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Students' Perspectives on Implementing English as a Medium of Instruction in Algerian Higher Education Between Fear and Ambition

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ABSTRACT:

Implementing English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in higher education has become a focus of many non-English-speaking countries. In Algeria, the transition to EMI not only affects the teaching process of instructors but also influences students' academic performances and acquiring knowledge. This study investigates the perceptions of first-year University Agronomy students towards adopting English as a medium of instruction in higher education. The aim is to explore students' views on learning content through English and to reveal the main challenges, characterized by fear and anxiety, yet also filled with hope and ambition. The study which employs a questionnaire survey revealed that students support the integration of English as a medium of instruction, recognizing its importance for academic and professional development. However, they did not hide that their limited proficiency in English might hinder their ability to learn effectively. Additionally, they reported anxiety related to the lack of instructional resources and to teachers' limited experience and proficiency in English instruction.

KEYWORDS: EMI , Students' Perceptions, Higher education, Language proficiency, challenges.

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آراء الطلبة حول تطبيق اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة تدريس في التعليم العالي الجزائري: بين الخوف والطموح

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ملخص البحث

أصبح تطبيق اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة تدريس في التعليم العالي محور اهتمام العديد من الدول غير الناطقة بالإنجليزية. في الجزائر، لا يؤثر التحول إلى استعمال اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة تدريس على عملية التدريس فحسب، بل يؤثر أيضًا على الأداء الأكاديمي للطلاب واكتسابهم للمعرفة. تبحث هذه الدراسة في تصورات طلاب السنة الأولى في قسم العلوم الفلاحية بالجامعة تجاه اعتماد اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة تدريس في التعليم العالي. وتهدف إلى استكشاف آراء الطلاب حول تعلم المحتوى باللغة الإنجليزية، والكشف عن التحديات الرئيسية التي تتسم بالخوف والقلق، ولكنها في الوقت نفسه مليئة بالأمل والطموح. كشفت الدراسة، التي استخدمت استبيانًا، أن الطلاب يؤيدون دمج اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة تدريس، مدركين أهميتها للتطور الأكاديمي والمهني. ومع ذلك، لم يخفوا أن محدودية إتقانهم للغة الإنجليزية قد تعيق قدرتهم على التعلم بفعالية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، أبلغوا عن قلق يتعلق بنقص الموارد التعليمية ومحدودية خبرة المعلمين وكفاءتهم في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعليم باللغة الإنجليزية، تصورات الطلاب، التعليم العالي، إتقان اللغة، التحديات.

1. INTRODUCTION

Implementing English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in higher education has become one of the main interests of Algerian curriculum developers and decision makers, particularly in light of recent educational reforms and globalization trends. Traditionally, French has been the primary language of instruction in most of Algerian higher educational institutions, especially in scientific and technical fields. This is largely due to the country's colonial history, which continues to affect language use in universities. However, as English becomes more important worldwide in education, science and communication, Algerian educational policy makers are starting to rethink their language policies. Therefore, the shift towards EMI is intended to expand students' academic opportunities, improve access to knowledge and enhance future employment prospects. Despite these potential benefits, the transition poses significant challenges for many individuals due to a wide range of reasons including limited English proficiency, and a lack of training and resources. In this context, understanding how students perceive EMI is crucial for evaluating its feasibility and for informing effective language planning in Algerian higher education.

The adoption of English as a medium of instruction in Algerian universities, such as the Department of Agronomy at Relizane University- Ahmed Zabana, raises several challenges. This is mainly because there is a limited understanding of how students perceive this shift. Thus, exploring the perceptions and attitudes of students is crucial for identifying the challenges they face and for developing strategies that facilitate the successful implementation of EMI.

The present study seeks to fill this knowledge gap and inform policy decisions regarding the use of English as a medium of instruction in the university setting.

To achieve this aim, the current study investigates students' perceptions of English as a medium of instruction.

