

Coping with language transition in instruction in Algerian higher education

التعامل مع التحول اللغوي في التدريس في التعليم العالي الجزائري

Mr. Abderrahim HABRI , Prof. Hafida HAMZEOUI ²

¹ Department of English, ESPT Lab, Tlemcen university
habriabderrahim71@gmail.com

² Tlemcen university (Algeria), hamzaouihafida@yahoo.fr

Received: 07/03/2024 Accepted: .16/04/2024 Published:01/06/2024

Abstract

Algerian higher educational system uses French to teach scientific subjects, unlike pre-graduation education that uses Arabic. Such shift in the language of instruction poses challenges for low proficiency first year university students. However the strategies applied by learners to cope with this transition are not often discussed, particularly in scientific branches. This paper aims at investigating the strategies used by the learners and its impact on their comprehension. Thus Questionnaires are administered to case study of 80 first year students belonging to scientific branches at university of Tlemcen. Qualitative and quantitative data analyses reveal that students use various strategies, which help them significantly in their comprehension, besides it enables them to use other languages. The study suggests the application of appropriate strategies in different learning situations, besides considering implementing a bilingual education system by policy makers to ensure suitable learning environment for first year science students.

Keywords: Medium of instruction, coping strategies, comprehension, bilingual education

ملخص:

يستخدم نظام التعليم العالي الجزائري اللغة الفرنسية في تدريس المواد العلمية، بخلاف التعليم قبل التخرج في الثانوية الذي يستخدم اللغة العربية. وهذا التحول في لغة التدريس ينطوي على تحديات كثيرة بالنسبة لطلاب السنة الأولى من التعليم الجامعي المنخفضي الكفاءة في الفرنسية. غير أن الاستراتيجيات التي يطبقها المتعلمون للتغلب على هذا التحول لا تناقش في كثير من الأحيان، ولا سيما في الفروع العلمية. وتهدف هذه الورقة إلى دراسة الاستراتيجيات التي يستخدمها المتعلمين وأثرها على فهمهم.

ومن أجل هذه الأهداف استعملت استبيانات لدراسة حالة 80 طالباً في السنة الأولى ينتمون إلى فروع علمية في جامعة تلمسان. التحليلات النوعية والكمية للبيانات بينت أن الطلاب يستخدمون استراتيجيات مختلفة تساعد بدرجة كبيرة في الفهم، إلى جانب أنها تمكنهم من استخدام لغات أخرى. وتقترح الدراسة تطبيق

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استراتيجيات مناسبة في مختلف حالات التعلم، إلى جانب النظر في تطبيق لنظام تعليمي ثنائي اللغة من مقرري السياسات لضمان بيئة تعلم مناسبة لطلاب السنة الأولى من العلوم.

كلمات مفتاحية: لغة التعليم، إستراتيجيات المواجهة، الفهم، التعليم ثنائي اللغة

***Corresponding author:* Mr. Abderrahim HABRI**

1. Introduction

Language policies in Algeria , and especially language policies in education are highly sensitive and complex state , which is made more difficult due to different politic views , and other ideologies (Benrabah 2007: 226) . This made it hard to adopt certain linguistic codes for educative instructions. Until up to the 1950's the dominant language of instruction for the Algerian education was French, given the fact that Algeria was colonized by France, this situation will soon change by the Algerian independence in 1962, when the Algerian government introduced the Arabazation process in the 1960's by introducing Arabic in primary schools in 1963, a retaliation act against the French occupation, and in relation to the language across the entire Algerian community. As a result, the education system was also influenced by the Arabazation movement in which modern standard Arabic (MSA) became the medium of instruction at all levels, witnessing the second shift of instruction at Algerian education.

Although MSA was established as the language for education in all domains at pre-university levels, the attempts to fully generalize Arabic as the medium of instruction at university level by 2000 (Maamri 2009: 85) as cited in (Le Roux, 2017), the completion of this program did not see the light as Arabic language remained relevant only in disciplines related to humanities such as sociology, psychology, literature, journalism and geography. Due to the various shortcomings of the Arabic language in science disciplines. Arabic was relatively inexistent in scientific fields at university, where French was the dominant language in fields such as medicine, hard science and engineering (Mostari 2004: 30) as cited in (Le Roux, 2017)

