Research Article
Rethinking Foreign Language Education in Tunisian Preschools

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Since its institutionalization three decades ago, early childhood educator training in Tunisia has been a considerable tributary of mainstream education. Despite such bearing, this field does not yet seem to reach the expected evolution as evidenced by the lack of a guiding vision. A case in point that attests to this state of clarity is foreign language education which has not expediently addressed the needs of both educators and preschoolers. This paper underscores this overlooked strand of early childhood education. Building on an appraisal of the problems and challenges burdening this area of education, it suggests the awakening-to-languages approach as an alternative project that maps the future course of foreign language education. Possible related benefits will consist in (i) investing in identity building, (ii) fostering critical thinking, and (iii) developing metalinguistic awareness where young learners act according to a pedagogy of discovery and reflection rather than skill-based attainment.

1. Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) has received noteworthy consideration by policy makers in Tunisia. One case in point that attests to such interest is the establishment of the Higher Institute for Childhood Education in 1989 which is primarily concerned with training future specialists in young children's education. This paper is largely inspired by my five-year teaching experience within this institution which stands as the chief tributary of ECE experts in the country, whose graduates have been occupying vocations in governmental and private institutions concerned with childhood welfare. Considering an exhaustive examination of the curricular choices and professional forums under the guardianship of this institution and the successive governmental bodies in charge of ECE, there is some reason to assert that there has been an absence of a vision which outlines a coherent policy based on clear objectives together with the unavailability of a guide that schematizes the projected ECE educator's profile. This in fact reflects the peculiarity of this educational body as a composite of feeder disciplines that have not, perhaps, reached the requisite maturity to hammer out a unifying vision exclusively premised on the assertion that the child

is a project. In order to accomplish that project, educational effort should observe the key elements of its construction starting from clear objectives setting, through syllabus design and implementation, to evaluation.

Upon asking ECE students on a regular way during classes about what constitutes their vision of and/or the agenda they ought to pursue as future practitioners, it follows that inconsistency and uncertainty are the common denominator among them. At this juncture, it is unreasonable to allot full responsibility onto the ECE policy makers within the institution and elsewhere as efforts in this respect are not lacking. (The official website of The Higher Institute for Childhood Education displays a "pedagogical guide" that is based on a needs-analysis perspective. The guide comprises a list of recommendations for ECE training which have never been implemented or at least broached during curricular reforms or revisions (see http://www.iscenf.rnu.tn/fr/wp-content/uploads/guide/index.html).) The problem appears then to be communicative seeing no willingness by ECE faculty to raise students' awareness about the necessity to develop a judicious understanding of their professional *raison d'être*. The picture arising from this lack of vision, and, therefore, template of objectives, is marked by a dominant

discourse of incoherence. It is hence no surprise discerning a collage of individualistic training practices basically informed by teacher biases. Instructional booklets are therefore partially designed in keeping with the faculty's academic fields of interest rather than in accordance with an abiding, predetermined frame of reference (i.e., a vision).

The discourse of incoherence in my understanding is rooted in the intuitive policy of recruiting ECE faculty and the lack of a concerted definition of the projected ECE educator profile. On one hand, the hiring of ECE faculty is fundamentally decided according to the needs of the department(s) and the courses suggested in the curriculum. This gap-filling method recommends the position needed to the Ministry of Higher Education which in turn appoints a recruitment jury made up of a number of academicians hardly knowledgeable about ECE as a discipline *per se*. They rely on generic criteria to decide someone's eligibility for the intended position and that includes how advanced one has been in his/her research course in fulfillment of a doctoral program (e.g., sociology, psychology, linguistics, etc.), and not due to one's contribution and/or projects attendant to the vocation. On the other hand, the discourse of incoherence is reflected in the prevailing market-oriented view of the projected ECE graduates. There is a prevailing tendency to envisage their training according to the vocational needs determined by the job market. Therefore, their profile appears more of a bundle of skill sets purported to fulfill these external needs instead of being seen as projects that grow in competence and maturity around the master project that is the child.

