

## **The Language Question in Algeria and the Prospects of ESP Teaching in Higher Education**

**Mohamed AFKIR**

*University of Amar Telidji Laghouat, Algeria*

amohdeb@yahoo.com

**Received:** 13/05/2018,

**Accepted:** 30/12/2020,

**Published:** 31/12/2020

---

**Abstract:** *This article discusses the prospects of ESP teaching at university in the light of the complex language situation in Algeria. Although a lot of research has been done on ESP teaching methodologies as well as teaching content, there is necessity to see ESP and English teaching in general in the context of the country's language realities. English is not alone in the field; Arabic, Tamzight and French are all strong players that cannot be ignored when assigning a role to English for Specific Purposes.*

No doubt, ELT is increasingly gaining a larger ground in Algeria, as is the case everywhere in the world. In particular, ESP, which responds to a constantly developing world economy, is also positioning itself so strongly. Therefore, it is imperative for the Algerian academicians as well as the authorities to pursue a policy of revitalizing English teaching to cope with the rapid economic changes taking place inside the country and outside it. However, a proper policy of teaching English for specific purposes cannot be implemented without a proper understanding of our language situation and its complexities. Algeria is a country where four important languages share the scene, if not the arena. Arabic, Tamazight, French

and English are all, by degrees, heavily present. In the meantime, proponents and opponents of these languages often display contradictory positions on what language policy should be adopted. Unfortunately, there is not enough research on ESP, when English is a second foreign language, as one can guess from a survey on the available literature. Hence there is obvious need for a further debate on the question.

I attempt through this article to present a reading on the prospects of ESP in the light of this complex language situation. The aim is to analyse the different trends and views on Language for Specific Purposes in Algeria, in order to fix a role to ESP in relation to Arabic, Tamazight and French.

### **The Importance of LSP in Nowadays World**

It is true that English, and ESP, is dominant in nowadays world with about 2 billion speakers of English. Yet other languages are still playing major roles all over the world and in many different sectors. Europeans for example stipulate that Europe's common language is translation, which indicate the importance of multi-lingualism. Therefore, studies on "Language" for Specific Purposes cannot be underestimated.

Historically ESP research is pioneer to other studies on other languages for specific purpose. According to established researchers in the field like LSP actually developed out of ESP. As specified by Abbot, 1981; Carver, 1983 "ESP as we know it today began in part as a reaction to the notion of TENOR as a way for curriculum developers to respond to the call for English education internationally

in a way that was manageable and sensible for learners in EFL/ESL contexts” (Trace et al., 5). Scholars in the field also specify that “LSP is often positioned as the opposite of language for general purposes (LGP), or the more ominous Language for no Obvious Purpose (LNOP)” (Ibid., 4). Given the negative connotations attached to LNOP, LSP is often seen as a solution or remedy to ensuring that language instruction has purpose, and therefore value. Therefore, a standard definition of LSP/ESP is one by Strevens stating that it:

Consist of [teaching] which is: designed to meet specified needs of the learner; related in content (i.e., in its themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations, and activities; centred on the language appropriate to those activities, in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc. (quote from Ibid., 1-2)

As is the case with ESP, LSP has several branches of study the most frequent of which are (LAP), (LST), and (LOP).

Taken from a general perspective, we can think of all language teaching as LSP instruction, as long as we teach language with a clear purpose in mind. Widdowson (1983) reminds us that all language is purposeful, or at least intends to be so, and in considering what it is, that makes LSP different from other kinds of language instruction, maybe it will help to think of *purpose* as being on a continuum.

Following this importance of LSP, there is understandable need to foster foreign language students’ awareness to the appreciate exact objectives of learning a foreign language on the basis of their future needs. This is because “students are more willing to work hard at something when they see those connections outside the four walls of

the classroom. They want to be able to take what they learn in school and apply it to real life” (Mario Pace, 480). After all, LSP teaching is destined to non-native speaking learners i.e as a second and foreign languages. In this context, the courses designed in LSP should be “those in which the methodology, the content, the objectives, the materials, the teaching, and the assessment practices all stem from specific, target language uses based on an identified set of specialized needs.” (Trace et al., 2)

At this point, an important question should be asked: since needs have to be properly identified in the LSP process, how can an appropriate policy in Algeria be adopted in the field of Language for specific purposes? Related to this, what role can ESP play in complement to the roles of other established languages?

The answer seems a language policy based on a true understanding of the language question constructed through scientific investigation and academic research. Approaches to language policy, to syllabus design and to teaching methodology all depend on the nature of roles each of those languages. Therefore, choices on LSP/ESP depend partly on the pragmatic and also ideological choices in a given country. In countries where the language question is not solved, the problem is not ESP; it is rather LSP.