Therefore the Algerian education system witnessed a lot of changes concerning the language of instruction with back and forth between Arabic and French. Despite the language rivalry, The current landscape of the Algerian educational system still favors French as the medium of instruction for scientific fields at university whereas Arabic is used as the medium for

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instructing in the majority of non technical fields (Clark 2006), this language planning direction lead to a prominent problem related to Algerian students ability to cope with the medium of lecturing which they are not sufficiently equipped to handle at university when the instruction shifts to French because their previous education is based on Arabic instructions (Chaouche 2006: 28) mentioned in (Hamzaoui, 2021), although in 2022 English has been introduced as EM at higher education in some fields such as medicine , it has not yet been applied practically throughout higher education system due to students and teaching staff preparedness, thus French is still the medium of instruction for all scientific fields.

Taking into account all what have been said before the purpose of this study is to highlight the learning strategies used by first year university students, enrolled in the scientific fields of biology, geology, science and technology, to cope with French as a medium of instruction in their studies. It is important to identify these strategies since it will reveal how these students comprehend and understand the subject matter which is delivered in a foreign language with the help of the used strategies as (Pressley and Associates, 1990) cited in (Oxford, 2003) using learning strategies is closely related to students academic achievements . The study also aims at identifying how the learning strategies have helped students in their learning Thus the following research questions have been raised :

- 1- What are the strategies used to cope with the learning instruction?
- 2- Are these strategies helpful for students to comprehend their lectures?

2. Literature review

2 .1. Previous studies on coping strategies

Several studies were done on the impacts of language transition on learners' comprehension which drove student to apply different learning strategies to adjust their learning to the challenges imposed on them by the foreign instructions, below an overview of several studies by (Praxton 2009;; Holi Ibrahim Holi Ali 2020; Peacock 2001; Suliman and Tadros 2011) that show the different coping strategies used by students to deal with the challenges in times of language shift in education

A study done by Praxton (2009) in south Africa revealed that students use translation to deal with the bilingual instruction in many domains whether it

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is in classrooms , group work or peer learning situations , students switch between English and their local languages. The researcher stressed that only if the learners explore the concepts in different languages they would not form their own understandings of the given concepts “unless students explored concepts through various languages, they would not really develop their own personal construction and an enriched understanding of them” (ibid: 351).

Furthermore, a study carried out by Holi Ibrahim Holi Ali | (2020) , on Omani engineering students coping with English instructions , a case study of 12 engineering students , using semi structured interviews and observations to gather data on how Omani students dealt with the difficulties in their studies ; the results showed that students use different strategies such as translation bilingual dictionaries, peer, group work , family support . similarly another investigation by Peacock (2001) on learners dealing with bilingual instruction , he focused on investigating the relation between students language proficiency and the strategies they use , he examined six different strategies in which metacognition , compensation and cognition were related to students’ language proficiency.

Moreover, a study carried out by Suliman and Tadros (2011) , the study investigated the coping strategies of Saudi Arabia nursing students dealing with foreign language instruction. The research sample contained seventy – eight students which they were surveyed three times , the results showed that those students use of coping strategies changes over the school year in three ways , at the beginning of the semester students relied heavily on planful problem-solving, positive reappraisal, , self-controlling and seeking social support, although the usage of these strategies decreased significantly in the middle of the semester , finally, at the end of the semester student use of confrontive coping and distancing much more , in this case Suliman and Tadros (2011) stated that students’ choice of these strategies by the end of the semester may indicate they need their teachers help as they may have been stressed , thus their teachers should provide them with academic counseling session , positive feed backs and an understanding of effective coping strategies to deal with English as EFL or ESL medium of instruction. The investigators concluded that the students used a variety of learning strategies which changed over time, and another point which has been raised by the investigators is that the responsibility of coping with English as a medium of instruction is a shared and cooperative responsibility between students, faculty and management.

