

Multilingual Education in the Algerian University: Blurring Borders and Unveiling Linguistic Dimensions

L'éducation Multilingue à L'université Algérienne : Brouiller les Frontières et Dévoiler les Dimensions Linguistiques

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Abstract

The study investigates the pros and cons of the sudden imposition of ELT in higher education for scientific fields and its impact on both lecturers and students. A mixed methods approach was employed including 15 days of in-class observation and interviews with 15 lecturers from various scientific departments at Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret. The findings highlight the need for a gradual transition that respects the principles of bilingual education while incorporating EFL in the teaching of scientific disciplines. Thoughtful decision-making, comprehensive planning, and ongoing evaluation are crucial to addressing the challenges and ensuring a successful integration of ELT instruction at the university level. By bridging the gap between bilingual education and sudden language transitions, Algeria can create an environment that promotes linguistic proficiency and scientific excellence, preparing students for a globalised world. This research provides valuable insights for policymakers and educational institutions implementing language transitions.

Keywords: Bilingual Education-Higher Education-EFL Language Policy-Lecturers' Attitudes, Students' Impact

Résumé

L'étude examine les avantages et les inconvénients de l'imposition soudaine de L'enseignement en anglais (EA) à l'enseignement supérieur pour les domaines scientifiques et son impact sur les enseignants et les étudiants. Une approche méthodologique mixte a été utilisée, comprenant 15 jours d'observation en classe et des entretiens avec 15 professeurs de divers départements scientifiques à l'Université Ibn Khaldoun de Tiaret. Les résultats soulignent la nécessité d'une transition progressive qui respecte les principes de l'éducation bilingue tout en intégrant l'EA dans des disciplines scientifiques. Une prise de décision réfléchie, une planification exhaustive et une évaluation continue sont essentielles pour relever les défis et assurer une intégration réussie de l'EA au niveau universitaire. En comblant le fossé entre l'éducation bilingue et les transitions linguistiques soudaines, l'Algérie peut créer un environnement qui favorise la maîtrise linguistique et l'excellence scientifique, préparant les étudiants à un monde globalisé. Cette recherche fournit des informations aux décideurs politiques et aux établissements d'enseignement qui mettent en œuvre des transitions linguistiques.

Mots-clés: Enseignement bilingue -Enseignement supérieur-Politique linguistique de l' L'enseignement en anglais (EA)-Attitudes des enseignants, Impact des étudiants

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Introduction

Since language education is a crucial aspect of language management, planning, and policy, Algeria has prioritized foreign language learning and teaching due to the limitations of the 'Arabization Policy' that has been unable to respond to the economic, political needs, and job prospects nor to suit the technological progress, world's new challenges and public life management that have been closely tied to the development of information technology and strongly imposed by the complex processes of globalisation.

In the realm that lies between bilingual education and the sudden imposition of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in higher education for teaching scientific subjects, a significant gap emerges. This gap signifies the need for a thoughtful and gradual transition that respects the principles of bilingual education while acknowledging the importance of incorporating EFL in the teaching of scientific disciplines. Recognising this delicate balance, Algeria's educational system aims to strike a harmonious chord by implementing a strategic and phased approach. This approach seeks to seamlessly integrate EFL into the higher education curricula, ensuring that students receive comprehensive language support while effectively acquiring the necessary scientific knowledge. By bridging this gap, Algeria strives to cultivate a learning environment that fosters linguistic proficiency and scientific excellence, preparing students to navigate the complexities of today's globalized world with confidence and competence.

Indeed, hasty decisions and spur-of-the-moment actions in language implementation have led to numerous problems and errors in language usage. In the context of bilingual education and the sudden imposition of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in higher education for scientific subjects, the lack of careful planning and consideration can result in a range of challenges. These challenges may include inadequate language proficiency levels among students, difficulties in adapting to new teaching methodologies, inconsistencies in curriculum design, and insufficient support for teachers in delivering effective instruction. Furthermore, rushed language policies may fail to address the broader sociocultural and contextual factors influencing language acquisition and usage. It is crucial to emphasize the significance of thoughtful decision-making, comprehensive planning, and ongoing evaluation to mitigate these problems and ensure the successful integration of language instruction within the educational system. By taking a measured and holistic approach, Algeria can proactively address the challenges arising from hasty language decisions and pave the way for a more effective and sustainable language education framework.