## **Background to the language question in Algeria**

For the sake of an appropriate language policy, courses and methodologies of LSP, understanding the historical background of the language question is more than needed. Historically, Tamazight and Arabic are the oldest spoken languages by Algerians. There had for

long been no obvious conflict between Berber and Arabic. At a later stage, French was planted with the coming of French colonial rule. Both languages were relegated to secondary roles. After independence, the authorities officially fought French and sought to restore Arabic through the policy of “Arabisation” as a means of returning to the self and consolidation of the Islamic identity of the country.<sup>1</sup>

Because of the automatic attachment of Arabic to Islam,<sup>2</sup> and the fact that Algerians were overwhelmingly Muslim, the fresh leaders of post-independence took it for granted that Arabic alone is the official language of the country. However, the exclusion of Berber, ostensibly for national unity, created a deep divide between *Arabophones* and *Berberphones* who often resolved to defend French at the expense of Arabic.

Moreover, there was conviction among the intellectuals of the time that economic and social modernization should rest on French. Actually, French was a first language for many Algerian families; many of them had fought the colonizers but so no harm in retaining their language. In addition, poets, novelists used and still use it to

---

<sup>1</sup> «*l'arabisation est devenue synonyme de ressourcement, de retour à l'authenticité, de récupération des attributs de l'identité arabe qui ne peut se réaliser que par la restauration de l'arabe est une récupération de la dignité bafouée par les colonisateurs et condition élémentaire pour se réconcilier avec soi-même* ». (IBRAHIMI K.T., 1995, p.186).

<sup>2</sup> BENRABEH M. insiste que « *la langue arabe et l'islam sont inséparables...l'arabe a sa place à part par le fait qu'elle est la langue du Coran et du prophète* ». (BENRABEH M., 1999, P.156).

express their attachment to their origins and even to manifest anti-colonial aspirations.

With the advance of Arabisation, tension increased between pro-Arabic groups and pro-French/Tamazight sides, especially in the 1970's and the 1980's. Unfortunately, even university research was affected, with so much bias towards that language or the other (BenAzouz, 35). By the 1990's an offensive was launched against French. It was expressed clearly through a policy of Anglicization in the primary school starting from 1993, in addition to the adoption of Arabic by the strong institution of the Army. In 1996, the Law on the generalization of Arabic was implemented and forbade dealing in French in the administration. In the meantime, political attempts at reconciliation with Tamazight were rapidly evolving. After becoming president of Algeria in 1999, Abdelaziz Bouteflika restored the position of French, but he insisted on the primacy of the Algerian personality, implicitly referring to the primacy of the Arabic language.<sup>3</sup>

For sure, after this historical phase of conflict, French is the language that suffered the most. D. CAUBET stipules that French in Algeria has an ambiguous status.<sup>4</sup> It is a foreign language, but largely see as a means of social and economic progress (BenAzouz, 13).

---

<sup>3</sup> Abdelaziz Bouteflika declared : «l'Algérie a payé encore plus lourdement la récupération de sa personnalité qu'une longue domination coloniale avait gravement mise en danger». <http://www.algeria-watch.org/farticle/presid/francophonie.htm>

<sup>4</sup> « Le français en tant que langue de l'ancien colonisateur a un statut ambigu ; d'une part, il attire le mépris officiel (il est officiellement considéré comme une langue étrangère au même titre que l'anglais), mais d'autre part, il est synonyme de réussite

In spite of this fierce conflict between French and Arabic, it was not Arabic that dethroned French, because Arabic was not able to develop in the technical sciences. It was rather English that really succeeded to dethrone French from its position as a language of modernity, science and technology. After the rise of the United States as the sole super-power in the 1990's, the Algerian authorities sought a policy of introducing English at an equal hand with French early in the primary stage. English is increasingly dethroning French in Algeria. The rush towards private institutions teaching English is so obvious. Cooperation between the Algerian authorities and the UK in this field is evolving day after day. Some statistics confirm this trend of increasing importance of English. The British Council passed to action. According to Daltry Martin, the Ex-director of the Council in Algiers around 3000 teachers, in addition to 300 inspectors of English, were formed by his institution since 2006. This led the British ambassador, Martin Roper, to state that cooperation between the ministry of education of Algeria and the British Council was excellent, and a model between the two governments” (*Algérie Focus*, 11 mai 2014).