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1.3. Reasons behind bilingual instructions

In this regard educational system based on foreign language instruction generally shut the door on other language varieties which are at the reach of the learners in this case MSA which is the majority language used by students in their learning, Baker (2002: 237)in (Le Roux, 2017), pointed out a new direction which governments are undertaking in their language policies that is ideologically stands in favor of bilingualism or even multilingualism , eventually an educational system that encourage multilingualism thus , here it lies the urgency of considering the students' bilingual background in learning and teaching especially when using only a foreign language of instruction. Bilingualism can be a beneficial factor that helps students in leaning the target content since it will give them the opportunity to extract and construct knowledge from both linguistic forms used in the classroom, since many studies formulated the conclusion that students' minority language is a source that help student develop knowledge and their comprehension of the entire school subjects (like Cummins , 2005). even though the majority of first year students are not sufficient in the French medium of instruction it is an integral part of their community making them bilinguals by nature , as bilinguals are individuals having two languages used in everyday life (Garcı ´a, 2009) as reported in (Ünsal et al., 2017)

1.4 Foreign language instruction in Algeria

Concerning the Algerian context , The use of a foreign language for instruction in scientific disciplines were mainly due to the failure of Arabazation policy , which main goal was solely the eradication of French from the Algerian society including education at all levels, because this process was an action taken against the occupation, another reason was that shortcoming of the Arabic language like the lack of the appropriate terminology and jargon , the lack also of knowledge and information sources in Standard Arabic for these disciplines (Benrabah, 2014) , these obstacles prevented the effective teaching using Arabic , much more than that the majority of the Algerian teachers at university at that time received their education and training in French since it was the dominant language in the colonial era , this created another problem which is the lack of educational staff that were trained to teach scientific disciplines in Arabic .

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Although the introduction of French as the medium of instruction was to gain better quality education and the use of a language that will open the Algerian students to modernity development and scientific advancement besides better job opportunities; another failure for the educational system immersed , this failure was related to the student linguistic competency in French as , Benrabah (ibid), state that a report in 2005 by the Minister of Higher Education showed that about 80% of university first year students failed their final exams due to” linguistic incompetence “ (cited in Hamzoui , 2017)

Several studies have been carried out on the MI at Algerian higher education, (Djenane 2016, M.dendane 2020) the two researches have been done at university of Tlemcen , where the current study took place , the two investigations show that learners prefer French or English as MI for their studies over Arabic regardless of the impact of MI on their learning , since they believe that the foreign language will guarantee a quality education and will help them in their future carries. Even though the results show that students prefer one MI over the other , it does not deny the multilingual use of different verbal codes inside the classroom , which indicate the presence of a bilingual or multilingual education , whether it is officially accounted for or not , this is highlighted by Chaouche (2006) work when he asks his participants about how do they think teaching should be in Algeria , the results are as follow either bilingual (35%) or multilingual (46%) and that Algeria needs a multilingual reform (49%). Medfouni (2020) argues that even French a long term medium of instruction for sciences does not have a total dominance in use inside the classroom where English is being also considered as a possible MI for the future. With some change in attitude towards it by learner as well as teachers (Chemami , 2011) . This situation yields an issue of considering the position of the mother tongue in education which should be taken into account by language policy makers.

So first year student may need to resort to certain learning strategies to adapt their learning to the foreign medium of instruction , this latter imposes several challenges for the students, these challenges are for the most part related to language proficiency , they will not be able to comprehend the content of the lessons because it is delivered in a language which is not familiar to them Fakeye and Ogunsiji (2009: 494) , a situation that will force the learners to rely open certain learning strategies to adjust their learning to the medium of instructions , these strategies work at various levels to ensure that students will cope with the demands that the

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language of instruction will impose on their comprehension process. Thus this work tries to shed the light on the different strategies used by first year Algerian university student and the impact of these strategies on their learning curve.

3. Method

The study is undertaken at the university of Bekr Belkaid Tlemcen , precisely in the departments of biology, geology and hard sciences. This investigation follows a case study research design, in which an exploratory descriptive case study is chosen for this research

3.1.Population and samples

To gather data about the current topic a random sample of 80 first year university students have been chosen to take part of this work. All the participant students share the same educational background in which they have received their pre-university education in MSA and then move to university where they are receiving their education in French. Below is further description concerning the sample chosen:

Department	RF
Biology	49%
Hard sciences	35%
Geology	16%

Table01: Students' departments distribution

3.2.Research instrument

In order to collect data for the study a questionnaire form is given to the participants with open ended and close ended questions, even though most of the questions administered are close ended questions. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used in data analyses to obtain accurate data interpretations and results generalizations.

4. Results and discussion

4.1.Students' questionnaire results

The students questionnaire results is divided in tow 2 sections the first section focuses on the possible strategies that first year scientific students use to deal with the issues related to the French MI and the second

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part addresses the possible solutions the chosen coping strategies have presented to the learners.

