

From Arabization to EMI: Tracing the Evolution of English in Algerian Education



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Abstract

This article provides a historical overview of educational reforms in Algeria with a particular focus on the development of English language education. From post-independence Arabization efforts to the recent introduction of English in primary schools, Algeria's language-in-education policy has undergone significant transformations influenced by political, social, and global factors. While French has long dominated the educational and administrative landscape, recent reforms reflect a growing recognition of English as a global lingua franca. This paper explores key reforms that have shaped the status of English in Algerian education, analyzes the motivations behind policy shifts, and discusses the challenges and implications of integrating English more systematically into the curriculum.

Keywords

English education;
Teaching;
Educational reform;
Algerian education.

الكلمات المفتاحية

تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية؛
الإصلاحات التربوية؛
التعليم الابتدائي؛
سياسة اللغة.

من التعريب إلى التعليم بالإنجليزية: تتبع تطور تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في النظام التعليمي الجزائري

ملخص

يقدم هذا المقال لمحة تاريخية عن الإصلاحات التربوية في الجزائر مع التركيز بشكل خاص على تطور تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية. فمن جهود التعريب التي أعقبت الاستقلال إلى إدراج اللغة الإنجليزية مؤخراً في المرحلة الابتدائية، شهدت سياسة اللغة في التعليم في الجزائر تحولات كبيرة تأثرت بعوامل سياسية واجتماعية وعالمية. وبينما ظلت اللغة الفرنسية مهيمنة في مجالات التعليم والإدارة، تعكس الإصلاحات الأخيرة إدراكاً متزايداً لأهمية اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة عالمية. يستعرض هذا المقال أبرز الإصلاحات التي شكلت الوضع الحالي للغة الإنجليزية في النظام التعليمي الجزائري، ويحلل دوافع هذه التحولات السياسية، كما يناقش التحديات والتبعات المرتبطة بإدماج اللغة الإنجليزية بشكل منهجي في المناهج الدراسية.

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I. Introduction :

Algeria's language-in-education policy has undergone significant shifts since independence in 1962. While the country initially pursued Arabization as a means of national identity construction, French continued to play a dominant role in academic and scientific spheres. In recent years, English has emerged as a key focus of educational reform, particularly with its growing global influence and the government's push for linguistic diversification. This paper traces the evolution of English education in Algeria, from early policy attempts to the recent introduction of English at the primary level and its use as a medium of instruction in higher education. By examining key policy decisions and their sociopolitical context, the study provides a historical perspective on the development of English within Algeria's multilingual educational landscape.

1. Language Reforms in Algeria Since Independence

Since achieving independence in 1962, Algeria has faced the challenge of managing a linguistically diverse society shaped by the coexistence of Berber, French, and Algerian Arabic (Benrabah, 2005). Nationalist leaders sought to build unity through a shared language, religion, and cultural identity, promoting Arabic as the cornerstone of national education. As part of this ideological agenda, Arabization became a central strategy to assert political legitimacy and cultural sovereignty. Initiated by President Ahmed Ben Bella's government in October 1962, this policy mandated the use of Arabic in primary education (Grandguillaume, 2004), with instruction conducted entirely in Arabic except for foreign language subjects. The goal was to restore national identity and promote Standard Arabic, while maintaining French for its utility in science and technology. However, despite strong symbolic value particularly as Classical Arabic is associated with both national heritage and the Quran the practical implementation of Arabization encountered serious difficulties. Rapidly increasing school enrollment (from 14% to over 36%) and a shortage of qualified Arabic-speaking teachers led to a decline in educational quality (Assous, 1985; Bennoune, 2000). To fill the gap, Algeria recruited teachers from countries like Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, many of whom lacked cultural familiarity with the Algerian context. Their unfamiliar accents and teaching methods often failed to connect with students, making comprehension difficult (Sarter & Sefta, 1992; Nakla, 2021; Grandguillaume, 2004). Despite these efforts, French remained firmly rooted in academic and professional spheres. This coexistence of French, Classical Arabic, and local dialects produced a diglossic environment that further complicated language policy implementation (Benhabib, 2019). The result was ongoing national debate over whether schools should maintain monolingual instruction in Arabic or adopt a bilingual Arabic–French model to reflect Algeria's linguistic realities.

