

## Languages and Conflicts: Arabisation, French and English in the Algerian Educational System

اللغات والصراعات: التعريب، الفرنسية والإنكليزية في النظام التعليمي الجزائري

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### Abstract

Language is inevitably intertwined with national identity and is intimately bound up with the colonists' language. Algeria is a multilingual country that was conquered for more than a century by the French. This what made the issue of language thornier and more complex. The current paper discusses the different language reforms that were passed and enacted by the Algerian government starting from the independence (1962) when the government introduced Arabisation until the implementation of the LMD system at the tertiary level. Most importantly, the rationale objective that lied behind this research is to shed light on the status of English at the Algerian universities as it becomes the most dominant language.

**Keywords:** Algeria, Arabization, English, French, Language

ملخص

تشابك اللغة حتماً مع الهوية الوطنية وترتبط ارتباطاً وثيقاً بلغة المستعمرين. الجزائر بلد متعدد اللغات الذي غزاه الفرنسيون لأكثر من قرن. الجزائر بلد متعدد اللغات الذي غزاه الفرنسيون لأكثر من قرن مما جعل مسألة اللغة أكثر تعقيداً. تناقش الورقة الحالية الإصلاحات اللغوية المختلفة التي أقرتها و سنتها الحكومة الجزائرية بدءاً من الاستقلال (1962) عندما أدخلت الحكومة التعريب إلى حين تنفيذ نظام LMD في الجامعة الجزائرية. والأهم من ذلك، تسلط هذه الورقة البحثية الضوء على مكانة اللغة الانجليزية في الجامعات الجزائرية لأنها أصبحت اللغة الأكثر انتشاراً.

كلمات مفتاحية: الجزائر ، التعريب ، الإنكليزية ، الفرنسية ، اللغة.

## Introduction

Algeria is a multilingual country that gave birth to a controversial and heated debate amongst sociolinguists. Relevant and profound researches and investigations were conducted by many specialists and politicians to decide which appropriate and successful language is best for the Algerian learners. Arabisation was the first adopted language by politicians to preserve identity after the long French conquest. Thereby, different reforms were enacted from 1962 to 2019 that encompassed Standard Arabic, French and English languages.

### 1. General Description of Language Policies in Algeria

Algeria's history development after independence in 1962 consisted of three major phases each of which influenced the language educational policies. The first phase was featured by the French language instruction in schools with a slight growth in the Arabic language. The second phase lasted from the late 1960s to the late 1990s in which the Arabic language was gradually imposed in the educational sector. The third phase began in the early 2000s which corresponded the transition of the free economic market (Benrabe, 2007, pp. 225-226).

After 1962, Algerian nationalists started supporting Arabisation; fostering standard Arabic instead of French in schools and offices (Sharkey, 2014, p. 319). There are two main language policies in Algeria; the first one is the policy of Arabisation between 1962 and 1999, and another refers to the policy of the educational reform in 2000 (Chemami, 2011, p. 229). The reform policy in Algeria of 2000 concerns the low level of teachers, improving their socio-economic development, reviewing content's curriculum, and more importantly, the status of foreign languages (Chemami, p. 230). And the first reform was Arabisation which was introduced after 1962 to eradicate

all the French traces which lasted for more than a century in Algeria, Benrabah stated as follows:

*Starting from 1962 the Algerian government that inherited the remnants of an education system focused on European content and conducted in a foreign language by foreign teachers, sought to gradually increase arabic sessions in all levels and all subjects were taught in Arabic and there was a decrease in the amount of time for teaching French. This policy, of course favoured the national integrity and unity and religion (cited in Rezig's, 2011, p. 1329)*

### 1.1. French versus English

The status of French and English languages in Algeria does not rely only on cultural preferences and educational reasons; however, the country's modern history and political alliances are also taken into account. Algeria has a particular connection with the French language, i.e. it is the language of earlier colonization and is considered as a prestigious language that is spoken by most of the Algerian people. In other words, this vast country of 2.3 million Km<sup>2</sup> is inhabited by 40 million people remains the second French-speaking country in the world with approximately eighteen million speakers (Abid- Houcine, 2007, p. 143). Some Algerians are fluent in speaking and writing the French language, and some code-switch because they do not master the language.