2. The Case of Foreign Languages in ECE

The status of foreign language (FL) education, being an essential part of ECE, seems to reflect such discourse of incoherence, particularly through the opacity over *what* and *how* to teach. As for the part concerned with the subject matter of FL education, the conceptualization of language(s) is much a question of a system to be mastered. Residues of structuralism seem to be still anchored in FL practitioners' subconscious. In order to pursue their goals, educators encourage children to use a facts-oriented approach focusing mainly on the areas of grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. This image concurs with Georgiou's [1] assertion that "foreign language education (FLE) tends to focus on linguistic competence and when it chooses to deal with culture teaching, it commonly adopts a facts-oriented approach which is criticized as inadequate as it represents the risk of creating and reinforcing stereotypes" (p. 1). To such disproportionate predilection for form, hardly any focus has been allayed to culture. The bottom line of all of this is that we are stripping the FL in focus from its cultural substance. Equally responsible for this view of language is the socioeconomic pressure originating from parents' aspiration to have their children master languages, such as English and French, as tools to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Evidence for such pressure is clear through their increasing interest in enrolling their children in private preschools which offer FL programs as early as to three-year-olds.

FL teaching practices, respectively, align with this discourse of incoherence in the absence of a clear ECE vision. As our educational legacy endorses a culture of excellence which aims to spawn generations of achievers at the expense of personality building and balanced selves, pedagogical priority is fully focused on how to "perfect" and streamline the process of acquiring a given language. This explains to a large extent the tendency to enroll children in private schools that offer them better opportunities to learn languages, as in the case of English, at an earlier age compared with public school programs. Form-focused FL teaching, obviously thriving in this frame of mind, is another form of "banking education" where educators are responsible for depositing the A to Z of a particular language to children who act as "depositaries" [2]. In keeping with this *technicist* spirit of excellence, educators are in a relentless quest of the "best" teaching methodology and the most effective teaching materials (e.g., the extracurricular support offered by lucrative businesses) to guarantee the highest achievement levels possible.

The problem of FL learning in ECE has not been yet treated as an independent academic discipline in Tunisia in the sense that educators do not receive quality training on providing a specialized and focused training. This is far from being possible for two reasons. Firstly, scholarship interested in FL learning together with the businesses behind sponsoring them garnered their focus on age categories where young children are not part of. With a closer glance at the content of the materials available worldwide, one can readily assume that the learner subjects are stratified according to their proficiency levels, reflecting a completely product-oriented view that envisages FL learning as an echelon-ascending movement rather than a course of development. Secondly, future ECE practitioners are not selected for any particular skill sets, say their aptitude for languages. It is hence too ambitious to attach great expectations about their ability to respond to any form of training. Again, it is the lack of a clear vision about FL learning that is self-imposing through a key question: do we really need to *teach* FLs to children? If not, in view of the limitations of FL teaching policy in ECE mentioned above, a serious revision is recommended to seek other alternative loops for a purposeful FL initiation in ECE.

The principled revisions should be based on a clear vision anchored in a culturally pluralistic world. Commensurate with this vision is (global) citizenship education that has been prevailing worldwide, but yet overlooked by both Tunisian scholars and practitioners. The educational policies and curricular decisions here have been compliantly responsive to the market forces based on values of productivity, efficiency, and so forth. It is no surprise then that FL education, notably the learning of English, reflects a market-minded view of language as a product/tool to survive the challenges of modernity. However, the 21st century's educational creed has witnessed a paradigm shift worldwide where focus is now on global citizenship which, according to Hosack ([3]: 126), helps young children to "develop the values, knowledge, and skills that will enable them to participate in social and political life as responsible citizens." The awakening-to-languages approach is part of this movement.

3. The Awakening-to-Languages Approach

By way of definition, there is solid consensus over the meaning of the awakening-to-languages (AL) approach (see [4]). The AL approach is originally conceived to prepare young children to live in linguistically and culturally pluralistic societies. Pedagogically wise, this is made possible through exposing young school learners (i.e., preschoolers and earlier school graders) to audio and visual materials from a variety of languages and language varieties, such as official school languages (French and English), national languages (e.g., Italian in Italy), indigenous languages, and migrant languages (e.g., Berber and modern standard Arabic related to some ethnic minorities in France and Belgium). Students using such materials are encouraged to perform activities of discovery in order to explore and compare linguistic/cultural differences in an environment of amusement. The primary role of FL practitioners is to *initiate* rather than to *teach* such languages where the ultimate objective is to promote *awareness* rather than *acquisition*.