The implementation of Arabization in education was effectively halted following the election of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in 1999. While distancing Algeria from the Francophone sphere, Bouteflika emphasized a more pragmatic stance, stating that although Algeria is not part of the Francophonie, there is no justification for adopting a rigid or hostile position toward the French language (Morsly, 2004). In the early 1990s, Algeria introduced a significant change to its language education policy by allowing students in Grade Four to choose either French or English as their first foreign language (Bennoune, 2000). This move marked a notable recognition of English as a key global language and was intended, according to Benaissa and Zeghib (2023), to challenge the continued dominance of French, the language of the former colonizer. However, the initiative was short-lived. The majority of parents opted for French, favoring its familiarity and perceived socioeconomic advantages within the Algerian context. Benrabah (1999) suggested that French was seen as more accessible and beneficial for everyday and professional use, which led to the widespread reluctance to embrace English. Moreover, the education system itself was unprepared for such a transition. There was a shortage of trained English teachers and a lack of adequate teaching materials. As a result, the policy failed to gain traction and was ultimately abandoned. As a result, the attempt to introduce English as an alternative early foreign language was ultimately seen as overly ambitious and failed to achieve its intended goals (Benabelkader, 2025). However, in a 2015 Al Jazeera interview, Ali Benmohamed, Algeria's Minister of National Education from 1990 to 1992 stated that he was surprised by the number of parents who chose English during the language policy experiment. He also claimed that the initiative was intentionally derailed by a scandal that led to his resignation (Cherifi, 2024).

In March 2001, the National Commission for the Reform of the Educational System (CNRSE) made up by the government recommended that French be reintroduced as the first mandatory foreign language in Grade Two, instead of starting it in Grade Four, and suggested that scientific disciplines be taught in French in secondary schools (Sebti, 2001). A survey conducted in 1999 revealed that 75% of Algerians supported the idea of teaching scientific subjects in French (Djamel, 2001). Alongside these reforms, the government began to acknowledge the linguistic and cultural rights of the Berber-speaking population. In 2002, Tamazight was officially recognized as a national (though not yet official) language in the Algerian Constitution. This decision followed a wave of political unrest and protest, most notably during the "Berber Spring" of 1980 and the "Black Spring" of 2001–2002, both of which highlighted demands for cultural recognition and linguistic inclusion (Benyagoub & Sebti, 2020).

With the advance of Information and Communication Technologies in this globalized age, the introduction of English into schools became more necessary than ever (Djebbari, 2016). While it is acknowledged that French is a language that

has always been present in a child's daily life before going to school. The government tends to give more impetus to the global language besides Arabic and French. Indeed, in 2003-2004 academic year, French was introduced as the first mandatory foreign language in Grade Two, while English was positioned as the second mandatory foreign language starting the first year at middle school (grade 6) (Benrabah, 2005). In high schools, students selecting the languages stream will study new foreign languages, such as Spanish and Italian. Overall, Algerian students learn Arabic for 12 years, French for 10 years, English for 7 years, and an additional foreign language for 2 years if they follow the languages stream. At the higher education level, scientific subjects are taught in French and humanities in Arabic. Additionally, a department for Amazigh language and culture has been established at four universities in Algeria, along with various departments for teaching other foreign languages like Turkish, Italian, Spanish, German, and Russian at different institutions. (Benyagoub & Sebti, 2020).