As our focus revolves around examining the advantages and disadvantages of the abrupt introduction of ELT in the scientific fields within higher education, as well as its effects on the academic performance of lecturers and students, we aim to offer guidance to policymakers and educational institutions on implementing multi/bilingual language education transitions successfully and sustainably. Consequently, several interconnected research enquiries have emerged. These enquiries encompass the following:

1. How do scientific fields' teachers perceive the sudden language transition from French to English at Ibn Khaldoun University?
2. How far does the abrupt language transition impact scientific fields' teachers' pedagogical practices and their ability to adapt themselves to the new language requirements?
3. To what extent do the immediate effects of the language transition impact the teaching process and student learning outcomes in scientific subjects?

To meet the research questions and achieve the objectives of this investigation, the following research hypotheses have been developed. These hypotheses serve a twofold purpose: first, to

examine the advantages and disadvantages of impulsive decision-making and sudden actions in language implementation; and second, to explore the immediate effects of these decisions on the higher education system while identifying the challenges, considerations, and recommendations necessary to overcome the overnight shift project.

- a) Teachers will perceive the advantages of the language transition as improved access to international scientific field/progress and enhanced job prospects. However, they also consider that this transition include disadvantages like difficulties in adapting to new teaching methodologies and lower language proficiency levels among students.
- b) The abrupt language transition poses challenges for teachers in adjusting their pedagogical practices and delivering effective instruction in English to a certain extent.
- c) The sudden language transition has immediate effects on the teaching process and student learning outcomes in scientific subjects, to a certain extent, potentially impacting comprehension of scientific concepts and overall academic performance.

Based on the aforementioned research inquiries and hypotheses, this study centres its primary focus on achieving the following set of objectives:

To

- a. Explore the perceived advantages and disadvantages of the sudden language transition from French to English in selected scientific fields at Ibn Khaldoun University.
- b. Investigate the impact of the abrupt language transition on teachers' pedagogical practices and their ability to adapt to new language requirements.
- c. Assess the immediate effects of the language transition on the teaching process and student learning outcomes in scientific subjects.

1. An Overview of the Related Literature

It seems crucial, in this section, to provide a succinct overview of the most significant sociolinguistic circumstances in post-independent and contemporary Algeria, addressing the reasons behind the linguistic clashes resulting from neglecting the historical realities of Algeria's diverse linguistic landscape including language management, planning, and policy implemented since independence. The Algerian decision-makers have been confronted with the challenges of revitalizing Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), re/ranking Berber, and introducing foreign language instruction to adapt to technological advancements. These initiatives have generated mixed reactions from supporters and opponents.

1.1 Arabisation Policy, MSA Limitations, and the French-to-English 'Shift Project'

The significant impact of French on Algeria's cultural, socio-linguistic, economic, and political aspects in both colonial and post-colonial eras has deeply shaped much of the linguistic reality of current Algeria. During the colonial period, French was imposed to undermine Islamic values and blur national identity. However, since the wake of independence, the French language has been widely embraced even more than before, challenging claims of its imposition on the Algerian people (Bouamrane, 1986, p. 40). French has become the language predominantly used by the educated population for prestige, and even the uneducated or ordinary individuals unconsciously incorporate it into their daily conversations due to its integration into Algerian Dialectal Arabic

In an attempt to revive the glories of the usurped Arabo-Islamic culture, the 1963 Constitution by Algeria's first president Ahmed Benbella assumed the execution of the

‘Arabization Policy’ as a brave plan for dismissing French from the Algerian speech repertoire, as an anti-colonial disdain for all that is French within the Algerian society. Many fundamentalists go even further to assert that French is the language of the enemy and reject to bring about in either daily speech or formal settings.