4.1.1. The different strategies used by students to overcome their language problems (items 1-10).

Item one: students' use of translation to Arabic during the teacher explanation.

The results yield that the majority of students (61.25%) use translation to Arabic to understand the teacher's explanation.

Then, **the** students are asked about the type of dictionaries they use.

Students are given three different types of dictionaries to choose from them the results are shown in the graph below:

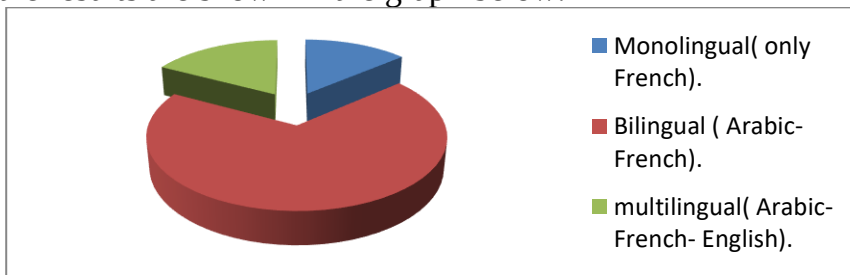
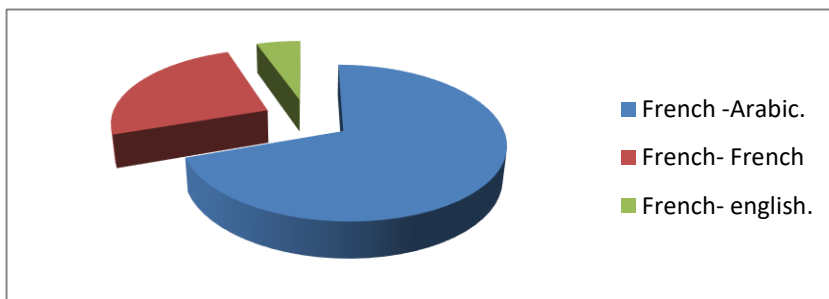


Figure 4.1: types of dictionaries used by students.

The graph displays that the majority of students (69%) prefer to use a bilingual (French-Arabic) dictionary. Only (14%) use a monolingual dictionary (French)

Item two: students' use of glossaries

A big number of students (70%) use glossaries in their studies in different languages as shown in the figure below.



Fiigure4.2: types of languages the students use to write their glossaries.

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The study show that the majority of students (69.64%) use Arabic and French to write their explanation about expressions and specific jargon , only (25%) of students use French .

Item three: students asking for help from their classmates

This item aims to show how many times students refer to their classmates for help in order to understand the given instruction. The results are shown in the following graph

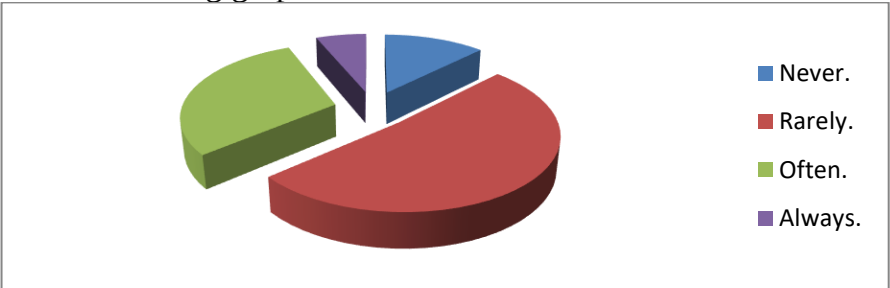


Figure 4.3: students ask help from each other

Only 36% of respondents ask their mates for help in understanding instructions

Item four: languages that students help each other with

This question is an informative question which is a follow up to the fifth item. It is aimed at identifying which languages are used when students tend to help each other. The following graph highlights the results

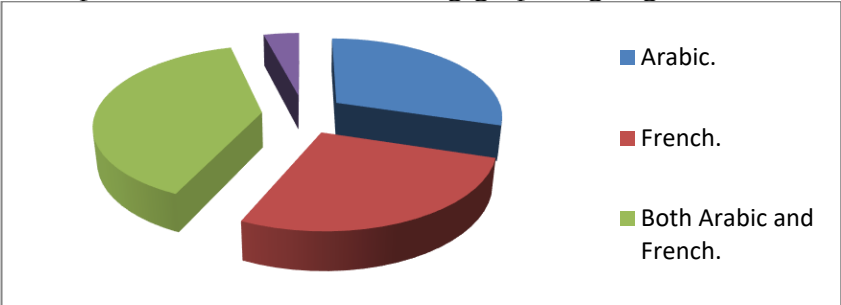


Figure 4.4: languages used by students to help each other.

