by its ability to influence formerly held territories.

Foreign aid to Tunisia reveals the priority which certain governments place on influencing language policy and planning activities. In 1996 the American government allocated approximately \$600,000 and the British government contributed about \$400,000 for language, cultural, and educational activities. The French government, in contrast, spent an estimated \$20 million for these programs in Tunisia. The British cultural attaché jokingly commented to me on this disparity: “The French spend more in a morning than we do in a year.”

Still, other forces in North Africa argue in favor of the spread of English. In Morocco, I visited the first anglophone university—Al Alkawayne (the two brothers). This institution, created in 1995 with financial support from King Fahd of Saudi Arabia and King Hassan II of Morocco, is already viewed as one of the finest universities in North Africa. In Algeria, parties such as the Islamic Salvation Front have pushed for the adoption of Arabic internally and the use of English as a lingua franca externally. If French provides a window to the outside world, they argue that English offers an even larger window.

Conducting research in Tunisia is a frustrating, exhilarating, and memorable experience. On the one hand, access to libraries is not always easily obtained, and one can wait weeks if not months for a requested publication. On the other hand, Tunisian government officials and academics are typically happy to be of assistance. I have fond memories of sitting in under-

heated libraries with my laptop computer surrounded by stacks of books and journals. Sometimes after working most of the day, I would wander off into the markets in the medina to lose myself among the stalls and sellers of spices, fabrics, jewelry, and household wares.

Conclusion

My Fulbright experience in Tunisia has provided me with various insights concerning multilingualism which are partially applicable to California. First, Tunisians view mastery of English as well as various other languages to be essential for internal economic development and privatization. Second, Tunisian governmental officials and educators are prepared to devote resources for continued language instruction throughout the elementary, secondary, and university levels. Finally, Tunisians realize that understanding different languages and cultures will assist them in forging links with the international community.

California can learn much from Tunisia as it also continues to grapple with challenges concerning multilingualism. California is inextricably linked to various regions of the world, and knowledge of English along with the languages and cultures of Pacific Rim and Latin American countries, in particular, are essential. Although this state possesses a wealth of resources represented in its diverse population, it often fails to recognize the potential benefits of multilingualism and the important role of education.

The aim of the Fulbright program is to increase mutual understanding between the people of the U.S. and other countries. My experience once again has confirmed to me that Americans have much to share and, just as importantly, much to learn from countries such as Tunisia.

Endnote

¹ The Fulbright program, which sponsors post baccalaureate and postdoctoral fellowships for teaching and study abroad, is administered through the U.S. Information Agency. Information is available online at <<http://www.iie.org/fulbright/>> or by writing: Institute of International Education, 809 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017-3580.

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