By the same token, president Houari Boumediene's 1976 Principle Constitution, reconfirmed the worth of the ‘Arabization Policy’ by including Arabic in the Third Amendment, for reviving the Arab-Islamic culture and governing the national identity. To argue, Houari Boumediene stated that “our efforts will remain in vain, our personality incomplete, and our body without a soul” (as cited in Berrabah, 2023, p. 87)

Between the ebb of overusing French and the tide of Arabizing Algeria, it might be valuable to reconsider the linguistic mosaic in the Speech of the Algerians “since it seems quite a challenging task to put away the heavy linguistic heritage of Algeria due to the term of linguistic contacts and the coexistence of three major groups of languages” (Berrabah, 2014, p. 17). In a word, the accomplishment of Arabization within the Algerian context is easier to talk about than to put into action since it necessitates a brusquely sweeping move from the linguistic melting pot to monolingualism that could backfire on the speech behaviour of the Algerians.

Since the Arabization policies, as constitutionally proclaimed to be best represented by MSA, have shown their limitations and failed to satisfy the necessities of modernity and technology, French is still dominant in several domains of public life such as in university, medicine, banking, insurance, telecommunication, press, etc. and has become, across the full range of contexts, the language to be employed by the overwhelming majority of educated speakers for prestigious reasons and even unconsciously by the uneducated individuals in their daily conversation as a main component of Algerian Dialectal Arabic. In this respect, Berrabah (2014) stated that:

The execution of the ‘Policy of Arabisation’ has demonstrated once more its inaptitude to fulfil the Algerian job markets’ demands for the reason that Arabized students even with higher university degrees are less likely to find posts in comparison to their French-educated counterparts (p.18).

Accordingly, this gives the impression that the Arabization policies have demonstrated their ineptness on the Arabophone elites who have been underprivileged in the uppermost salaried governmental professions in Algeria. It has become perceptible that the extremely waged occupations have been instead dominated by the socially advantaged Francophones and/or their families who have had the first-rate occasions to be registered sometimes at local private schools or even overseas to attain the essential skills in French.

As already highlighted, French had been the untouchable language in both the political and economic domains until the second decade of independence. During that period, ‘bilingual education’ was implemented in French as the foremost medium of instruction alongside a very restricted use of MSA in education. However, by the late 1970s, MSA had been executed as the solitary medium of instruction, while French was ranked, then, as the First Foreign Language (FFL) to be taught as a self-directed subject matter from the fourth grade of primary education. The launching of the Competency-Based Approach (CBA) in the 2003/4 school year by the Ministry of National Education (MNE) reviewed the teaching of FFL commencing from the second year of primary schooling instead; however, since the 2005/6 school year thus far FFL has been taught starting from the third classes of primary education.

During the last decade of the last Millennium and at the very beginning of the 21st century, it has been supposed that French has become incapable of confronting Western political communiqué and/or worldwide economic transactions with the republic. Thus, a shift project from French to English has been recommended to resolve that shortage. In this vein, Bouhadiba (2002) stated that “English is gaining dominance in the oil sector, computing, and in the scientific and technological documentation” (p. 16).

In the same line of thought, Miliani (2000) stated:

In a situation where the French language has lost much of its ground in the sociocultural and educational environments of the country; the introduction of English is being heralded as the magic solution to all possible ills-including economic, technological and educational ones. (p. 13)

Therefore, some decision-makers in Algeria, according to Berrabah (2014), “felt the need for well-trained teachers of English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL)” (p. 23) as a fundamental means to stay up to date with industry trends and technological advancements.

Right to the point, it is an undisputable verity that ELT and EFL learning/teaching have perceived rather progressive hurdles in Algeria since the wake of independence and touched its zenith in the last decade of the last millennium. In light of this, Berrabah (2023) clarified that:

ELT had occupied the foreground of political debate in the early 1990s. The latter was led by Ali Ben Mohamed, the ex-Minister of the National Education (July 25, 1990-July 19, 1992), whose finely-tuned political/supporting antenna helped to sense the future position of English that, unfortunately, neither of the earlier politicians had been able to perceive nor the subsequent have. The concern was raised about substituting French with English in primary schooling. Regrettably, the idea cost the minister the unfair dismissal against the background of the 1992 Baccalaureate scandal. (p. 98)

Because of that, in the 1993/4 school entrance, the government, without see-through parents' poll results of June 1993 in favour of ELT, opted to introduce English alongside French starting from the fourth grade in just some regional primary schools. This procedure continued until 2003. In 2003/04, the Ministry of National Education (MNE) implemented the Competency-Based Approach (CBA) promoting the start of ELT from the first year and extending it till the fourth grade of middle schooling, with an additional three years of EFL at secondary education. At the higher education level, English is either a major field of study by choice in a standalone department or a compulsory independent subject matter for all other specialities without exception.