The unsolved language issue in Algeria has always been a serious obstacle in the face of economic development. The economic issue is of fundamental importance when designing language policy and planning. Recently, however, there are signs that the language problem related to identity is going to be solved. Political priorities are no longer the Identity issues. Most active political parties reveal a

---

et d'accès à la culture et au modernisme ». CAUBET D. Quote from (Ben Azouz, 2011).

discourse based on objectives of social and economic development. In this context, consciousness of politicians that social and economic development should occupy priority facilitates the way for academicians to find solutions. One solution proposed by linguists is multilingualism. Multilingualism can be a key element for a modernity seeking country like Algeria. This is because learning foreign languages allows groups and individuals to benefit from a variety of social and economic opportunities offered inside or outside the country.

### **What role for each language in the Algerian university context?**

Since LSP basically stands on needs analysis, therefore it is important to properly understand the utility and role of each of the four languages.

-Above all, a national language must be promoted to play the principle role in every teaching, as is the case of all successful nations.

- Although Berber is mother tongue to millions of Algerians, it could not develop to be a language of instruction. However, there is possibility to promote it provided that research would be conducted academically according to the needs-analysis principle. In addition, Arabic and Berber can be complementary.

- Now it's a fact that all teaching up to the final year in the secondary level is conducted in Arabic. Also a large part of the human sciences at university adopt Arabic as a language of teaching (history, philosophy, sociology, psychology...). Many Algerians have strong aspirations to instore Arabic as a language of teaching technical



sciences, on the ground that the best language to learn easily is the mother tongue. There are also attempts to import successful experiences of technical Arabic from Jordan, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. As an example, Prof. Saci Amar, from Blida university collaborated with SIM company to develop teaching technical Arabic to SIM engineers.

On the other hand, it is a fact that all teaching in technical sciences at university is in theory made in French. Most university teachers have been trained in French. But except in major coastal towns, students come to university with a very low level in French.<sup>5</sup> Research has shown that students' high rate of failure in their studies is due the non-mastery of French. Although French is taught in all technical disciplines, the problem persists because of the inadequate conception of teaching itself and the type of teaching material. Most of the teaching of French is carried by part-time teachers having little training to teach language for specific purposes. Students are also discouraged with a rising anti-French discourse, stipulating that French is outmoded as a language of science and technology.

## **The Role of English and ESP**

No doubt, the surrounding global transformations that led to the spread of English imposed ESP as an inevitable reality in Algeria.

---

<sup>5</sup> It is stated that « L'effectif des élèves devant apprendre le français : 7 000 000. Déficit quantitatif d'enseignants de français, estimé à 6000 environ, surtout dans les zones rurales : pas d'enseignement de français dans certaines classes. » MESR.. From [www.Biskra-univ.dz](http://www.Biskra-univ.dz)

Mme Deirdre Nicholas, director of the projects of English in the British Council, stated in Oran: “it is the countries themselves which realize that English is often a key to important incomes and to a better occupational integration”. (Loukil, Liberté 2015). It is evident that most English teaching in Algerian schools is General English. Even at university, and particularly, in departments of technical sciences, all surveys conclude the absence of ESP teaching. Although English became popular, its teaching remained ineffective. Actually, a lot of university research on ESP in Algeria has been made to determine the problems faced, the causes lying behind and the possible solutions to ESP teaching. In the 1990’s at the start of the pro-English policy, pioneer research for the use of English in economic sectors was launched. In 1995, Dr. Khaldi from the University of Algiers, for example, investigated into the causes of the problems facing ESP teaching in SONATRACH, the largest state company in the country (Khaldi, 1995). He concluded that learners enjoyed all the necessities of good training, but were not motivated as 60% would leave the training before the end. The main reason found is that learners were unhappy with the absence of the objectives related to their concerns (their job-situation needs, participation in conferences, translating documents, answering mails, etc).

Other research was conducted in many other universities only to confirm the inappropriate approaches and methods in teaching English. Postgraduate studies in ESP have also been opened in a number of universities like those of Laghouat, Chlef and Oran. Yet the graduates rarely contribute to real ESP teaching as they often do not lecture in departments of technical sciences.

A number of conferences organised extensive debates on how to render ESP teaching effective in the Algerian context, and on how to develop the use of English in private and public companies through the teaching of ESP. However, very few research or debate is being made on the way ESP should interrelate with the other existing languages mainly French and Arabic. Most of the time, debate on the question deal with ESP in isolation from roles of French or Arabic. At this point of the debate, two questions of profound importance have to be asked:

- Is it wise, as it is widely claimed these days, to replace French with English, and opt only for ESP/EAP to target science and technology at university?
- Isn't it more appropriate to opt for complementary roles between French and English, especially that the two languages share a large amount of terminology?