In line with this objective, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- How do students perceive learning in English at the department of Agronomy at Relizane University?
- What challenges do students encounter when using English in the educational context?

To provide a framework for this investigation, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

- Students in the Department of Agronomy perceive learning in English as positively contributing for their academic and professional development.
- Students' limited language proficiency presents major obstacles to the successful implementation of EMI in the department of Agronomy at Relizane University.

The study employs a descriptive-analytical research design to examine students' perceptions of EMI. A questionnaire, combining quantitative and qualitative items, was distributed to students to collect data on their views and challenges.

2. Literature review

The literature review of this study provides a number of EMI definitions and examines its status in the Algerian higher educational setting, referring to the major shift from French to English-medium learning across several fields. It also deals with the main benefits of EMI in the Algerian context, particularly in developing student's language competency and improving their access to scientific knowledge. Additionally, the present section exposes some of the learning challenges that students encounter when adopting EMI in their study, including language barriers and problems related to course content. These aspects will be explored in detail in the following section.

2.1. Definition of EMI

Teaching content in English can be fulfilled through different educational contexts. Among which English-medium education (Earls, 2016), English-medium teaching (Macaro et al. 2018; Tatzl, 2011), and English as the lingua franca medium of instruction (Björkman, 2011). For the present study, the term English Medium Instruction (EMI) is used to refer to the language employed to convey skills, information, and values in the classroom, and to facilitate communication between the teacher and the students (Islam et al. 2015).One of EMI definitions is"the use of English in the offer of university degree courses in higher education instead of the domestic language of the country" (Karakaş, 2015, p. 1).For others,it refers to certain academic disciplines that are taught in English in countries where English is not the first language (Dearden, 2014; Macaro et al., 2018).

EMI is closely related to other educational concepts such as : Englishization, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Content-Based Instruction (CBI). According to Gabriëlsand Wilkison(2021), Englishization refers to the progressive shift toward using English instead of local languages across key societal sectors, most notably in higher education, governance, culture, and commerce.For the term CLIL, it serves as a dual-focused educational approach where a foreign language is used to deliver non-language subjects, i.e, merging content learning with language acquisition (Dalton-Puffer et al. 2010).According to Snow (2001), CBI integrates language teaching with academic subject matter. This approach emphasizes the development of linguistic proficiency and content knowledge through utilizing real-world communication to drive language acquisition. (Brinton et al. 2003).

Overall, while CLIL and CBI seem similar to EMI, some major differences exist regarding institutional context and pedagogical focus. Structurally, CLIL is frequently used within secondary education, whereas EMI is generally implemented at the tertiary level. Furthermore, the main objectives differ significantly: "CBI emphasizes language development over subject content" (Simbolon, 2016, p.155), and CLIL seeks an equitable integration of both. On the contrary, "EMI programs revolve around content mastery, treating language acquisition as a means instructional process"(Aguilar, 2017, p.28 ; Banegas &Manzur Busleimán, 2021, p.79).

2.2. The Transition to EMI across Algerian Universities

Across the world, many higher education institutions are adopting EMI to enhance their international global profile. The main objective of internationalizing education is to strengthen students' linguistic competence and cross-cultural communicative skills, often by providing English-meduim courses. In response to globalization, this shift contributes to attracting a diverse group of international students. Blommaert (2012) identifies three main reasons for universities to implement English as a medium of instruction:First, to increase international

student enrollment. Second, to enhance the institution's global reputation.Third,to prepare graduates for a globalized job market.

Expanding EMI in Algeria plays a critical role in fostering the nation's economic development and global integration by equipping graduates with vital English language proficiency. To adequately prepare students for the academic and professional demands of the 21st century, Algerian higher education institutions must prioritize comprehensive English language training and systematically integrate EMI across their curricula (Ouarniki, 2023).

Algeria is increasingly discussing the shift toward English as a medium of instruction in its schools and universities. This means teaching academic subjects in English instead of Arabic or French. Many believe this change is necessary to modernize the education system and connect Algeria to the global community.