The data above show that the biggest proportion of students (39%) use a mixture of Arabic and French to explain to each other , while about (30%) rely on Arabic only, meanwhile (27%) use only French when they are asked to explain some things.

Item five: students' taking notes

The results show that the majority of students (76.25%) take notes during the lectures. When they are asked about the reasons for choosing any

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specific language, all answers present the notion that it enables them to understand better. But this has many other reasons. Most students who choose Arabic to write their explanations say “Arabic, because I don’t understand French” or that” I am not good at French” one of them says ‘I use Arabic because I revise a lot in Arabic’. On the other hand, the answers of those who choose French are ‘the teacher uses French words “and the exam will be in French” they also add ‘we study in French” only one says that he use French in order to translate the words later, They also explain that they use French because it is “easy for them’ or they have “a good level in French”. As for informants who choose to write their glossaries in both French and Arabic all their replies fall under the idea of better comprehending, and to facilitate the words given in French or to bridge the gap of their incompetence to understand French as one of them says‘ I use Arabic and French to remember better” .Some students choose a combination of French and English as they answer because “ the technical words are more understandable in these languages” a minority of students use French and English because they are simply “ good at both of them” .

Item six : Students sharing notes

Students are asked if they share their notes with each other or not. Half of them do not do it.

Item seven: students records their lesson

The results show that a huge number of the participants (87, 5%) do not record their lessons.

Item eight: students preparing the lessons beforehand

Only 25% of the informants prepare the lessons before coming to the classroom.

Item nine: students do their assignments on groups

65% of the informants prefer doing their assignments in groups for the following reasons:

Reasons for doing assignments within groups	RF
I want to understand and learn more. And the group makes it easy to understand.	100%
To benefit more and receive more information.	95.23%
To get more help and benefit from others’ opinions	75%
Because it is hard to understand alone	61.53%
To work less and facilitate the assignment.	51.92%

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Because I cannot understand French and others are better than me in French.	36.53%
We can share our ideas (or knowledge) and correct each other.	30.76%
It helps me learn more techniques.	19.23%

Table 3: reason for studying in groups

Item ten: the language of communication in the group

This question is put forward to see if French is the medium of communication among the group member. The results do not show big difference, (48, 75%) do not use French in group discussion, on the other hand the remaining students about (51, 25%) use French in their discussion. When they are asked why they use French they answer as follow:

- I prefer this language.
- I can express myself better.
- Because we study in French and we need it in our lessons.
- Because the assignments are in French.
- I understand this language.
- I understand the scientific words better in French.
- To make my level in French better.

The students are asked what other languages than French are used to communicate, and the responds show almost all students use only Arabic or dialect, some of them say that they use both Arabic and French at the same time. But only few of them about (5.75%) students say English, Or Arabic and English.

4.1.2 Solutions provided through the techniques used by students

This section includes items from (eleven to item fifteen) it explores other strategies used by students to enhance their performances as well as the possible solutions that group work has provided for students.

Item eleven: benefits of group work

This question is concerned with whether group work helps students to improve themselves and presents answers to the different problems they face. The results are shown in the table below

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Situation	scale		
	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
	RF	RF	RF
Group work helps me define my strength and weakness	13.75%	22.5%	63.75%
I received more information in the group	26.25%	22.5%	51.25%
I communicate effectively in the group even while using French	36.25%	22.5%	41.25%
I got access to different materials and resources in the group	17.5%	35%	47.5%
I remember the group discussion better than the class explanation	26.25%	30%	43.75%
I am more satisfied with the answers I got in group discussion from the answers I receive in the classroom	27.5%	27.5%	43.75%
I tend to be motivated to work when I am in a group	16.25%	27.5%	56.25%
I had to adjust my ways of studying while learning in a group	30%	25%	45%
My reading skills has improved during group work	33.75%	28.75%	37.5%
Working in group will definitely improve my performance in exams	22.5%	35%	42.5%

Table 4: Students' benefits from group work.