A new reform was introduced in 1993 which concerned introducing the English language as a foreign language at an early age by providing two different opportunities to primary school learners. Furthermore, these opportunities were to choose between the English and the French as a compulsory foreign language. However, instructing English was experienced only in some primary schools, but had ceased because some parents favoured French to English (Rezig, 2011, p. 1330). Establishing English as a first foreign language in primary schools was a success and was not discouraged as a

considerable number of pupils registered to study the target language (60 000 out of 2 million pupils enrolled within the years 1996-1999), and was abandoned because of some opponents who regarded English as a detriment to French, i.e. political reasons (Milliani, 2000, p. 23).

Nowadays, the French language is taught for three years in primary school, for four years in middle school, and for three years in high school. As a matter of fact, French has taken second place after 'Standard-Arabic' and is instructed in many private schools. It plays a fundamental role in pursuing higher education especially abroad or to find a particular job. It should be noted that at the tertiary level and particularly for science fields, French is the medium of instruction.

English on the other hand, has become a controversial issue. The English language is considered a second foreign language in Algeria. Basically, French language instruction is important in that undergraduate and postgraduate courses in science and in technology are taught in the French language, but further research entails English, because most worldwide journals are written in English, and that what makes the English language compete with French instruction. Indeed, the desire to promote English in Algeria is due to the cooperation with the United States of America and Canada which supported this educational reform in Algeria. This support included textbooks and the training of teachers of English.

The Algerian linguistic background is very rich and complex at the same time. In fact, it makes a unique nation with a number of languages instructed and employed whether in academic or non-academic contexts. Rezig (2011, p. 1327- 1328) in Mala Tabory's (1987) who argued that:

*The Algerian situation is complex, as it is at a crossroad of tensions between French, the colonial language, and Arabic, the new national language; Classical Arabic versus colloquial Algerian Arabic; and the various Berber dialects versus Arabic. The lessons from the*

*Algerian situation may be usefully applied to analogous situation by states planning their linguistic, educational and cultural policies.*

However, the presence of this variety created political and educational language issues (Rezig. 2011, p. 1328 quoted Lakhal Ayat, 2008). Indeed, students' weaknesses in general and particularly in foreign languages contributed to the failure in the educational system. It is worth mentioning that learners in Algeria start studying English at the age of twelve (12) which is considered by many researchers and scholars to be the critical age for learning a new language. This delay and a little exposure to the target language made the learners influenced by the first foreign language. The learners' weaknesses are revealed at the levels of grammar, spelling, insufficient linguistic background, and most importantly writing mechanics (Iddou-Derraz, 2009, p. 12).

## **1.2. The Status of English in Algeria**

English instruction started officially in Algeria in the late 1930s during the French colonial rule. It began with the non-existence of English language policy and no designed plan for its education. Basically, the teaching of English as part of what it is used to be named "*Penseignement des langues vivantes*", under the title of "*l'anglais vivant*" (IElsherif & Smith, 2013, p. 170). Until the late 1960s, English instruction was still based on the French system in terms of syllabi, textbooks, and organization.

The emergence of ELT (English Language Teaching) textbooks, the provision of EFL Algerian instructors, and the shifts in ELT methodology have been influenced by ELT approaches and methods. Most importantly, the new changes in the economy and the appearance of the new means of communication as part of the ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) encouraged the growth of "*Global English*". Thus, in this broad context of "*globalization*", English became the dominant foreign language in the

curricula of educational schools and institutions and the only language that forms an immense part of most graduate and postgraduate studies in Algerian universities. Elsherif & Smith (2013) quoted Bottery (2000, p. 170) who claimed that "...the development of globalization has been associated with the dominance of the English language".