Historically, due to its colonial past, Algeria has used French as the main language of instruction, especially in science, medicine, and engineering. However, because English is now the dominant global language for science, business, and international communication, a growing number of students, teachers, and officials are pushing for university courses to be taught in English.

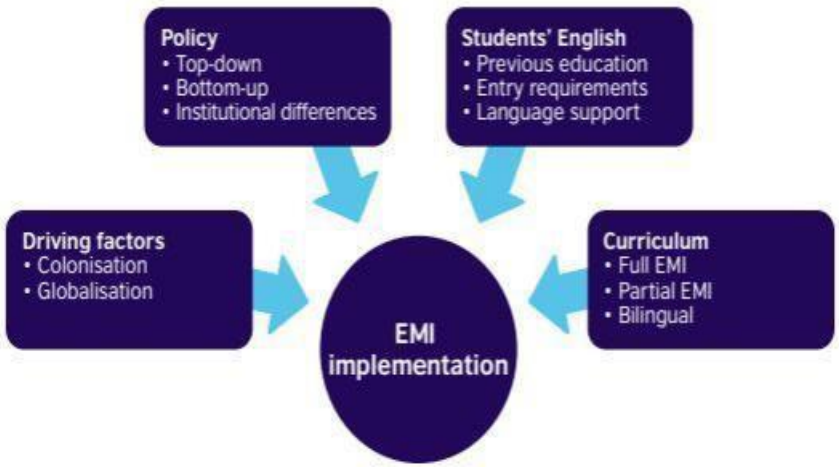


Fig.1. Factors Influencing EMI Implementation

Source: Nicola Galloway,2020,p.25

2.3. Benefits of EMI in the Algerian Setting

The use of EMI as a language of content in the Algerian universities is beneficial for students, teachers and the whole educational system. The most important advantage is to facilitate access to scientific knowledge and research, as most academic publications, textbooks and studies in disciplines such as : technology, medicine and engineering are published in English.

Shifting toward EMI in the Algerian Higher education enables both students and teachers to stay up-to-date with worldwide advancements and learning materials. At the level of employment, EMI can enhance job opportunities across various professional sectors including business, healthcare, tourism and hospitality, finance and banking, scientific research, media and communication,…etc. Another advantage of EMI is that it promotes student interaction and global collaboration skills through which students can study abroad in countries namely: USA, the UK and Canada. This will help to build academic partnerships and conduct research with foreign institutions.(Helm, 2020).

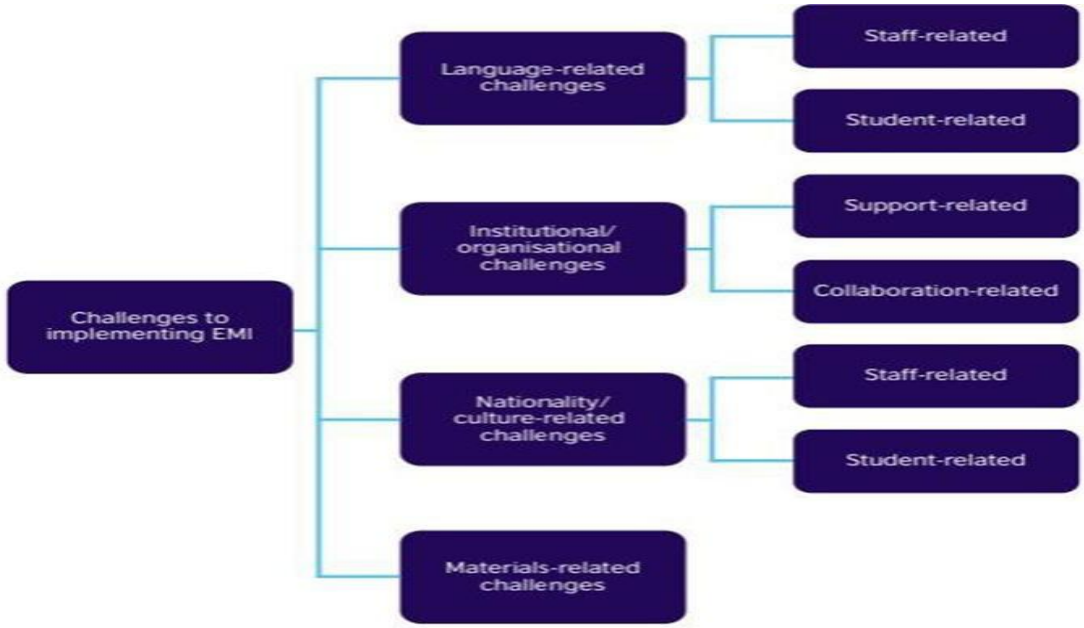
Furthermore, EMI supports the adoption of modern teaching methods. Most online courses and digital learning resources are available in English. EMI encourages interactive learning through group projects and discussions, helping students improve their critical thinking and communication skills. Using EMI also reduces Algeria's dependency on France and aligns its education system with global academic and economic standards, enhancing the country's international reputation. Several non-English-speaking nations, such as Germany, Turkey, and China, have successfully implemented EMI, strengthening their academic and research standing.