1.2 EFL Education Policy at the University

Somewhat tardy in comparison to MNE, the ex-minister of higher education and scientific research, Tayeb Bouzid, in an audacious step, declared at Brothers Mentouri University of Constantine on July 8, 2019, that “French does get you anywhere!” (as cited in Bensouiah, September 14, 2019). Bouzid's exaggerated enthusiasm, which is eagerness to initiate, accommodate change, and a willingness to near-at-hand alternatives pushed him to enact the ordinance of July 21, 2019, which states the compulsory use of Arabic and English in the heads' administrative correspondences and official documents, as he insisted on the heads of higher educational institutions of its immediate execution.

In addition, as an outcome of the national conference of the Algerian universities on August 18, 2019, Bouzid posted on his Facebook account two days later his proposal for promoting English in universities' administrations and predominantly relying on it instead of French to teach the scientific subject fields. Therefore, an opinion poll was carried out by the ministry to determine what both students and lecturers think about the proposal. After the poll closed, 94.3% of respondents were in favour of the inclusion of English and the exclusion of French. From this perspective, Bouzid maintained that:

To increase the visibility of research in higher education institutions...and to open up to the international environment...it has been decided to set up a think-tank of specialists and administration officials to present proposals for promoting the use of English in teaching and research. [Berrabah, trans., 2023]

Bouzid's initiative had acknowledged miscellaneous responses from public opinion and the large majority regarded it to be rather political and it came at the wrong time or just used by him as a purposeful attractive means to climb the wave of El-Harak. Irrespective of the objections or supports to the idea, it has been a gain for English albeit it was to some extent a hasty decision and a spur-of-the-moment action since many mistranslation errors had occurred in many universities, faculties and/or departments' entrance signs and principally by the administrators in some official or correspondence documents.

Since that time onwards, there has been a persistent call from successive heads of the Ministry of Higher Education to teach scientific subjects in English. However, this push has lacked careful prior planning and has been characterized by great insistence and urgency. Some have even gone so far as to demand that professors quickly enrol in training to teach in English. Unfortunately, this training has been surrounded by ambiguity in its methodology on the one hand, relying on Common English for General Purposes (EGP) using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) Levels, rather than providing field-specific English for Specific Purposes (ESP) training and, on the other hand, the selection of teacher trainers have been haphazardly done in the sense that most of them have been either pre-service master's holders or in-service secondary school teachers, with insufficient expertise and time allocated for the training. The responses from teacher-practitioners (trainees) have been mixed, with some welcoming the change and others rejecting it, feeling dissatisfied and surprised.

Furthermore, the ministry had implemented a standard and distance preparatory training programme for new students, i.e., baccalaureate holders for the 2023 session, who were oriented towards the scientific subject fields. This programme had been intended to prepare students for the transition to English-medium instruction in the 2023/2024 academic year, but it was limited to a period not exceeding two months before university entry. Indeed, both students and their teachers have had to try to apply what was written on paper, in the hope of implementing at least a small part of what they have suddenly encountered. The lack of careful planning and the rushed implementation of this initiative have created significant challenges for the whole educational community.

2. Research Methodology, Participants and Data Collection Procedures

To satisfy the requirements of confirming previous findings, scrutinising the research enquiries mentioned earlier, experimenting with the framed hypotheses and achieving the research objectives, the present study used a mixed-methods research paradigm that merged two

qualitative methodologies to investigate the language transition in Algeria's higher education. The methodology incorporated two different data collection instruments, each serving a particular purpose in the study.