3.1. An Overview. The AL approach is historically rooted in the *language awareness* movement that appeared in Great Britain, precisely through the pioneering work of Hawkins [5] in which he highlighted the importance of being aware of/exposed to several languages to facilitate learning foreign languages. Lourenço and Andrade's ([6]: 2) definition best illustrates Hawkins' view of the AL approach "as a way to make monolingual pupils step outside their mother tongue, freeing them from 'linguistic parochialism' and allowing them to recognise the validity of languages other than their own." The main argument of Eric Hawkins concerning this approach consists in his differentiation between the concepts of multilingualism and pluralism. As multilingualism stands for learners who know a set of languages as independent competences, pluralism implies that learners cultivate a plurilingual and a pluricultural competence premised on the interaction between languages that they learn or experience. Some scholars refer to it as the "fifth skill" [7] being separate from other competences and most notably from the "communicative competence" that has shaped the frame of mind of a whole generation of FL professionals under the umbrella of the communicative language teaching. Pluralism should be treated henceforth as the ultimate objective of FL education, especially for beginner learners. It should accordingly qualify as complementary to multilingualism which had been the main standpoint of FL practitioners.

It is worth noting that the assertions developed in Hawkins [5] in support of the AL approach were inspired by British school reports that outlined the gap between students with and without adequate preliminary communication skills and intercultural awareness. The schools surveyed showed common failure to give the latter additional assistance. According to Hawkins' proponents, the AL approach can thus stand as a back-up strategy to consolidate the education of monolingual children through and for diversity. Such recommendations later inspired many FL theorists into advancing refined versions all centered on the identification and promotion of intercultural competence (e.g., see [8]).

Despite some wide disagreement over a standard definition of this concept, most of the related research endeavors concur on adopting pluralism as their guiding spirit. Their motto is as follows: children need to *experience* rather than *learn* languages in ECE education.

3.2. The European Experience. Although the ideas of Hawkins did not resonate adequately among British policy makers concerned with FL education, it has received considerable appeal in the European circles. Traces of the AL approach are evident in one of the guiding documents released by the Council of Europe, namely, *A Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*, issued in 2001. According to Fidler [9], this document serves as a "modern bible" for all those engaged in FL education from curriculum designers, language teachers, and test developers. The document champions pluralism as an ultimate objective to attain, and so education has the obligation to "equip all Europeans for the challenges of the intensified international mobility (and) to promote mutual understanding and tolerance, respect for identities and cultural diversity" (p. 346). The choice is indeed politically driven knowing that European cities have been growing into multicultural sites of a heterogeneous fabric. FL education, adopting pluralism as a frame of mind and the AL approach as its *modus operandi*, represents an exceptional part of this project which seeks to promote the intrinsic values of diversity and tolerance.

The interest of European research circles in the AL approach was palpable through the emergence of many government-sponsored projects throughout many cities in the 2000s. Several projects, such as Evlang, FREPA, and JaLing, which were conducted by Michel Candelier and his associates, focused on young age groups (i.e., a range between 3 and 12 years old). They managed to amass bulks of materials, administered activities, provided personalized training to educators, and produced a number of evaluation reports. FREPA, being the latest of this lineage, devotes a considerable space for the AL approach among other pluralistic approaches. It details (i) themes of focus related to knowledge, attitudes, and skills intended to attain by learners, (ii) teaching materials, and (iii) a teacher-training kit (for further details about FREPA, see http://carap .ecml.at/CARAP/tabid/2332/language/en-GB/Default.aspx). Methodologically bent for *pedagogy of discovery* ([10]: 50) rather than attainment, the experimental effort in these projects highlights learning qualities of curiosity, reflection, and interaction. With all the findings collected, attention is now channeled to making the AL approach rather convertible into a teachable substance in curriculum design.

3.3. Objectives. Scholars and practitioners interested in the AL approach have amassed scores of works reporting on the benefits which are conductive to efficient learning for young children. In light of a wealth of recommendations, a concise look at the literature suggests that there is a great deal of agreement over a triad of objectives whereby this approach is purported to promote ECE. These objectives consist in

(i) investing in identity building, (ii) fostering critical thinking, and (iii) developing metalinguistic awareness.

3.3.1. Investing in Identity Building. Can FL education be conductive to identity building in young children? This question has been extensively explored both theoretically and empirically in the European circles. For instance, Azaoui [11] in his case-making project in support of an education of social coherence in multicultural European cities claims that the AL approach can play a determining role in cultivating new identities open to diversity and accepting differences. This educational project is, however, given peripheral attention compared with the prevailing view of FL teaching which treats an unfamiliar language, such as English, as a lingua franca that is culture free [12]. Language is therefore a mode of communication neutralized from its culturally imbued semantics. It is just another survival tool to serve the instrumental values of market economy. Conversely, the AL approach provides another vision of FL beyond the notions of *proficiency* and *assimilation*. Accordingly, FL education is to be viewed as a process of *exploration* where children "actively engage in comparing, contrasting, and reflecting on the cultural values in the target culture" [13].