Lastly, EMI equips students with essential language skills needed in global industries, preparing them for the future. This is especially important in fast-growing fields like artificial intelligence, cyber security, anddigitalmarketing, where most resources are in English(Galloway et al., 2017).

2.4 Students' Learning Challenges in the EMI Environment

When adopting EMI, students may encounter several learning difficulties such as: linguistic challenges, cultural challenges, structural issues and identity-related (institutional) challenges (Bradford, 2016). The first type of difficulties concern language proficiency where students find it difficult to comprehend lecture content delivered in English and effectively engage with academic texts and learning materials.The second category; cultural barriers arise from differences between the cultural backgrounds, values and expectations of international students and those prevalent in the host country . In such context, the experiences and intercultural competence of EMI lecturers play a major role in addressing these challenges. According to Bradford (2016) some Japanese lecturers reported feeling pressure to adjust their pedagogical approaches in response to EMI implementation. These adjustments may challenge established national values and contribute to changes in professional identity, as suggested by Spolsky'stheory. In addition, these cultural tensions may arise less from broad cultural differences and more from internal institutional dynamics and expectations. The third category of learning barriers comprises structural barriers, which are associated with the organization and implementation of EMI programs. These challenges include the limited availability of EMI courses and inability of administrative services to adequately respond to these enquiries of a diverse student population. The last type of students' learning difficulties with EMI , according to Bradford (2016) is identity-related institutional challenges which refer to how the EMI program is externally perceived, including its reputation, the faculty's identity, and patterns of student enrollment. The figure below illustrates the main challenges that hinder EMI implementation.

Fig.2. The typology of challenges to implementing EMI for staff and students



Source: Nicola Galloway,2020,p.32

3. Research Methodology

The current study uses a questionnaire survey to examine student perceptions of English as a Medium of Instruction in higher education. The instrument was administered to first-year Agronomy students at Relizane University. By gathering data from participants with varying levels of English proficiency, the researcher was able to compare diverse perspectives, thereby enhancing the reliability and comprehensiveness of the findings.

The questionnaire comprised both multiple-choice and open-ended questions, designed to explore students' perceptions, experiences, and challenges regarding English Medium Instruction. To ensure clarity and accessibility for all respondents, the language of the instrument was intentionally simplified.

3.1.Data Gathering Procedure

The data collection process began with the development of the questionnaire. After obtaining institutional permission to conduct the study, the instrument was printed and distributed to 57 first-year Agronomy students. Participants were provided with sufficient time to complete all items thoroughly and honestly. The collection phase spanned several weeks to ensure the organized distribution and retrieval of the questionnaires.