The first research tool involved fifteen (15) days of in-class observation, based on Labov's 'Observer's Paradox' (1972), to closely survey lecturers/teacher-practitioners alongside their students in the Mechanical Engineering, Math and Computing, Civil Engineering, and Economy and Management departments at Ibn Khaldoun University. The purpose of the observation was mainly to gain insights into the pedagogical practices, students' learning outcomes, adaptation to the new language requirements, and the challenges faced during the transition.

The second component comprised conducting semi-structured interviews with fifteen (15) esteemed lecturers (teacher-practitioners), who were abruptly involved in teaching exclusively in English. The interviews were made up of five (5) carefully designed items including their teaching experience, speciality and initial instructions, EFL training, EFL challenges in the Algerian context, and expectations or recommendations, tailored to elicit and delve further into their perspectives on the dis/advantages of the sudden shift in language education and its implications for the teaching process and student learning outcomes

3. Findings Analysis and Discussion

The key focus of this section is to confirm the reliability of our research by conducting a thorough findings analysis. Our interpretations are grounded in real evidence to enable the readers to comprehend and evaluate the pros and cons of the EFL Language Policy at the Algerian University. To achieve this, we conducted separate analyses of the developed research tools to emphasize the outcomes of such a hasty decision and spur-of-the-moment action on the whole educational community.

3.1 In-Class Observation Findings

The in-class observation provided valuable insights into how practitioners and their students were struggling to adapt themselves to the new language requirements in their teaching and learning respectively. The study examined the key challenges faced by these practitioners and their students during the transition to English as the medium of instruction/ learning. Additionally, the observation explored the impact of the change in the language of instruction on the teaching/learning process and student learning outcomes.

First and foremost, one of the key findings from the in-class observations was the widespread dissatisfaction with the sudden shift to English as the medium of instruction whereby neither the teacher-practitioners nor their students were satisfied with the hasty decisions and spur-of-the-moment actions that led to this abrupt change. The lack of a well-planned and gradual transition has created significant challenges for both the educators and the learners.

Secondly, the observations revealed that French remains the primary medium of instruction, especially among older teachers, except for subject-specific terminology. This persistence of French as the dominant language of instruction is particularly evident. Additionally, there is a distinct mismatch in the language of instruction, where many handouts, documentation, and references are in English, while the explanations and feedback from

teachers are provided in French. This disconnect has undoubtedly resulted in a suboptimal learning experience for the students.

Furthermore, the quality of the English-medium instruction is often very restricted or limited, lacking the depth and meaningful engagement that is present in the French-language explanations. Consequently, the students' feedback and engagement are more likely to be higher when the instruction is delivered in French rather than English. This finding suggests that the transition to English-medium instruction has not been seamless or effective in enhancing the students' learning experience.

On the whole, the in-class observations have revealed a set of interrelated challenges that have arisen from the sudden shift to English-medium instruction, highlighting the need for a more carefully planned and gradual approach to implementing such a significant change in the language of instruction.

3.2 Interviews Findings

The interviews with the 15 lecturers who were abruptly tasked with teaching exclusively in English revealed their perspectives on the sudden shift in language education, which was contrary to their initial instruction which was in French and their teaching experience which was all in French. The study explored the perceived advantages and disadvantages of this transition, as well as the lecturers' views on the implications for the teaching process and student learning outcomes.

First and foremost, the interviews with lecturers revealed an unwillingness to accept the sudden shift to English as the medium of instruction, especially from experienced and aged teachers, who studied and taught in French for decades. They expressed a lack of clear objectives and expected outcomes for the language change. Furthermore, they felt that no compelling reasons were provided to justify this abrupt transition.

Secondly, the lecturers reported that no serious, comprehensive training in English was provided by the Ministry of Higher Education. Most teacher trainers were either pre-service master's holders or in-service secondary school teachers, with insufficient expertise and time allocated for the training. Consequently, the lecturers felt that the language training was inadequate and did not meet their needs.

Moreover, the language training focused on Common English for General Purposes (EGP) using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) Levels, rather than providing field-specific English for Specific Purposes (ESP) training. This mismatch in the language training further worsened the challenges faced by the lecturers in transitioning to English-medium instruction.