In the continuum of Algeria's language-in-education reforms, recent developments have marked a decisive shift toward expanding the role of English across all educational levels. Two reforms introduced in 2022 illustrate this shift which are reflected in the integration of English as a compulsory subject in the third year of primary education, and the launch of a national initiative to gradually implement English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in higher education. The former began with the 2022–2023 academic year following the decision of the Council of Ministers in August 2022, while the latter was initiated by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in October of the same year. These initiatives, while rooted in a long history of language planning and ideological negotiation, signal a new phase of reform that seeks to elevate the status of English within Algeria's multilingual landscape. The following sections will examine each of these reforms in greater depth, exploring their motivations, implementation processes, and the challenges they present.

2. English as a medium of instruction in higher education

The languages of instruction in Algerian higher education have remained largely unchanged since independence, Algeria has adopted French as a medium of instruction in higher education institutions, especially the scientific and technical disciplines. with the exception of the introduction of Arabic in some disciplines . English was taught as a foreign language with a session a week in other subjects outside the English Language and Letters department. However, the popularity of English as a medium of instruction began to grow following the 2019 Hirak protest movement, which challenged President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's administration and called for broader reforms including in language policy. Many Algerians began advocating for English to replace French as the country's dominant foreign language in education and public life (Cherifi, 2024). Also when within the same year, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR), under then-Minister Bouzid Tayeb, conducted a survey on his official Facebook page to assess public opinion on replacing French with English in university instruction. The results revealed overwhelming support, with 94% of participants in favor of the change. In response, English began to replace French in the headers of official documents (Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023; Mizab, 2024; Rezig, 2011). Nevertheless, as revealed by Medfouni (2020), These surveys were widely criticized for their lack of methodological reliability, as they permitted multiple responses from the same participants and failed to meet the rigorous standards typically required for research on language policy.

Efforts to promote English in higher education institutions were officially launched in early October 2022, initially focusing on academic staff development. The MHESR instructed university leaders to continue implementing their plans to enhance English-language training and help both students and staff reach B2 or C1 English proficiency. The decision is driven by several political, scientific, and economic motives. Though the main reason was to gain linguistic independence from French influence (Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023), the rationale for this transformation is based on many causes; including the growing worldwide integration of higher education, the growing importance of English in the global employment landscape, and the Algerian government's ambition to improve the caliber of its higher education system. During a meeting with the UK ambassador on March 22, 2023, Minister Baddari emphasized the ministry's commitment to enhancing the proficiency of both Algerian students and university instructors. He highlighted efforts to cultivate globally minded students and to support faculty in achieving full mastery of English, with the long-term goal of gradually incorporating the language into the teaching of scientific and technical subjects. Additionally, he expressed interest in establishing partnerships with major British universities to offer scientific and technological training within Algeria, as well as enabling local language centers to administer internationally recognized exams such as the IELTS (Belkhodja, n.d. cited in Benabdelkader, 2025).

To support teachers from Arabic and French-speaking backgrounds in adapting to English-medium instruction (EMI), the Algerian Ministry launched a compulsory online training in September 2023 via the Dual Edx platform, overseen by the national commission of l'enseignement à distance (Ghouali & Haddam Bouabdallah, 2024) which is an online learning initiative that offers online English level-specific courses open to anyone interested. Also, Many lecturers from different disciplines are increasingly pursuing Bachelor's degrees in English to improve their EMI teaching. The effectiveness of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), however, remains uncertain, as its implementation is still in Progress . The 2023–2024 academic year marked the first phase of EMI implementation in Algerian higher education, as certain scientific and technical courses began to be taught in English. This shift was primarily carried out by instructors who had either pursued their studies in English-speaking countries, taken the initiative to develop their language skills

independently, or participated actively in institutional English training programs. Furthermore, deans of medical faculties received a specific directive requiring that all scientific modules in first-year medical programs be taught in English starting from the 2025/2026 academic year.