3.2. Participants

The current research involved 57 first-year Agronomy students at Relizane University. These participants were selected because they were newly introduced to the use of English in their academic courses. Despite their limited familiarity with the language, their diverse backgrounds

and varying proficiency levels provided valuable insights into how they perceive and navigate English as a Medium of Instruction.

3.3. Data Analysis and Interpretation

This section is devoted to the analysis and presentation of the data obtained from the student questionnaire.

3.3.1. Description of the Students' Questionnaire

The research instrument is designed to investigate students' perceptions toward the implementation of EMI in the field of Agronomy. It seeks to gather data on the benefits, challenges, and overall experiences of students exposed to EMI, while also examining their views on the effectiveness of teachers' instructional practices.

The survey is divided into three sections, each focusing on a distinct thematic aspect. It utilizes a combination of closed-ended and open-ended items, incorporating Likert scales and multiple-choice options. The introductory section collects demographic and linguistic background data, including gender, duration of English study, and self-assessed proficiency. The second section evaluates students' exposure to English-taught modules, their comfort levels with the subject matter, and the perceived utility of EMI for their professional development. The third section discusses students' attitudes towards EMI and their expectations about future aspirations of learning content in English.

3.3.2 Findings

A- Students' Background Information

Q1 : Gender

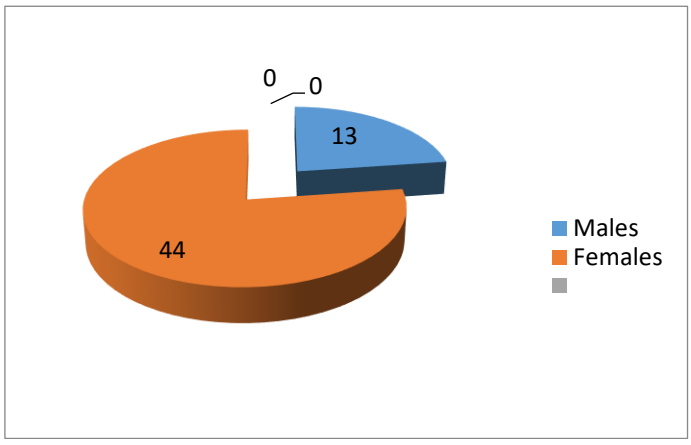


Fig.3. Distribution of Participants by Gender

As shown in the pie chart representing students' gender, there are more females than males in the sample. Males' number 13, accounting for 23%, while 44 females account for 77% of the total sample. This reflects a considerable gender disparity, with females being overrepresented in this study.

Q2 : Duration of English Language Study

The table below presents the length of time students have been learning English

Table.1. Students'Experience in Study

Option	Number	Percentage
7years	11	19.3%
8years	40	70.2%
9years	2	3.5%
10years	4	7%
Total	57	100%

Regarding the duration of English study, 70.2% of participants reported an 8-year learning English. 19.3% with 7 years, 7% with 10 years, and a minority of 3.5% with 9 years of experience follow this. The data implies that there is a homogeneous linguistic background in terms of time-spent learning English. The slight variations in duration likely reflect individual academic paths, such as grade repetition, yet the overall results ensure that no student is a complete beginner to the language.