By the mid of the year 2000, the Algerian government made an adjustment that aims at enhancing the educational system. However, the dramatic past events (1991-2000) had left the government confused in particular parts of Algeria where several schools required a particular organization and more instructors. English language has become a necessary subject in the curriculum and required a tremendous demand at all the levels of education, Abdelatif Mami (2003, p. 432) in Miliani's (2000) stating as follows:

*In a situation where the French language has lost much of its ground in the socio-cultural 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.*

English has been defined as a second foreign language at the beginning of the 90s and as a first foreign language after the 2000 reform to obtain the status of the langue of science and technology employed in lifelong learning (Abdelatif Mami, 2003, p. 433).

Up to now, that is from 2019-2021, "Tayeb Bouzid", who was enacted as a new minister in 2019 has introduced a new reform that adopts English at the tertiary level and has been imposed in the administrations, in which some of the headings should be penned in the target language. In other words, before the minister's instructions of promoting English at the university, these headings were written in both Standard Arabic and French languages. Ghani Lamine in his newspaper article (2019), stated that Tayeb Bouzid argued on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August, 2019 that "the French language does not get us anywhere."

The move towards French language replacement was critical among Algerian linguists, and provoked a hot debate between

supports and opponents because the country was stuck to the French language for more than fifty (50) years after Algeria's independence. Supporters who encouraged implementing English as an important foreign language in Algerian universities claimed that the change is vital for "Algeria's cultural independence" (Ghani Lamine, 2019). Opponents, on the other hand, discouraged the minister's step, because they believed that applying English at the tertiary level ought to start at an early age (since primary school). Nevertheless, English is the language that is rampant throughout the world and is viewed as an instrument of pursuing scientific education.

Introducing English in scientific research was first proposed by the new minister and has been immensely welcomed by both students and tutors. Additionally, this has been done through a poll that lasted for one month; starting on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July and ended up on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August, 2019. The primary objective of promoting English at the Algerian University was to attract foreign students as is reported in a conference that was held by the minister "Tayeb Bouzid" in August (2019). Although this minister has been replaced by different ministers in the academic year 2020-2021, his reform has not been adjusted.

It is worth mentioning that this reform was a good strategy on the old ministry's part. However, students and teachers are unaware of how is it going to be implemented, since the bulk majority of students and researchers barely know English. Even students of English, on the other hand, who are tackling the target language and are exposed to English for years are found to have huge language deficiencies. Some teachers and researchers claimed that this should not be done only at the level of the university, but ought to start from the primary school so that the reform will be successful at different levels.

Burni (2017) conducted research on the English language that is used by Algerians and found that if English were to replace French, it would gain the status of the primary foreign language that Algerians would speak it better than the French language (cited in Belmihoub,

2018, p.8). Likewise, the status of English is rampant throughout Algeria in which business takes also this advantage and is associated with small businesses. Owners of coffee shops, restaurants...etc. named their boutiques as follows: 'Black and White Café Shop', 'Junk Food', 'Las Vegas Restaurant'...etc. (P. 11). In fact, these names reflect prestige that is linked with the English-American culture which proves that even the Algerian resorts to English in lieu of French.

## **2. Language Description in the Algerian Context**

The implementation of language reforms encountered several constraints. For instance, Arabization policy was applied since independence and entailed a multitude of teachers who taught in Arabic. The administered policy had risen the Arabic language teaching hours compared to French and English (Rezig, 2011, p. 1328). Teachers of the primary, on the other hand, middle and high schools were applying these reforms with immense difficulty, because they were not trained on how to deal with the change as it is the case of university teachers with the implementation of the LMD system (Licence Master Doctorate).

The Algerian universities first adopted a system based on the French model; that is to say, the universities used to be autonomous at structuring the teaching curricular. However, this system was in vain (Rezig, 2011, p. 1330 quoted Benrabah, 1999). In 1971, some reforms were designed to develop the university system and the prime reforms were introduced in 1988 but the majority of universities followed the French model, and the teachers were French-speaking.

