

The necessity of learning English in multilingual Algeria: Belhadj Bouchaib University as a case study

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Abstract

English is believed to be the language of science and technology; it helps increase the quality of education and promotes social and technological progress. This paper aimed at scrutinising the students' language preference as a medium of instruction and their attitudes towards an entire English-based instruction. Its significance was established in checking whether or not English is a prerequisite among the learners via a written open-ended questionnaire and oral interview sessions. The present study is built on a mixed method approach to data collection and a probability sampling including 42 master students. These students receive their lectures in French. The findings revealed that the participants seem to hold in high esteem English and appraise it, for it is a valuable means of job opportunities and knowledge transfer compared with French, a language they consider far less effective for their professional career and the prosperity and socio-economic growth of their country.

Keywords: English, higher education, learning, multilingual Algeria, prerequisite.

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1. Introduction

Algeria is a culturally diverse and a linguistically heterogeneous society. Three languages are distinctive: Arabic, with its different forms; classical Arabic (CA), the language of the Holy Qur'an; and standard Arabic (SA), also called literary Arabic or modern Standard Arabic, which is the mother tongue of no sector in the community and children usually become aware of it until school age. Algerian Arabic (AA) is the form of Arabic used in everyday talk, in addition to Tamazight and French, even though a host language like English (the 1980s–1990s), and has recently appeared in the Algerian linguistic landscape. Besides English, other foreign languages such as German, Spanish and Russian, of course, existed during this period, but their involvement has not been as significant as English (Belmihoub, 2012). However, there is a lack of research on documenting the spread of English in Algeria, and more particularly, in the educational sphere. Berns (2005) has sketched out a research agenda to address the problem of lack of research on, for instance, the context of the Middle East and particularly North Africa which is under-represented in World Englishes research. Berns' (2005, p. 91) proposed research agenda involves, for example, 'drawing profiles of countries and regions where none have yet been done'. Algeria is among those countries where no sociolinguistic profiles have been achieved yet.

The rivalry between Arabic and French discussed by Sayahi (2014) has paved the way to English expanding not only in Algeria but also in the Arab Maghreb as a whole. In fact, with an intensified presence of English comes a reinforced competition with French. The aim of this study is to detect the students' language preference as a medium of instruction (MI), in addition to their perceptions towards an entire English-based education. In other words, this study investigated the following research questions:

1. Which language do students prefer as an MI and why?
2. What are students' attitudes towards an English-based education?

The students under investigation are from telecommunications and civil engineering majors, and they receive their lectures in French. The importance of this study lies in checking whether or not English learning constitutes a necessity among the students of Belhadj Bouchaib University. That is why it is of paramount importance to encompass the role of French in the Algerian higher education sector and check whether or not the potential of this language keeps the English language's influence limited and remains a hegemonic language in its own right.

2. Literature review

2.1. A present-day perspective on multilingualism in the Algerian higher educational sector

As far as higher education is concerned, despite the strong Arabisation policy that has been implemented, French has remained a prominent language in significant streams like science, technology, engineering and medicine. Instruction has suffered given a lack of Arabic books and Arabic-speaking teachers. The lack of adequate terminology and language in SA in the above-cited fields has been particularly constraining and consequently French is the key language for studies in the scientific disciplines (Benrabah, 2014).

In a research survey conducted by Chaouche (2006) in Oran, the second economic capital in Algeria, most university students who participated in the study believed that teaching in Algeria should be either bilingual (35%) or multilingual (46%) and that Algeria needs a multilingual reform (49%). In an analogous study, a tendency of using French in a variety of social and official contexts was also detected. Indeed, when informants were asked in which language they would prefer to study, they revealed the following: French (61%), AA (33%), CA (16%), and Berber (10%). A general comment as regards the use of French was that it was 'omnipresent in social life' (Chaouche, 2006, pp. 34–7). A linguistic verity is that French is not perceived negatively and despite the joint Arabisation efforts since

independence, French is still present and retains a significant space in the Algerian linguistic landscape. 'Algeria is not condemned to push the "Stockholm Syndrome" to its extreme that links to France. It would be a linguistic and cultural suicide for Algeria' (Ghanmi, 2019, p. 13).