Q3 : Students' Self-Assessed English Language Proficiency

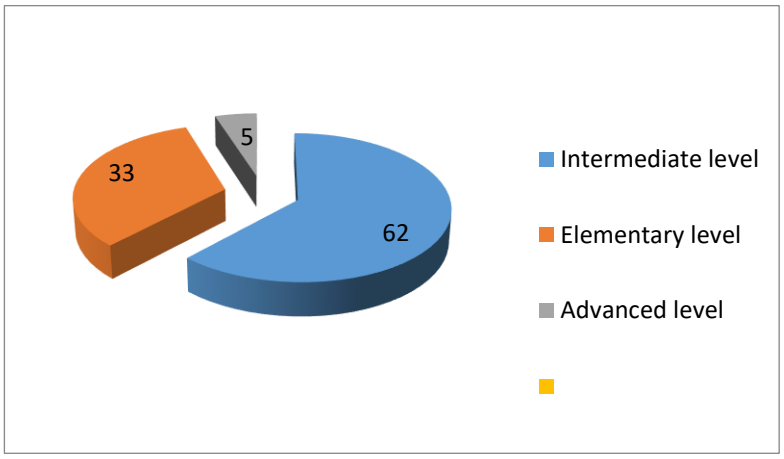


Fig.4. Students' level in English

In this question, respondents were asked to evaluate their English language proficiency. The data reveal that **62%** are at an intermediate level, **33%** are beginners, and **5%** are advanced. This suggests that most students have reached a middle level of proficiency.

B-Students Perceptions of EMI

The next section of the questionnaire focused on understanding how students regard learning Agronomy in English.

Q4 :Exposure to Modules Taught in English

Table.2.Students' Exposure to learning Modules in English Language

Option	Number	Percentage
Yes	57	100%
No	0	0%
Total	57	100%

According to Table 2**,** all respondents (100%) confirmed they are exposed to modules in English. This indicates that all students in the sample are familiar with learning their subjects in a foreign language.

Q5 : Impact of EMI on Content acquisition

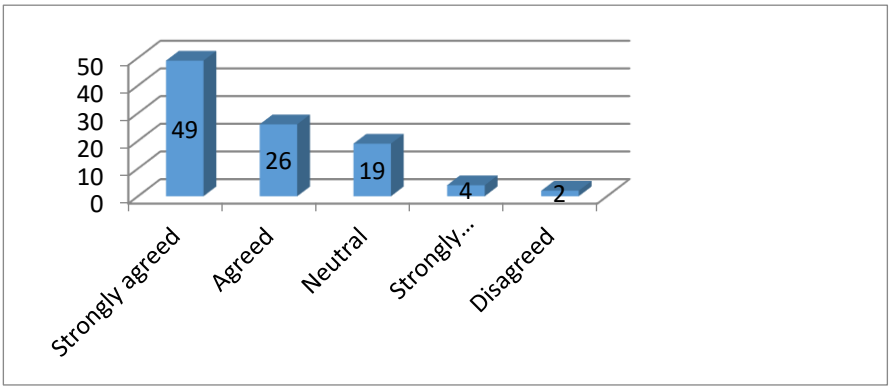


Fig. 5: Students' Views on Learning Subject Content in English

When asked if EMI improves their knowledge, most students agreed: 49**%** strongly agreed and 26**%** agreed. This shows that the majority believe English helps their academic growth. While **19%** remained neutral, very few disagreed (**only 6% total**). Generally, the findings clearly show that most students find English beneficial for understanding their field of study.

Q6:Future Career Benefits of Learning Content in English

Table 3: Students' views on advantages of learning content in English

Option	Number	Percentage
Yes	46	81%
No	4	7%
Not sure	7	12%
Total	57	100%

The table above reveals that out of 57 students, a large majority (**81%**) considered English beneficial for their future academic and professional career. This proves that most students believe English is key to reaching their future goals, such as job opportunities or conducting scientific research. About **12%** were unsure, and only **7%** did not see a benefit. The results show that most students regard learning in English beneficial for their future careers and studies.