Identity should be accordingly understood in a discourse that does not uphold a set-in-stone essentialist definition of the concept anchored in a normative culture of FL classrooms. It is, as Huhtala and Lehti-Eklund ([14]: 5) emphasize, "a process, as something flexible, hybrid and multifaceted. Identity evolves in participation and it always includes a temporal dimension." In this respect, FL learners act as participants and not recipients, and, in the process of participation and exploration, their identity evolves along episodes of deconstruction and reconstruction within a space which Claire Kramsch refers to as the third place. The third place, according to Kramsch [7], is a symbolic space that emerges between learners' native language/culture and the target language/culture in their focus. Far from the binary relation between what is native or nonnative, this space represents an experimental site for the learner to negotiate new understandings of the target culture as well as their own, hence opening possibilities for new identity/identities which are essentially transformative. FL classrooms become in this regard a fertile ground for discursively constructed in-the-making identities away from the traditional image of lesson delivery to promote FL learning.

Interestingly, the vision underlying the AL approach strongly meshes with the concept of the third place. It is in the process of third place formation that the new identities are discursively cultivated. That is, exposure to unfamiliar languages/cultures stimulates one's emotional and cognitive resources to engage in a discourse of openness. The configuration of such a discourse is premised on parameters such as empathy, awareness, sensitivity, understanding, and tolerance. The adoption of these attitudinal features may change the sense of geography for children in their perception of the world and themselves. They do not only conceptualize visible and invisible aspects of the target language/culture but also discover how to distance themselves from their native language/culture. Seeing one's own language/culture from a distance would consolidate a new vision of the world that their native view of the world is just one possible view among many other views. Such a new understanding helps shape a new identity which is capable of containing values of openness and diversity.

3.3.2. Fostering Critical Thinking. As the world is going through drastic change, American and European think tanks (e.g., US National Education Association) have been engaged in developing new plans of action to meet new world challenges. The *Framework for 21st Century Learning* is among the proposed paradigms to move 21st century education forward through promoting four master skills (i.e., the four Cs) among which is critical thinking. Education-focused literature abounds in writings that define the concept of critical thinking. Irrespective of divergence over what constitutes the concept, there is near unanimity that its integration into mainstream education helps learners engage systematically and, therefore, master deeper analytical abilities such as reasoning, problem-solving, synthesizing, inference, and reflective skepticism [15]. The necessity to observe critical thinking in ECE is driven by the challenges posed by the complexities of the present digital era and the reign of information. Children should be hence equipped with such intellectual tools whereby they manage properly and purposefully the bulk of information they keep bombarding every day. This also helps them envision the world critically with a great deal of relativism, thus acting within frame of mind propitious for adopting and championing values of tolerance and openness to diversity.

This is not to deny that current educational agendas do not encourage teaching critical thinking in curriculum design and implementation. Tunisian decision makers do not deflect from this principle although what we readily notice, as field practitioners, is the contrary of the high order objectives and the official syllabi reported. The reality shows a completely contradictory picture prevailed by a packaged type of thinking palpable in the fact-based way learners see the world and the dominance of surface-level strategies in their schooling history. One example is the mainstream evaluation system which quantifies learners' achievement on the basis of the mistakes they commit and not the progress they make. Interestingly though, this does not come out of nowhere in view of the market-minded choices that justify the whole educational experience instead of opting for citizenship education. FL education, as a case in point, is well influenced by the socioeconomic mindset that languages such as English represent survival tools that increase graduates' chances in the market economy. This largely explains the overwhelming propensity to focus on the formal side of language. Even when dealing with culture, the prevailing teaching approach appears to be invariably facts-oriented. Instead of pushing learners to negotiate the target culture(s), they tend to create unchecked ideas that through time congeal into stereotypes. It is to be noted here that stereotyping has a deleterious effect on one's capacity to think critically because stereotypes, as Wei ([16]: 18) maintains, "are

nothing more than standardized mental pictures reflecting an oversimplified opinion and have little or no ascertainable basis in fact."