This transition raises critical questions regarding lecturers' readiness, attitudes, and perceived challenges in adopting EMI, as well as its potential impact on academic performance and the broader implications for Algeria's linguistic identity. According to Hamane (2023), EMI in Algerian universities is valued for enhancing students' English proficiency, access to international resources, and global career readiness. However, teachers also reported major challenges, such as students' difficulty understanding complex concepts in English, limited teacher proficiency, and the lack of qualified English-speaking instructors, reduced student confidence and participation, and decreased motivation due to frustration. Furthermore, the transition to EMI may not be equally effective or necessary across all disciplines. There might be linguistic and pedagogical difficulties of implementing EMI in humanities and social sciences such as law, sociology, and history (Mansouri, 2025). As cited by Benabdelkader (2025), EMI practices vary greatly depending on the local context, and assuming that a universal, one-size-fits-all model could be applied effectively is unrealistic (Sahan et al., 2021). This reveals that the challenges facing EMI implementation can be found at multiple levels: at the national level (macro), within institutional policies (meso), and in the attitudes and readiness of students and instructors (micro) (Hult, 2010). At the national level, Algeria's language landscape is marked by ideological tension among three dominant languages; Arabic, French, and English. Each carrying historical, political, and religious weight. These competing influences, rooted in both colonial legacies and contemporary agendas, shape the ongoing debate over language policy. At the institutional level, universities were tasked with rapidly introducing English language instruction without sufficient time, planning, or resources. The lack of a structured needs assessment and uneven distribution of staff and materials across institutions led to inconsistent implementation and friction between universities and the ministry. At the classroom level, students, teachers, and even families were largely excluded from the decision-making process and were instead expected to accept language policy changes without consultation, resulting in passive compliance rather than genuine engagement.

While the current generation of university students and instructors may face difficulties adapting to EMI due to their limited exposure to English, recent reforms in primary education, aim to shift this trajectory. By introducing English earlier in the school system, the government is investing in a long-term solution. Drawing on perspectives from second language acquisition, particularly Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982), it argues that early and consistent exposure to English will produce a generation of learners who are not only more comfortable using the language in academic contexts but also more capable of navigating EMI without the linguistic and cognitive overload faced by today's students. In parallel with the rollout of EMI, the ministry is also pursuing efforts to boost Algeria's attractiveness as an international study destination. This includes launching the "Study in Algeria" initiative and adopting a range of strategies, with EMI positioned as a central tool for drawing international students (Benabdelkader, 2025).

3. English in Primary school :

While the various changes mentioned that took place over the years, a particularly notable shift occurred in 2022. In recognition of English's increasing importance in a globalized world, the Council of Ministers approved a reform on August 28, 2022, mandating the introduction of English in the third year of primary school, beginning in September of that year. This significant reform mandated that students start learning English from the 3rd year in primary school, at the age of nine (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, 2023) instead of the secondary level, where students began their formal education in the language around the age of 12.

The introduction of English in primary schools has been relatively late compared to other nations where English has been a compulsory subject from an early age (Garton, 2013). This delay can be contextualized within the broader historical and sociolinguistic landscape of the country. Algeria's language policy has historically favored Arabic and, to some extent, French, largely as a response to the colonial legacy and the desire for national unity. (BELKHIR & ABDELHAY, 2019; Sharkey, 2012). This delayed approach limited students' exposure to English at a critical age for language acquisition, as widely believed in the field of Second Language Acquisition and based on the linguist Lenneberg (1967), the optimal window for acquiring new languages is between early childhood and the beginning of puberty, making primary school the ideal time to begin learning a second language. (Chettibi, forthcoming). Starting from the school year 2022-2023, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) for two 45-minute sessions per week by specialized teachers. Ministerial Circular No. 1711 (October 2022) outlines continuous assessment procedures, requiring teachers to evaluate oral expression, listening comprehension, and reading. To calculate the continuous assessment average the teacher have to calculate these three components' mark, all divided by 3 and pupils also sit for an exam at the end of each term.