Nonetheless, the number of French teachers had reduced as the number of Algerian teachers increased after 1980, when a decree introduced Arabization. Thereby, the Algerian government brought Syrian, Egyptian, Palestinian teachers. French on the other hand was gradually left for French instruction itself. This step was dramatic for baccalaureate holders who belonged to the scientific and technical streams at university wherein modules were instructed in the French



language such as the medical stream, computing, and so on. Indeed, the students found it difficult at different levels including understanding the content of the courses (p. 1330).

However, the more Algeria altered into an Arabized realm as 'Standard Arabic' displaced the French language as a tool of instruction, the more urgent requirement for the English language increased. The status of French has changed therefore, into a mere subject and has competed English as the first mandatory foreign language (Benrabe, 2013).

Up to now, further research at the university level requires the English language for conferences, writing articles and doing a general scientific investigation. The more English is becoming the most predominant language in research, the more it creates a certain malaise for scientific postgraduate students, because they get used to the French language and find English thorny in terms of presenting their works orally as well as providing written papers. Yet, 95% of postgraduate studies in scientific domains are still conducted in French, and the job opportunities still require certain mastery of French (Milliani, 2000, p. 20).

### **3. The English Language Teaching**

Several approaches have been proposed and adopted by educationalists and psychologists in the Algerian schools. However, two approaches have been taken into consideration. The first one was the communicative approach to the language where curriculum designers agreed that language is first communicated; indeed, making the learners communicate, but this step was inadequate because of time constraints.

The second approach was adapted from the first one (the communicative approach to language) which was the Competency-Based Approach (CBA), that was implemented in 2003-2004 and which helps learners acquire a communicative competence through focusing on the learner as the target of the learning process (learner-

centered approach). The focal point of this approach was conveying the meaning by the context rather than grammatical forms. More importantly, its objective is to develop and modernize education to face globalization requirements (Benadla, 2013, p. 158). This approach has been the upshot of the requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that structured particular measures to the instructor and better considered in the United States as “*facilitators*” (Abdelatif-Mami, 2003, p. 243).

#### 4. Critical Discussion

Up to now, Standard Arabic is the official language of the Algerian Constitution and is taught in primary schools, middle schools, and secondary institutions. Arabisation policy with its cultural, political, and religious factors created an immense gap in education (from primary school to the tertiary level). Most importantly, a gap for university students, and of course, this is not only the case of foreign language departments but also for the scientific and technical streams where all the modules are taught in the French language such as medicine, mathematics, physics, biology, computing, etc. (Rezig, 2011, p. 1332).

However, all these scientific and technical streams require the English language as all studies worldwide are in English. Adding to that, it is mandatory for all the doctoral students and researchers to carry out their scientific studies in the English language which poses a great hurdle for them as they finished their graduate studies in French. Therefore, it is of great paramount on the Algerian’s government’s part to alter language policy and integrate English as a compulsory language for primary schooling.

The descriptive-argumentative study covers the sociolinguistic profile of languages in Algeria. The research reveals that Standard Arabic will remain the most important language that represents identity as an Arab community talking ‘Derja’. Furthermore, Arabic or ‘Classical Arabic’ reflects Muslims; that is why teaching Standard Arabic in the Algerian institutions will never be replaced or changes.

On the contrary, the French language could be replaced in schools since English is widely spread and required in different fields such as business, scientific research, politics, etc. To sum up, the English language is still competing French in Algeria as a multilingual country.

### **Conclusion**

Languages in Algeria have always been a controversial issue since learners in different academic settings are taught in Standard Arabic on one hand. As an Algerian community, on the other hand, we speak and use 'Algerian Arabic' at home, administrations...etc. which is also mixed with some French words and expressions. However, the English language becomes a dominant language since it is the language of post-graduate studies.

The latter poses a tremendous hindrance since researchers start getting profoundly in touch with the English language at a late stage. It becomes a must for nearly all researchers to do their postgraduate studies in English. It is worth mentioning that introducing Standard Arabic at schools might well be a complete failure for primary schooling as pupils use a completely different language that is 'Algerian Arabic'. Thus, French is regarded as a second language, and English becomes the most urged language by educators.

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