Stereotyping is considered to be a reliable measure to index packaged thinking as it is based on social categorization. That is, thinking stereotypically means that we envision individuals as members of a group or a class rather than focusing on their idiosyncrasy. This tendency for categorizing reflects authoritarian values that there should be hierarchies between people, both culturally and socially. The outcome of this thinking pattern, according to Moskowitz [17], is cultivating people who have less trust in others and show a skeptical view of the "positive universalism of human nature." In fact, the on-off relationship between packaged thinking and stereotyping can be determined by our educational choices. Interestingly, the Aristotelian maxim "nature abhors a vacuum" explains to some extent how the absence of critical thinking is substituted by ready-made judgments whose accumulation stifles the mental habit of critical thinking. In an educational milieu that favors critical thinking, children form hypotheses about a given stereotype, submit them to reasoning through using multiple techniques, such as comparing and gathering assorted information, and decide whether to support them, at least partially, or reject them. This process of revision immunizes individuals against the alternative of stereotyping.

The championing of the pluralistic stance in FL education through the implementation of the AL approach can promote and streamline critical thinking among young learners. As mentioned earlier, exposing children to languages could be part of the conceptualization process through which children develop a greater ability to think critically. The AL approach has the credit to open up a new symbolic third space in which they treat the target culture(s) reflectively. On the basis of a cultural reflexivity, this space qualifies as a liberating force allowing them "to question, to analyse, to evaluate and, potentially, to take action" ([18]: 146). All this process certainly substantiates the spirit of relativity which gradually grows into a style of thinking. Acting within such a frame of mind may ensure that these young learners would not only be reflecting critically on the "other" cultures but also *relativizing* their own culture away from their ethnocentric perceptions which are logically nourished by stereotypes. In a sense, the cultural relativism which they cultivate from their negotiating and comparing cultural differences and similarities would fuel their mental habits to challenge any cultural assumptions and put them under the scrutiny of questioning.

3.3.3. Developing Metalinguistic Awareness. Findings reported on the role of exposing children from a very young age to foreign languages and cultural/linguistic diversity suggested that they may develop metalinguistic awareness (i.e., the ability to consciously reflect on the formal and functional nature of language) that boosts their aptitude for language learning later in their schooling course. Consistent with this assertion, Lourenço and Andrade [6] reported that a number of studies probing the correlation between the AL approach and literacy acquisition concluded that one's awareness of the phonological configuration of a given language eases the way to "crack the code" of its alphabetic system and subsequently other aspects of the additional language. Also, children who undergo experimental AL-oriented programs develop a sharp sensitivity that strengthens their decoding ability to read as well as vocabulary retention. Contrarily, those unexposed to unfamiliar languages in their formative years are more likely to develop word decoding problems, which is prejudicial to the speed of their learning process [19].

The metalinguistic awareness accruing from children's systematic exposure to unfamiliar languages can be schematized into two different but complementary areas. The first area is concerned with the acquisition of a number of skills equipping children with basic tools to approach the formal side of a given language. One of the widely researched aspects of this area is phonological awareness. Defined by Lourenço and Andrade ([6]: 4) as "the ability to recognise, distinguish, and manipulate the basic sound structures of a language, such as syllables and phonemes," phonological awareness includes skills such as auditory discrimination that enables children to distinguish sounds, intonation patterns, and sound systems of unfamiliar languages. Also, among the other skills attendant to metalinguistic awareness occasioned by AL-oriented engagements are the ability of observation and metalinguistic reasoning that presage better morphosyntactic manipulation among children such as inferring simple rules from comparing content of different languages, coining lexical and morphological combinations. Such linguistic behavior most likely increases chances for restructuring which is an essential element in the dynamics of interlanguage development.

The second area of metalinguistic awareness relevant to the AL approach is the acquisition of a basic knowledge about how languages function. Upon exposure to unfamiliar languages, children are able to distinguish writing systems of a particular language they do not master though. Additionally, the AL experience represents an opportunity for them to widen their knowledge repertoire about world language families, language varieties, dialects, and so forth. This knowledge base will enable them to engage in in-depth reflections about the functioning of a particular language they intend to learn academically. It allows them to develop a positive attitude towards language learning considering it as a joyful rather than a thwarting learning experience. The day-to-day comparisons building on such a base may add vigor to their learning process since the access to more than a language as Kuo and Anderson ([20]: 369) asserted "may render structural similarities and differences between languages more salient, allowing bilingual children to form representations of language structure at a more abstract level."