In light of these findings, the lecturers suggested several solutions to address the issues. Firstly, they stated that no civilization has thrived by solely relying on another nation's language, and that translation from foreign languages into Arabic is the key. Secondly, they recommended building a solid foundation of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) in secondary schools before introducing it at the university level, rather than relying on short-term online training. Finally, they suggested providing long-term, fully-funded scholarships for lecturers, especially for novice or newly recruited teachers, to study or acquire in English-speaking countries, instead of investing in non-sensical local, ineffective EGP training.

By and large, the interviews with lecturers highlighted the significant challenges they faced in adapting to the sudden shift to English-medium instruction, and their valuable insights into potential solutions to address these issues.

4. Considerations and Recommendations

In light of the challenges identified through the in-class observations and interviews with lecturers, the following considerations and recommendations are proposed to facilitate a more effective transition to English-medium instruction in scientific fields:

First and foremost, it is crucial to conduct a comprehensive Needs Analysis to understand the specific linguistic and educational requirements of teachers and students in the scientific disciplines. Based on assessment, this will help identify the necessary language support and resources needed for a successful transition, ensuring that the specific needs of the educational community are addressed.

Secondly, the transition to the new language of instruction should be implemented in a gradual, well-planned manner, with clear objectives and a structured timeline. This approach will allow for a smoother adaptation process, as opposed to the sudden and abrupt shift that has been experienced thus far.

Thirdly, it is essential to involve key stakeholders, including teachers and students, in the decision-making process. Their active participation and input will ensure that the transition aligns with the needs and concerns of the primary users of the educational system, leading to a more successful implementation.

Furthermore, comprehensive and targeted training in both English language proficiency and subject-specific English for Specific Purposes (ESP) should be provided for lecturers. This can be achieved by designing high-quality instructional materials, textbooks, and supportive resources that are specifically tailored to teaching scientific subjects in English, taking into account the linguistic needs and technical terminology required in these disciplines.

Additionally, a balanced approach that integrates both French and English should be explored, recognizing the value of multilingualism and plurilingualism. This will allow for a more inclusive and enriching learning environment, where students can develop proficiency in multiple languages and better navigate the linguistic landscape of their academic and professional pursuits.

Finally, it is crucial to invest in long-term, immersive language learning opportunities for lecturers to develop their English proficiency. This can include fully-funded scholarships for lecturers, especially novice or newly recruited teachers, to study or acquire language skills in English-speaking countries, rather than relying solely on short-term, ineffective local training programmes.

By implementing these comprehensive recommendations, the transition to English-medium instruction in scientific fields can be made more effective, addressing the challenges identified and ensuring a smoother and more successful implementation for both teachers and students.

5. Conclusion

To go over the main points, then, the successful integration of EFL in scientific fields requires a balanced approach that respects the principles of bilingual education while meeting the demands of a globalized world. By implementing a comprehensive framework of strategic

recommendations and continuously evaluating the language transition process, Algeria can strive towards creating a learning environment that fosters linguistic proficiency and scientific excellence, equipping students with the skills necessary to navigate the complexities of the modern world.

At the heart of this framework is the need to deeply understand the specific linguistic and educational requirements of teachers and students in the scientific disciplines. A thorough Needs Analysis will enable the identification of the necessary language support and resources, ensuring that the transition aligns with the unique needs of the educational community. Equally important is the implementation of a gradual, well-planned transition, with clear objectives and a structured timeline, in contrast to the abrupt shifts that have proven disruptive in the past. Crucially, actively involving key stakeholders, including teachers and students, in the decision-making process will foster a sense of partnership and investment, leading to greater acceptance and commitment from the educational community.

Furthermore, embracing a balanced approach that integrates both French and English, recognizing the value of multilingualism and plurilingualism, will create a rich and inclusive learning environment. This will not only enhance students' linguistic abilities but also better prepare them for the multilingual realities of the global landscape. Complementing this, comprehensive and targeted training for lecturers in both English language proficiency and subject-specific English for Specific Purposes (ESP) will equip them with the necessary skills and resources to effectively deliver instruction in the new language. Last but not least, the long-term, immersive language learning abroad opportunities for lecturers will ensure a sustainable and authentic transition, moving away from reliance on short-term, ineffective local training programmes.

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