However, a new higher education system that favours multilingualism has been carried out since the early 2000s. This system is based on Europe's Bologna Agreement (Belmihoub, 2012). This agreement was originally designed to foster research and economic cooperation between European nations and was later expanded to encompass a few North African countries through programmes such as ERASMUS (European Commission Education and Culture DG, 2010) (Belmihoub, 2012). The reforms following the Bologna Agreement as a model were achieved in the hope of promoting students' and scholars' exchange and the identification of Algerian degrees internationally. English has become the common language that aids the Bologna Agreement's mission, thanks to the linguistic and cultural divergence of all of the countries included in the European Union and North Africa. Consequently, the reform of education in Algeria involved emboldening multilingualism, encompassing French and English.

2.2. The potential role of English in Algeria

Starting from 1995, Algeria witnessed several new developments in relation to language policy and the role of English. In 2008, a partnership between the British Council and the Ministry of National Education arose to evolve English language learning and teaching in Algerian middle schools. Then, in 2012, the British Council, in partnership with the well-known newspaper Echorouk, launched a programme to provide electronic and printed entertainment, in addition to educational articles and exercises for all dwellers showing interest in learning English.

In 2013, the US Embassy in Algeria in partnership with Berlitz Centre started offering free English language classes for learners of distinct ages. In 2019, Tayeb Bouzid, the ex-Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, urged university rectors to encourage the success of the exploration process on advocating and amplifying the use of English at Algerian universities. He wrote 'Within the framework of the policy to encourage and strengthen the use of English to give better visibility of education and scientific activities in higher education, I urge you to use both Arabic and English in official documents' (cited in Ghanmi, 2019, p. 13). To this, he adds 'the French language does not get us anywhere' (in Ghanmi, 2019, p. 13). The move, designed as a step towards having English replace French as the dominant foreign language in Algeria, sparked a fierce debate about the country's strong linguistic and cultural ties to France 57 years after the end of French colonial rule that lasted 130 years (Ghanmi, 2019).

Albeit Bouzid's initiative is held in high esteem by many sides of the population, it is facing criticism by many university researchers (Idir, 2019; L'expression, 2019; Meddi, 2019; Rifa, 2019, as cited in Ghanmi, 2019). Eliciting how English has spread in Algeria is crucial to several stakeholders. First, Foreign English Language teachers could benefit from becoming conscious of the context in which they work. Second, local policymakers could verify such a synthesis and better comprehend the extent of the presence of English in society to aid carry on making judicious and cognisant decisions. English had been making progress in Algeria following economic and social dynamics before the decision to encourage its use at the tertiary level. Some ministries, like energy and defence, supported employees to learn English to interact with foreign counterparts. Expansive access to the Internet has also aided in the spread of English (Ghanmi, 2019).

2.3. The expansion of English in Algeria

Algeria is among the countries that have promoted the use of English to ensure better communication and better access to knowledge for students, workers and researchers. Despite the language of instruction is either Arabic, French or Tamazight, Algerian decision-makers found it

necessary to implement the use of English at all levels of education due to its crucial role in almost all fields. According to Zoughoul (2003, p. 122):

In Arab North Africa, and despite the fact that French has had a strong foot hold in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, it has been retreating and losing a lot of ground to English. In fact, the tendency of what can be termed a shift from French to English in thus countries cannot be cancelled.

In the British Council's 1984 communique, an understandable sociolinguistic portrait of English in Algeria described English as a third language (British Council, 1984). During the same period, many teachers were British immigrants and the Algerian government wanted to recruit more. The British Council also stated that some persons without excluding Francophones, reported to make English the primary foreign language to be taught (Belmihoub, 2017). This is because English is believed to be the language of science and technology and has the potential to help increase the quality of education and promote social progress. English in Algeria took British and American support and approval in the 1980s. Even today, in 2021, many Algerians still receive scholarships from the UK and the United States.