Q7 **: Students' Challenges in Learning Content in English**

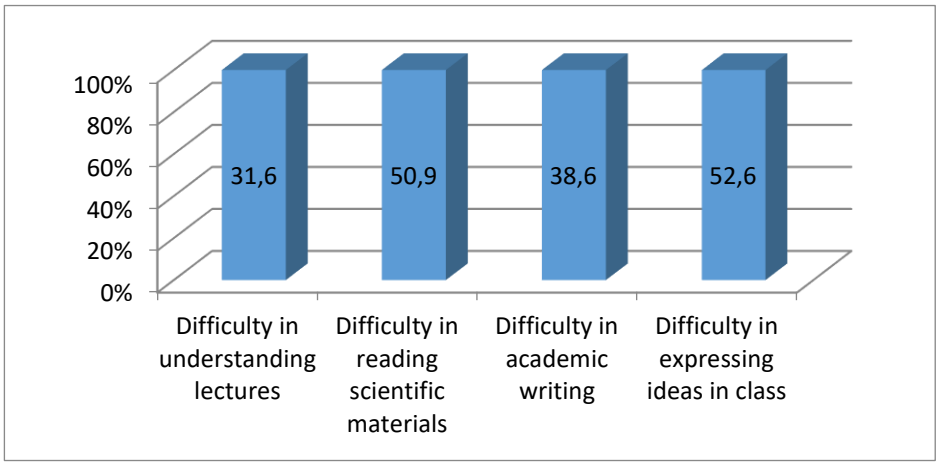


Fig. 6 : Students' Struggles with content learing in EMI

The seventh question in the questionnaire seeks to reveal the main problems students face when studying in English. More than half (**52.6%**) find it difficult to speak and express their ideas in class.

Similarly, **50.9%** find reading scientific texts difficult due to complex technical words. Writing assignments is a challenge for **38.6%**, while **31.6%** cannot understand lectures appropriately. The findings show that students find it more difficult when using English actively and understanding specialized scientific language.

Q8 :Impact of Learning Content in English

Table 4 : Students' Views on the Challenges of Learning Agronomy in English

Option	Number	Percentage
Yes	29	51%
No	15	26%
Not sure	13	23%
Total	57	100%

The results show that over half the students (**51%**) find learning Agronomy in English more difficult. However, **26%** disagree, claiming they have adapted well to the language. Another **23%** are unsure. These results suggest that while English adds a layer of difficulty for the majority, a significant portion of students feels confident using it for their studies.

Q9: Agronomy Students' Fears and Concerns Regarding EMI Implementation.

The table below displays the distribution of students' responses related to their fears and concerns towards EMI implementation.

Table 5 : Students' Perceptions of EMI-related Fears and Concerns.

Option	Number	Percentage
Yes	35	61,4%
No	12	21,1%
Not sure	10	17,5 %
Total	57	100%

The findings above show that a considerable number of Agronomy students express fears and concerns regarding implementing EMI in the field of Agronomy. Out of 57 respondents, 35 students (61,4%) answer "yes". However, 12 students (21,1%) report having no fears, while 10 students (17,5%) are not sure. This suggests that anxiety and fear from EMI implementation are common among biology students when faced with EMI. The main reasons behind these results can be attributed to some factors such as: limited English proficiency, fear of misunderstanding scientific concepts and concerns about academic performance.

Q10: Agronomy Students' Ambitions and Future Aspirations Related to EMI.

With regard to the students' ambitions and future aspirations towards EMI, the results reflect a positive image. 40 students (70, 2%) expressed positive feedback and believe that EMI could improve their academic and professional development. Only 05 students (8, 8%) think that EMI could not satisfy such ambitions, while 12 students (21,1%) are uncertain. These findings indicate that Agronomy students recognize the potential benefits of EMI believing that raising English proficiency can pave the way to scientific knowledge provide opportunities for postgraduate studies and enable contribution to international, academic and professional communities. The figure below provides a clear illustration of the findings discussed above.