That said, a central question persists: does this reform represent a genuine shift toward replacing French with English in Algeria's educational system, or might it follow the same unsuccessful trajectory as the 1990s attempt to introduce English earlier? (Cherifi, 2024). While the previous effort lacked widespread support and adequate resources, the current reform appears to be part of a broader and more sustained national strategy. The policy shift aims to improve students' language skills and align the curriculum with international standards. By introducing English earlier, the reform advocates hope to enhance students' proficiency in English and better prepare them for future academic and professional

opportunities. While the current generation of university students and instructors may face difficulties adapting to EMI due to their limited exposure to English, the government's decision to start English at the primary level represents an investment in long-term linguistic development. This approach aims to equip future generations with stronger foundations in English before they reach higher education.

This reform while ambitious, has not been free from criticism. Numerous media sources have expressed criticism of the recent decision to introduce English in primary education. The negative sentiment largely stems from two concerns: the perception that the policy was implemented hastily and without sufficient planning, and the belief that exposing young learners to four languages at this early stage may be cognitively overwhelming (Cherifi, 2024). Implementing this reform has presented numerous challenges for both students and teachers. Kebboul (2022) highlights concerns about young learners having to acquire two foreign languages simultaneously which are French and English in addition to their national languages (Arabic and Amazigh to some regions). Professor Jamal Daou from the University of El Oued opposes introducing foreign languages in early education, arguing that it undermines students' mother tongue development and cultural identity. Other practical issues include time constraints, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching resources, and inadequate teacher training. These factors inevitably affect students' performance. Research by Cheriguene (2025) identified limited vocabulary and difficulties with pronunciation as persistent problems, primarily due to the minimal exposure to English in and out of the classroom. Pronunciation remains particularly problematic, as many teachers are not trained to teach it explicitly, leaving learners to rely on their existing language knowledge to approximate unfamiliar English sounds (Cheriguene, 2025).

While such concerns are valid and acknowledge the complexity of Algeria's sociolinguistic environment, they often underestimate children's capacity for multilingual development and the potential cognitive benefits of early language learning. According to Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis (1979), skills developed in one language can transfer across languages, suggesting that learning English can, in fact, reinforce rather than hinder the acquisition of Arabic or French. In addition, recent studies on multilingualism indicate that early exposure to multiple languages enhances children's cognitive flexibility, working memory, and problem-solving abilities (Jessner, 2008; Cenoz, 2013). These findings challenge the assumption that multilingual exposure inherently overwhelms young learners; rather, they point to the developmental and academic advantages of early and well-structured multilingual education. Moreover, it is important to view current implementation challenges not as evidence of policy failure but as an expected phase in any large-scale educational reform. As Fullan (2001) explains in his Theory of Educational Change, early resistance, adaptation issues, and institutional inertia are common in reform cycles and should be anticipated as part of the process. Algeria's decision to introduce English in primary education is a strategic and forward-looking measure that responds to global linguistic realities. Like all major reforms, it requires long-term commitment, continuous teacher development, and curriculum refinement—but the presence of initial obstacles should not deter progress.

Ultimately, the early introduction of English in Algerian primary schools marks a turning point in the country's educational policy and for this initiative to truly transform English language learning in Algeria, it must be supported by long-term investment, teacher development, and a clearer integration of English into the local educational and cultural landscape.

II. Conclusion :

Algeria's language-in-education policy has undergone profound shifts since independence, reflecting the country's efforts to reconcile its national identity with global realities. From the ideological pursuit of Arabization to the pragmatic reintroduction of French and the recent embrace of English, each reform has responded to a complex web of political, cultural, and educational imperatives. While early attempts to introduce English met with limited success, recent reforms particularly the integration of English into primary education signal a more forward-thinking and sustainable approach. The promotion of English in higher education through EMI reflects Algeria's desire to engage more fully with the global academic and scientific community, though implementation challenges remain significant. Ultimately, the success of these reforms depends not only on policy shifts but also on the availability of trained teachers, institutional support, and quality educational resources. If these structural conditions are met, Algeria may well achieve its goal of developing a generation of learners who are both rooted in their national identity and equipped to navigate an increasingly interconnected world.

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