4. Introducing the AL Experience in Tunisia

Before delving in the applicability of the AL approach in the Tunisian context, it is worth reminiscing that this approach advanced by European scholars and practitioners emerged from the prerequisites of the political reality they sensed in their own countries. Multiculturalism as a concept has developed from the mere status of a humanistic ideal

to become a political reality in cities receiving scores of immigrants from different ethnicities. Social harmony has become an indispensable element to sustain the developmental course of such urban entities which have become socially dysfunctional due to tension arising from disparity of ethnic and cultural colors. Critical pedagogues have every reason to contend that all forms of education are fundamentally political underlying some ideological groundwork, which concurs with the now growing global citizenship education movement that endeavors to promote the image of culturally pluralistic world. Engineering identities which engage the values of social harmony, empathy, tolerance of diversity, and a sense of belonging to global contexts is a state affair in the European and North American countries far from being an individual enterprise based on one's free will to map his/her future pathway.

The educational experience in Tunisia is unquestionably no exception seeing politics has been deeply involved in dictating its choices. The difference with fellow European experiences, however, rests on whether Tunisian educationalists have indeed a clear vision concomitant with the drastic changes the world history is witnessing. This does not seem to be very obvious considering that curriculum building is completely decided or, at least, informed by market politics whose main objective is how to grapple with the increasing scores of unemployment. In this purview, success of any educational program is primarily conditioned by its capacity to offer considerable rates of employability. The question that is worth addressing here is whether this vision is actually in tandem with the current political agendas reflective of the essentials of globalization which is currently the driving locomotive of history making. The disparity is palpable in comparison with the European experience whose reliance on citizenship education is among its priorities in outlining its agenda.

Citizenship education sounds as approachable theme through which we can reflect on the Tunisian schooling system which has a strong bearing on the social picture. Along with the abundance of social and psychological research theorizing about the mounting social tension in society, there is reason to contend that the market politics dominating the educational sector is largely responsible for cultivating a personality model devoid of the basics of citizenship which involve among other things qualities such as openness to diversity, empathy, and cultural understanding. The 2011 Tunisian Revolution was an opportunity to cast the spotlight on the proscribed issues which revealed fragments of the collective personality of Tunisians, including their conduct, psyche, vision of the world, and thinking style. For example, they awoke on a new reality where social tension and terrorism are occupying the news headlines on daily basis as if these anomalies fell overnight in this country. This sense of "surprise" mirrors the absence of a belief system through which we undergo episodes of self-evaluation and revisions in the long run. For instance, the mainstream discourse among intellectuals hardly broaches terrorism from an educational perspective, that is, as a phenomenon underlying a dominant thinking pattern inhospitable to tolerance of differences and hence the by-product of the educational system.

It seems that the mindset of Tunisian educationalists has been unprepared for the dialogue over the historicity of fundamentalism as if this phenomenon is a political/ideological enterprise. Instead of averting this issue outside their internal circles of debate, it is crucial to historicize this thinking pattern as a natural eventuality of the driving force of globalization. Far from the moralist discourse and so the understanding that history is sometimes cruel but always just, the globalization processes with their ensuing values of equality, liberty, and democracy would naturally result in tension and resentment of the other. This is translated into the counter force of *localization* as we are in the midst of the greatest movement of populations within and across countries to the detriment of the traditional natural and national boundaries. Localization comes under different shapes and expressions such as xenophobia, racism, chauvinism, and ethnic conflicts. It is within this milieu that fundamentalism in Tunisia is commonplace seeing ideas such as "Arabic is the mother of all languages," "all the world is conspiring against us," and voices for the revival of archaic ways of life dating back to fourteen centuries ago.

The literature reflecting on the liaison between the globalization and localization does not exclusively draw a picture of abnegation of the other as cross-cultural encounters systematically yield two response patterns (i.e., systematic types of behavior in reaction to cultural encounters). The first response pattern, exemplified above, is based on *othering,* an approach that emphasizes differences between the *self* as superior and the *other* as inferior and hostile and implicitly ignores related similarities. It bears an essentialist view of culture(s) and identity as intractably fixed concepts. The second response pattern is positively associated with intercultural understanding that favors an amenable relationship between the self and the other where the general tendency is towards building on similarities rather than on differences (e.g., forms of acculturation in FL learning). It is interesting to mention at this juncture that these two response patterns do not necessarily flourish in different geographical and cultural spaces. They can also be ambivalently present within one individual's behavioral system. DeSousa ([21]: 2), in this respect, maintains that the cross-cultural encounters can be stratified in a spectrum ranging from a "form of seduction or confrontation, discovery or recovery, desire or loathing, wonder or disillusionment, peace or war." As these response patterns are natural processes inherent on every individual, it is the constant proceduralization of either pattern that consolidates future forms of the above oppositional/approachable identity poles.