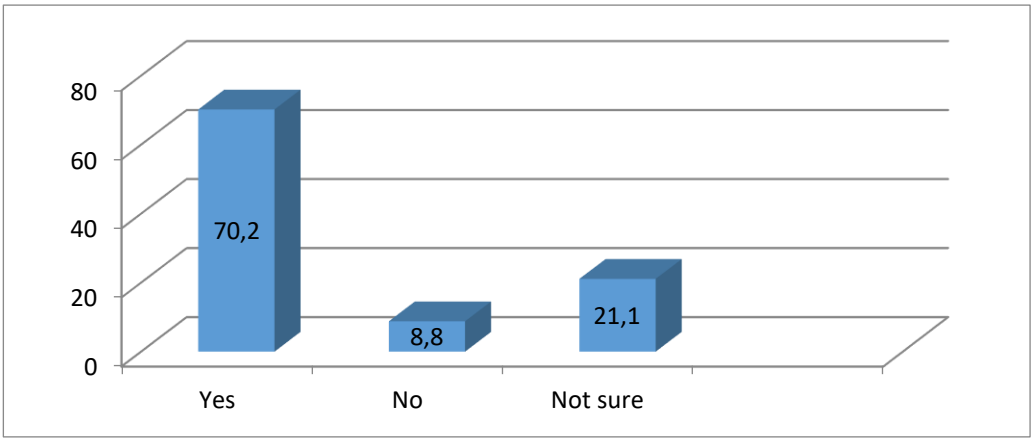


Fig.7: Students' Ambitions and Aspirations Regarding EMI

4- Discussion

The findings of the study reveal that Agronomy students have both positive and negative views of EMI combining both learning difficulties and hopeful outlook. The results of the questionnaire survey demonstrate that students encounter some key difficulties in oral skills (62, 6%) understanding lectures' content (50,9%) and handling reading and writing tasks (30,8%). This indicates that learning content in English is still deeply affected by some language barriers. Simultaneously, the findings show that Agronomy students recognize the importance of EMI for their future career believing that studying content in English can enhance their academic and professional opportunities. However, this attitude does not exclude students' dissatisfaction with the improvement of their understanding of subject content reflecting a significant gap between what they hope and what they currently experience. This explains the clear contract between their fear and ambition.

The study shows that Agronomy students' regard EMI as both an opportunity and a challenge. They do not hide their struggle with some language-related barriers at present (61,4%), but they are fully hopeful about the benefits of EMI in the near future (70, 2%). All they need is pedagogical and linguistic support to help them overcome the aforementioned challenges.

5- Limitations of the Study and Recommendations

While the study provides significant insights about students' perceptions of EMI, it is not without

limitations. First, the sample was limited to 57 Agronomy students, which makes it difficult to generalize the findings to a larger population. Second, the research was conducted within the department of Agronomy at Relizane University, which is the reason why the results cannot be generalized to other academic fields and universities.

To improve the students' learning experience with EMI, It is recommended that educational institutions are required to provide enhanced linguistic support for biology students so as to improve their English proficiency, particularly in oral skills. In addition, more English language training should be provided for content instructors, and bilingual classes that mix English with the students' native language should be introduced. Moreover, interactive EMI teaching strategies should be adopted by instructors to simplify complex scientific content and help students avoid comprehension difficulties. Workshops and seminars are also recommended to help both students and teachers adapt to the English-medium environment, alongside a greater variety of English learning resources. Finally, students need to be enhanced to take the initiative to autonomously develop some language learning strategies to empower their language proficiency and improve their academic performance.

6- Conclusion

The present study, which was conducted at Relizane University explored Agronomy students' perceptions of EMI with much focus on their learning barriers, perceived benefits and future ambitions. The aim was to understand how students experience EMI in their field of study. The findings revealed that Agronomy students at Relizane University hold mixed views of EMI, believing on its importance for their future academic performance and professionalism, yet not hiding their fear from adopting it as a medium of study. This fear arises from their difficulties in oral communication and understanding course content tailored in English. Thus, the results indicated a clear gap between students' expectations and their current learning experience. This gap is explained through the findings, which confirmed that EMI is perceived as an opportunity for future carrier development and as a challenge in the actual learning experience, reflecting limited English proficiency and certain language barriers.

In conclusion, although the present investigation is limited by its small sample size and focus on a single department, it does not exclude the need to raise some recommendations at different levels such as: institutions, instructors and learners themselves to enhance students' autonomous learning and adopt some strategies to improve EMI effectiveness in different fields.

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