It is evident that international research on LSP/ESP will help, but in condition to properly understand the Algerian context in which to implement a suitable language policy. It is obligatory to see ESP/EAP teaching as part of a whole plan of language teaching at university.

In this regard, for example, the modification Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) made on the earlier Strevens' definition of ESP offers us a better vision of the methodology and course content for ESP teaching at university. Dudley-Evans and St John's definition determines both absolute and variable characteristics to ESP. Relevant absolute characteristics to our context include that ESP should make

use of “the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves”, and that ESP should be “centred on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities”. On the other hand, Variable characteristics fixes that ESP can be designed for specific disciplines, and that it is “likely to be designed for adult learners, or for learners at secondary school level”. This means that it is can also be designed “for intermediate or advanced learners”; and hence ESP courses require knowledge of the language system (Dudley-Evans and St John, 6).

Taking into consideration the Algerian university context and the roles of the languages in use, it is also possible to modify Dudley-Evans and St John’s model that sees ESP as part of an overall plan of ELT teaching (as shown in the table below).

<b>Position 1</b>	English for Beginners
<b>Position 2</b>	Intermediate to advance EGP courses with a focus on particular skills
<b>Position 3</b>	EGAP/EGBP courses based on common core language and skills not related to specific discipline or profession
<b>Position 4</b>	Courses for broad disciplinary or professional areas (e.g. Report writing for Scientists and Engineers, Medical English, Legal English, Negotiating skills for Business English)
<b>Position5</b>	1) An academic support course related to a particular Academic course. 2) One-to-one work with business people

One can stipulate that ESP/EAP should be part of an overall plan of Foreign Language Teaching.

In this context of inevitable complementary roles between the languages in use at university, it looks judicious, at least in the short run, to assign a clear role for each of them. First, the national language(s) must be promoted to play the principle role in every teaching. That is an aspiration, but also a pragmatic principle followed in a variety of developing or developed nations. In the second place, the teaching of French and English in the pre-university stage should be based on clearly defined purposes such as preparing pupils to specific jobs or university studies. Hence a kind of ESP/FLS (*Francais langue de spécialité*) should be installed earlier in the secondary school.

At university, English is for sure the best means to quickly cope with the latest technological developments, but French is still being largely employed in the teaching of technical sciences. In graduation studies, the objective should be to equip students with good French that allows them to follow courses in their respective sciences easily. Thus, accelerated *FLS* should be taught before the beginning of learning the content of specialization. Teaching should be done by specialized *FLS* teachers using material directly related to the respective sciences.

In the post-graduate and research levels, English is obviously more suitable. The purpose is to equip researchers with specialized English so that they can read original sources. Therefore, ESP should be taught at the beginning of each formation, not in parallel. The best ESP teacher here is the teacher-specialist. For example, lecturers of

civilization may intervene in departments of history, political science, sociology, etc. Teachers of technical sciences should be trained as ESP teachers to be well equipped with the necessary pedagogy or didactic tools. If not, the “team-teach” principle is very useful: that is Co-teaching between a specialist teacher and an English teacher.

After all, research on the question of how to make better use of ESP teaching at university still requires a lot of constant academic research. There was an attempt through this discussion to remind of the difficulties that the university community may encounter while trying to apply ESP theories and teaching methodologies. As long as a clear and largely agreed on language policy is not yet made, there will still be confusion about ESP teaching at university. Academic research, it seems, is the only sure path that can bring appropriate solutions.

**References:**

BEN AZOUZ NADJIA. 2012. *Politique linguistique en Algérie: Arabisation et francophonie*. Revue de la faculté des lettres et des langues Biskra.

BENRABEH M. 1999. *Langue et pouvoir en Algérie*. Paris : éd Ségur.

DUDLEY-EVANS, T., & ST JOHN, M. (1998). *Developments in ESP: A multi-disciplinary approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

IBRAHIMI K.T. 1995. *Les Algériens et leur(s) langue(s)*. Alger: El Hikma.

JONATHAN T., HUDSON T., & BROWN J. D. 2015. *Developing Courses in Languages for Specific Purposes*. National Foreign Language Resource Centre. Hawaii.

KHALDI K. *The contribution of the ESP teacher to the development of the use of English in Algerian companies. A case study, Sonatrach*. GERAS 7-10. 1995.

LOUKIL D. 24-03-2015. *Développer la langue anglaise en Algérie*. Liberté.

PACE MARIO. Nov. 2015. *Foreign Language Proficiency and Certification Amongst Youths in Malta*. ICT for Language Learning Conference 8<sup>th</sup> Conferecne Edition, Italy.

WIDDOWSON H. G. . 1983. *Learning purpose and Language use*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.