In 1993, the Algerian government affirmed that English was an international language, a language that allowed access to science and technology and, thus, it needed to be offered as early as fourth grade. According to Benrabah (2007c), in 1993 in Algeria, fourth graders in and around the capital city Algiers had, for the first time, the option of choosing English, the other option being French, to fulfil their foreign language requirement. Nevertheless, this experimental programme was unsuccessful as most parents chose French over English.

Since 1995, Algeria has witnessed many new developments that raise questions about possible new roles that English might play in Algeria's already intricate linguistic landscape. These developments entail an important exile of Francophone intellectuals and a shift from a socialist economy that supported modern SA to a market economy that requires the learning of foreign languages (Belmihoub, 2012). Globalisation helped in the expansion of English in a competitive linguistic milieu. While French still pervades the tongues of millions of Algerians, English enjoys overwhelming approval among them.

According to Belmihoub (2017), 'The UK also engages in academic and cultural exchange with Algeria'. For example, according to the HuffPost Algerie (2014, p. 5), eight of the prestigious Chevening scholarships were granted to outstanding Algerian professionals for MA programmes in British universities'. The aim is to create a professional hook-up and endorse progress in Algeria. Some of the most encouraging areas involve politics, economics and miscellaneous engineering programmes. Britain also intended to prepare 500 Algerian PhD students in British universities between 2015 and 2020 (Belmihoub, 2017).

In Algeria, English has an auspicious role since it is the second foreign language after French. Indeed, its role took a challenging way since 2000, where the government introduced the educational reform that was highly encouraged by the United States. One of the principal changes in this reform is that English is taught starting from the first grade in Algerian middle schools, and as Benrabah (2007b, p. 9) correctly said,

The early 2000s was characterised by the transition to globalised pedagogy or the free market economy. It is also related to the high cooperation with the United States of America and Canada who are committed to freely support this educational reform policy in Algeria.

English holds neither an official nor a national status in Algeria; it is sometimes used by some Algerians from different ages and genders who try to learn it for its highly acclaimed role in almost all fields of life. According to Benrabah (2007c), the main reason why English has spread so much faster than French in post-colonial Algeria is that it fosters linguistic peace and contributes to social and

political stability, and it has a role in increasing access to economic opportunities to improve the socio-economic condition of Algerians. The notion of 'de-ethnicised English' was introduced by Benrabah (2009b, p. 257) who defined the term as an

“open” variety, a variety that is not associated with Britain’s colonial past or any of the cultures of the communities whose native language is English (e.g., the UK, the US, Australia); thus, anyone, including Algerians, can appropriate this variety as if it were their own’.

This variety promotes long-term peace in Algeria, including political, economic and social stabilities. Moreover, English contributes to promoting friendship and mutual understanding between Algeria and the rest of the world. A social point of view is that the use of social networks like Facebook and YouTube, largely, contributes to the expansion of English since they are useful to communicate with people around the world.

2.4. English among university students

At the tertiary level, English is introduced in different curricula and in various departments, either as a main subject in the English department where students are required to attend the various subjects such as literature, civilisation, linguistics, phonetics, oral expression, written expression, grammar and didactics, or merely as an additional but 'obligatory' subject in other departments, especially those of science, technology and engineering where students are required to follow English for specific purposes courses, depending on their needs and their area of research.

The advent of such social media spaces such as YouTube and Facebook has tremendously helped Algerian students to express themselves in English and become users of this language in an unprecedented way. As an illustration, there is a Facebook group of the Algerian Association of students of English, and many of these students are highly fluent in this language, while some Algerian English students panic in class and use fragmented sentences typical of online language use.