In a widely globalized world, it follows that countries with no multicultural fabric such as Tunisia are not categorically different from European cities in so far as cross-cultural encounters are concerned. FL program in ECE education being another important space for such encounters attests to the correlation between the response patterns and achievement rates. Evidence of such correlation is conspicuous in view of the gender-based distribution in the FL learning community in Tunisia. It is easy to notice, for instance, that female FL learners outnumber considerably their male counterparts and that they garner the lion's share in

admission to FL university departments as well as FL-related vocations. This fact is far from being explained by technical advantages or gender-specific aptitudes for languages but it is possibly justified by a disparity in the nature of the response patterns. Similar to Yoshimoto's [22] emphasis on power dynamics in her autobiographical report on four Japanese women, Tunisian females as a nondominant group seem to be more receptive to unfamiliar languages/cultures. As tertiary students of English, their achievements in terms of sensitivity to accents, fluency, idiomaticity, and discourse patterns may open the possibilities for freedom and emancipation where English stands as a space to circumvent feelings of oppression and subordination in an Arab world still dominated by conservatism. Oppositional response patterns seem to be more associated with male students who hardly see in those languages a liberating force (see [23] for details about how the gender-FL learning correlate proceeded for her main subject Mai).

Here lies the social accountability of FL education as a determining factor in identifying and promoting the approachable response patterns rather than the oppositional ones. Other than its effort attendant to training, syllabus design, and occasional evolutions so as to "streamline" language learning, Tunisia's FL educational community has to invest in the language learner. As such, character building through cultivating identity models with proclivity for openness should be prioritized especially at the level of ECE which has been least explored by FL educators (see Section 1). In this case, a new vision of FL training in this educational area should be taking shape. Its main tenet is the promotion of diversity which all makes sense within larger civic project that goes beyond simply learning a given language. The linguistic diversity emanating from cross-cultural encounters to which children are subject to through AL-based programs would become one cornerstone of their life style. Awareness and acceptance of such scope of variability cannot be dissociated from other aspects of diversity (e.g., ethnic, religious, social, and territorial diversity) since they are not mutually interdependent.

Exposing children to unfamiliar languages would offer them the cross-cultural encounters that enable them to negotiate and procure new understandings of themselves and the world around them. Due to the lack of chances to try such encounters through travel, young children would typically naturalize the world within the boundaries of their local culture, seeing things as their culture predisposes them to see. Lo Bianco et al. ([24]: 4) draw a picture illustrating this frame of mind stating the following.

The cultural maps we hold in our minds to make sense of the world are tangible maps which we often mistake as immutable truths. To dislodge the apparent immutability of our cultural interpretations of the world requires a considerable effort. It requires both educating the mind to identify the cultural boundaries within which we operate and it requires the willingness to venture into the foreign and to potentially be changed by it.

What one may discern from this short analysis is the focus on the concept of boundaries. The idea that Lo Bianco and his associates seek to communicate here is that the primary role of FL education should sensitize children about cultural boundaries. Once aware of those boundaries, children will be able to flexibly position themselves in and out and throughout this process. They will learn how to distance themselves from their local culture to reach the understanding that their own culture represents one world view among others. Therefore, what the AL approach offers to children is the chance to exercise engagement of the young self with the other and gain substantial elasticity to transcend cultural boundaries. They will become skilled negotiators rather than receptors within these encounters. Their view of the world and themselves will enable them to cultivate a sense of cultural relativism that qualifies as a sort of cultural immunity against any behavioral anomalies such as chauvinism and hostility to diversity. In sum, the essence of FL learning in ECE education is to immunize children against the dogmatic and oppositional behavioral patterns emanating from one's confinement to the narrow boundaries of his/her native language rather than simply treating the very language as another skill to master.