According to Belmihoub (2017), in a more recent study conducted by Borni (2017) where she explored Algerian students' use of the language outside of the classroom and after surveying 30 English master students, the researcher noted that 89% agree and strongly agree that it is important for Algerians to learn English. Borni (2017) adds that 70% use English at home, while the rest do not, mainly because they use AA instead and are not familiar with anyone else with whom to use English. While 53% of respondents do not use English with 'native speakers', 46% do so sometimes, which is still a large segment by Algeria's standards. And in terms of feeling able to communicate about day-to-day activities, 76% claimed their capability to do so. As far as French is concerned, 96% of the respondents reported that French is dominant because of colonisation, and 86% agreed and strongly agreed that, if English were to gain the status of a primary foreign language, Algerians would use it more than French (Belmihoub, 2017). Moreover, at present, an increasing number of students using English join language centres to learn English as they believe that this language opens doors to travel and study abroad. These students need to reach higher standards in English for their quality education.

Furthermore, in a more recent study conducted by Djennane (2016, p. 219),

All interviewees, with no exception, made the point clear that English is the language every student should be concerned with; some of them went to the extent that English should replace French in the Algerian universities.

Currently, any researcher is required to submit at least a summary in English before taking his/her diploma, and most students, especially postgraduate students, face language difficulties when attempting to publish in English, and any job entailing computer programming, is in English; job applicants are automatically expected to take a linguistic test in English to be recruited; that is why it is of paramount importance for students to learn the language. In many cases, students who show

proficiency in English have a definite advantage over those who do not. The present paper aims at scrutinising the status of English among university students, along with their perceptions towards an entire English-based education.

3. Methodology

This section is devoted to the methodology followed in this study.

3.1. Research design

The research at hand is based on the case study method. It followed a quantitative and qualitative design to explore whether English is a prerequisite among the learners studying in the fields of telecommunications and civil engineering and whether they consider it as a bane or a boon.

3.2. Participants

The participants of the present study included 42 master students from the telecommunications and civil engineering department studying at Belhadj Bouchaib University of Ain-Temouchent, a town situated in the north-west of Algeria. The participants' age ranged between 21 and 32. These students receive their lectures in French and study English as a compulsory subject once a week. The type of this sampling was random or probability sampling meaning that 'every item in the population has an equal chance of being included in sample' (Taherdoost, 2016, p. 21).

3.3. Research instruments

This study relied on two research instruments: a close-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire was administered to the participants to get their views about the language they prefer as an MI and to detect their attitudes towards an entire English-based education. This questionnaire was measured on four questions and a 3-point Likert scale that includes nine items to obtain the participants' level agreement which is as follows: agree, neutral and disagree. The rationale behind using the Likert scale, for this study, is because measuring attitudes in the field of language attitudes varies from one study to another. A semi-structured interview is another tool used to get a deeper understanding of the issue, and to check and reinforce the participants' replies obtained from the questionnaire.

3.4. Research procedures

The following procedures were carried out during the data collection stage. As far as the questionnaire is concerned, an appointment was made with the students to allow the researcher administering the questionnaire to them. Subsequently, the researcher met the students at the library outside class study time and the purpose of the study was explained to them. Then the questionnaire was distributed to them and they took 10 minutes to complete it. Concerning the interview, it was conducted with each student face-to-face; it took 15 minutes and it was transcribed. The above-mentioned procedures took 5 weeks.

4. Findings

4.1. Questionnaire findings

The data results obtained from the questionnaire are presented as follows:

Q1: Out of the following languages, what is the language you consider the 'World' language today?

Table 1. Students' perception of the 'World' language today

Number = 42	Arabic	French	English
Civil engineering = 20	2 = 10%	4 = 20%	14 = 70%
Telecommunications = 22	3 = 13.64%	7 = 31.82%	12 = 54.54%

As clearly shown in Table 1, and when asked about the language students consider the 'World' language today, English reached the highest score since a ratio of 70% of the participants from civil engineering and 54.54% from telecommunications engineering departments opted for this language and considered it as the World language today.

Q2: Which of these languages do you consider more suitable in the field of your study? Is it Arabic, French or English?

Table 2. Students' perception of the best language as an MI

Number = 42	Arabic	French	English
Civil engineering = 20	2 = 10%	6 = 30%	12 = 60%
Telecommunications = 22	1 = 4.54%	8 = 36.37%	13 = 59.09%

Table 2 clearly shows that most participants from both majors perceived English to be the best language as an MI. French, however, reached a score of 30% among the respondents studying civil engineering and 36.37% among those studying telecommunications engineering, while Arabic gained the lowest score concerning both majors.

Q3: Do you want to substitute French with English as an MI?

When asked about their opinions about the substitution of the ex-colonial language by English, the participants' responses from both majors were in favour of the globalised language, English.

Table 3. Students' opinion about the replacement of French by English as an MI.

Number = 42	Yes	No	Neutral
Civil engineering = 20	18 = 90%	2 = 10%	0 = 0%
Telecommunications = 22	19 = 86.36%	3 = 13.64%	0 = 0%

As clearly shown in Table 3, 18 participants from the civil engineering stream rating 90% and 19 participants rating 86.36% from telecommunications engineering agreed on the replacement of French by English, minority students from both majors rating 10% and 13.64%, respectively, disagreed on this suggestion, and nobody remained neutral.

To detect the students' attitudes towards the languages at play, i.e., French and English, the results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Students' attitudes towards French and English

Item	Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1	Anyone who uses French is considered a nerd	8 = 19.05%	2 = 4.76%	32 = 76.19%
2	I feel proud of myself when I speak in French.	12 = 28.58%	1 = 2.38%	29 = 69.04%
3	I think that mastering English is important for job opportunities and for those who want to carry on their studies abroad.	33 = 78.58%	2 = 4.76%	7 = 16.66%
4	French will always have a higher status than English in Algeria.	17 = 40.48%	0 = 0%	25 = 59.52%
5	I think that the scientific material presented in French is easier to understand than the one presented in English.	14 = 33.34%	1 = 2.38%	27 = 64.28%
6	I see that using English in everyday life is an indicator of intellectual and cultural progress.	28 = 66.66%	2 = 4.76%	12 = 28.58%

7	I think that English is more suitable for good quality education, especially in technical and scientific streams.	30 = 71.43%	1 = 2.38%	11 = 26.19%
8	I feel more comfortable when using French in my field of studies.	20 = 47.62%	2 = 4.76%	20 = 47.62%
9	I feel more comfortable when using English in my field of studies	22 = 42.86%	2 = 4.76%	22 = 52.38%

As exemplified in Table 4, a vast majority of the respondents disagreed that anyone who uses French is considered a nerd. Similarly, most of them show disagreement about feeling proud when they speak French. Indeed, the highest number (69.04%) disagreed and (28.58%) agreed, while only 2.38% remained neutral to this statement. Most students ratings (78.58%) agreed that mastering English is important for job opportunities and for those who want to carry on their studies abroad while minority students ratings (16.66%) disagreed. Again, an important proportion of the respondents rating 59.52% showed their disagreement as regards French will always have a higher status than English in Algeria. 40.48% agreed on this statement and nobody stayed neutral. Around more than half of the participants ratings (64.28%) disagreed that the scientific material presented in French is easier to understand than the one presented in English. However, 33.34% agreed with this statement and a tiny minority of about 2.38% remained neutral. Another important trend demonstrates a considerable rate of about 66.66% who agreed with the statement that using English in everyday life is an indicator of intellectual and cultural progress where there is a small group rating (28.58%) who disagreed. 71.43% agreed that English is more suitable for good quality education, especially in technical and scientific streams while a small group rating (26.19%) disagreed and only 2.38% stayed neutral. Surprisingly, an equal rate of 47.62% is attributed to those who either agreed or disagreed with being more comfortable when using French in their field of studies. The highest score (52.38%) was attributed to those who disagreed on the following: that they feel more comfortable using English in their field of study, while 42.86% disagreed and a minority proportion rating 4.76% remained neutral.

4.2. Interview results

In this section, the results obtained from the interview sessions will be presented.

Q1: How would you react if English replaces French as a primary foreign language?

The following are some of the participants' replies:

'We need fluency in English rather than French, especially those technical terms which will help us in our professional career'.

'However, we usually exchange text messages in French between us, but we rather do it in English since we lack fluency in this language and we need to better learn it'.