Aside from the purported value that the AL approach may add to ECE within a larger project of citizenship education, there is ample reason to assert that it can be usefully and feasibly adopted by ECE practitioners. Quite the reverse, the current FL learning practice in Tunisia's ECE requires extensive educator training and, obviously, trainees knowledgeable enough about a given language to secure the "transfer" process of linguistic information to children. This of course is understood within the *technicist* spirit of excellence and the market-minded view of languages such as English and French as tools for professional achievement. This reality ignores the profile of ECE graduates whose training is rather multidisciplinary and polyvalent reflecting the complexity of their future vocations. Nevertheless, a principled adoption of an AL-oriented model of education does not necessitate an advanced command of a variety of languages where the ECE practitioners undertake roles (e.g., facilitators, coaches, group animators, etc.) they are able to handle. Engagement in such an experience would make considerable sense to them understanding that they are acting within a clear vision of education for citizenship where the ultimate goal of FL education, as Lo Bianco et al. ([24]: 5) maintain, is to undergo an "experience of enrichment, discovery, wonder, principled compromise rather than domination, and peace rather than confrontation."

5. Conclusion

The present paper has the case-building purpose to introduce the plurilingual perspective as a viable option that may add pedagogical substance and efficiency to FL education for young children. Motivated by the case of my teaching experience at an institution specialized in training early childhood educators, the paper attempted at first to diagnose the main issue burdening this subfield of education that is the lack of a guiding frame of reference. Signs reflecting such absence of a vision appear in the unclear objectives establishing the frame of reference for FL educator training and the recourse to mainstream teaching models designed for a learning community stratified in accordance with proficiency differentials

rather than age categories. Alternatively, the paper sheds light on an approach bent on exposing young children to unfamiliar languages far away from the concept of acquisition and more into the values of discovery and reflection.

The AL approach, widely researched and implemented in the past two decades across European and North American educational communities, has the capacity to (i) cultivate or, at least, contribute to identities that favor openness, empathy, and cultural relativism, (ii) profess critical thinking style among youngsters and ward off forms of rigidity such as of stereotyping, and (iii) promote metalinguistic awareness through the development of the basic linguistic habits (e.g., observation and reflection) as well as favorable attitudes and the predisposition to negotiate and acquire new languages in their future academic career. The feasibility of the AL approach in the Tunisian educational system is also discussed in this paper, as it follows that benefits for FL education can amount to its ability to grapple with issues that related the anomalies of chauvinism and fundamentalism increasingly plaguing the Tunisian collective psyche. An additional benefit consists in the technical solutions that would make of FL education an approachable enterprise in as much as ECE practitioners playing new purposeful and easy-to-handle roles are concerned.

It seems difficult to deny that the introduction of the AL approach is fully engrained in the politics of childhood education. A closer scrutiny of the big picture of this critical domain in Tunisia invites the assertion that we are in the middle of two contrasting agendas, one agenda which champions a progressive model of education for citizenship and another agenda which attempts to promote forms of fundamentalism and cultural prejudice through disseminating *madrassa*-based models of teaching. As the latter is gaining ground in our preschool system due to several reasons such as the waning role of the Tunisian state, it is scholars' social and political responsibility to instill a number of revisions in order to energize the former agenda that endorses values attendant to citizenship building. At this point, broaching FL education within a clear vision based on a plurilingual perspective would in part contribute to cultivating identities that see cultural diversity as inviting and not as threatening. This is possible through opening the young selves to third places wherein they will be able to negotiate healthy flexible relationships between their cultural heritage and the other. That being said, our current global context, teeming with inevitable cross-cultural encounters that yield assorted forms of collisions, overlaps, and tension, stipulates forms of education sustaining cultural relativism. The adoption of the AL approach in ECE is therefore to be looked at as a form of investment in receptive approachable behavioral models that involve empathy, respect for differences, and sense of belonging to both local and global citizenry. The battle is far from being neutral.
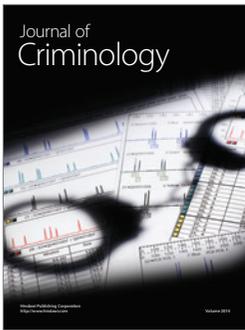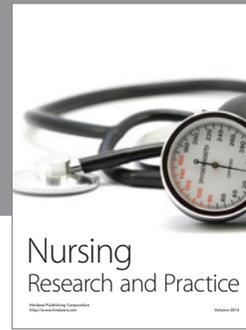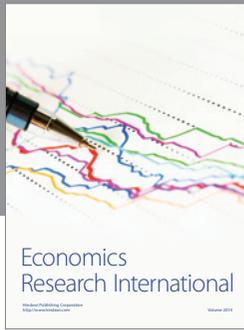
Conflict of Interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

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