'We hope that English will become the first foreign language in our country since it is the language of science and technology.'

'Learning through English is the wish of many students if we were competent in English, we would prefer it because French does not serve us well abroad'.

Q2: Which reasons push you to favour English as a study language?

The following are some of the participants' responses:

'English is an international language; it is also the language of wider communication and technology. It is also more prestigious than French and we strongly believe that it is the most appropriate language to pursue our studies'.

'The ex-minister, Mr Bouzid, and the actual Minister, Mr Abdelbaki Benziane have talked about the initiative of substituting French by English; the new government also contemplates this strategy, but nothing has been done yet'.

Q3: What do you think of an entire English-based education during the coming years?

Some of the participants' replies are as follows:

'French is still the key language in higher education especially in scientific and technical streams, but we hope things will change shortly'.

'We suggest a complete English-based education starting from primary school since this language has widely spread around the globe compared with French'.

'English is the world language today and we need it in the future, particularly in our professional career; we also need it for our training and even in France, students of science and technology receive their lectures in English!'

'Documents English especially those related to our field of study are highly available, especially on the net, and this will facilitate doing research'

5. Discussion

To provide answers to the above-cited research question (see Introduction), the findings obtained from the questionnaire depicted the following arguments: most respondents believed that English is the 'World' language today (Benrabah, 2014). Then, when asked about their opinions as regards the replacement of French by English, unexpectedly, the competition between the two European languages turned in favour of English for students of civil and telecommunications engineering. However, the ex-colonial language is still the key language for studies in scientific disciplines in higher education (Benrabah, 2007a). The results revealed that the students' attitudes towards English as an MI were positive, whereas French lacks preference despite its necessity. The participants also believed that English is more useful and practical, since it opens doors for job opportunities and for studying abroad (Belmihoub, 2017). However, in terms of linguistic comfort, French reached a higher score compared with English; this can be explained as follows: students are quite aware of the significance of English in their field of studies, but they still lack fluency in this language; they also need to be taught the language especially for their specific needs.

As far as the results from the oral interview are concerned, they indicated that if English were to gain the status of the primary foreign language, students would use it more than French and this is stated in their claims. When asked about the reasons that push them to favour English as a study language, the respondents provided us with different replies: they opined to its actual importance, its prestige and its status as a language of wider communication. They also pointed out to the declaration made by the ex-minister of higher education about the reinforcement of English in higher education. The students seem to approve this declaration which, unfortunately, is still on hold. In fact, the participants from both majors seem to hold in high esteem English and appraise it as a boon since it is a useful means of job opportunities, studies abroad and knowledge transfer compared with French, a language they consider far less effective for their professional career and for the socio-economic growth and prosperity of their country (Belmihoub, 2017).

6. Conclusion and recommendations

As the purpose of this paper has been to scrutinise the students' language preference as an MI and their attitudes towards an entire English-based instruction, the findings have revealed that the participants under investigation disclosed high awareness and appreciation towards the use of English, although they lack competency in its use. They considered this language as the most suitable means of instruction as it opens doors for job opportunities and studying abroad. Nevertheless, the ex-colonial

language, French, has been considered far less effective to carry on their studies albeit, it is still the key language for studies in scientific and technical streams. This, in fact, provides insights into the nature of the spread of English in Algeria's multilingual context. Policymakers and stakeholders' bottom-up initiatives also contribute to the spread of English; that is why, they should be aware of the importance of implementing English as an MI in higher education, especially in scientific and technical streams; however, in Algeria, there is no top-down linguistic law or regulation that imposes the exclusive use of French to teach sciences.

For English to reach the status of the first foreign language in Algeria and to take the place of French as an MI, a lot needs to be carried out as this initiative needs to go through a whole language planning to reach the desired objectives. It is also noteworthy to mention that the results obtained for this study cannot be generalised over the entire Algerian universities as it investigated a small sample from one research site only while a deeper investigation is needed to learn more about the real factors behind the participants' attitudes towards the exclusive use of English as an MI.

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