As it is noted from the table above the majority of the students benefit from group work as the largest proportion of students present positive answers.

Item twelve: students using a personal tutor

This item asks about the students who use a tutor to teach them study in the French language. The results show that only 12.5 % of them used a tutor. Among these students the language/s use between them and their tutor is/are as follows:

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Languages	RF
Arabic	10%
French	20%
Both Arabic and French	70%
English	0%

Table 5: languages used between the students and the tutor

Item thirteen: student taking extra French courses

This item asks about students taking extra courses in French, either while being at university or before starting their higher education. Only 11.25% of students take a course of French.

Item fourteen: types of language course

Regarding the type of language courses taken by the students; all the participants say that they participate in general language courses. And when they are asked at which level they start taking these courses, almost all the participants say they take classes starting from the intermediate level, only one student start studying from the beginner level, whereas no students start taking his courses at advanced level.

Item sixteen: students benefit from extra language courses.

the results show that the majority of students (88.88%) answers are positive towards taking language courses while only one student say he does not benefit from the courses.

4.3. Discussion

The results obtained by the research instruments show that first year science students do apply a variety of learning strategies for different situations , these strategies are visibly seen in students studying habits inside and outside the classroom , in which the questionnaire shows that (see students questionnaire part: a) the learners heavily use bilingual dictionaries and note taking , glossaries to clarify the difficult words and phrases, among these strategies what stands out tremendously is students applying translation to other languages which is proven when they use bilingual and multilingual dictionaries (see figure 4.1, and figure 4.5) , and also in taking notes and writing down glossaries, thus translation via the previously mentioned tools enable the learners to access the meaning desired in a simpler form closer to their comprehension level ,this gives them the opportunity to express their ideas and taught in terms which are

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easier to remember , moreover the findings show that students also rely on others' support especially when doing revision or assignments, that is resorting to group work and peer-assessments as an effective environment to learn in the foreign instruction (see item 09), since the previously mentioned techniques carry a great deal of practical implications that enable the learner to decipher the difficult meaning and give him a closer yet direct answer to language shift problems . Besides this, first year students use strategies such as group work and asking their classmates for extra information and for bringing additional recourses concerning the content studied (see table 4), these strategy is often used by students when they are preparing themselves for the exams. Moreover, it is clearly that first year students suffer greatly with the medium of instruction and this is due mainly to the linguistic proficiency of the students , thus first year science students enroll themselves in language learning classes (items 13, 14 ,15) in order to enhance their language proficiency and develop a communicative competence , to a smaller degree peer work is being used by students to reflect on their linguistic performance as the feedbacks from the classmates help them improve their interpretation of language patterns and linguistic phrases. In addition to this , code switching and the use of multiple languages: MSA, even dialect with small use of English(which are linguistic variables at the disposal of the students) plus the medium of education French are used as tools for communication between students as it is seen in the questionnaire, therefore code switching and mixing are used by students to carry out their discussions with their classmates (figure 4.4) students use different linguistic codes to communicate with each other as well as asking for help , in relation to this teachers believe that the majority of their students resort to translation to understand the difficult jargon, another strategy which is used by students as a learning habit and a valid source for information and extra explanation is studying with the help of a tutor (see item 12 , table.5) , due to the relaxed atmosphere between the tutor and the student , the learner can understand better and enhance his performance both in the class as well as academically.

The strategies found through the research instruments have proven to be of great help for the students especially those with low proficiency in the medium of French as students take part in language classes it would improve their linguistic level as well as their communicative competence (see item 13) this will results in better classroom interaction and understanding of the teachers explanations as well as their classmates help

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if it is presented in French which in return will be reflected in their learning outcome. In addition students use different languages to access the desired meaning whether it is via translation , code switching when they are in groups or when they rely on tutors since it allows the students to use different languages which are at the disposal of students thus , they can move past the language barrier and help them decipher the complex language forms that they encounter , this would impact students comprehension as remembering of the explanation provided would be easy , and they will be able to understand it , write it down or even summarize it in their own style and ideas . Furthermore, students use MSA while taking notes and writing down information can lead to better learning outcomes similar to Praxton (2009) findings in south Africa as he states “unless students explored concepts through various languages, they would not really develop their own personal construction and an enriched understanding of them” (ibid: 351) . By applying these strategies students may develop great deal of learning experience (see table 3.4) since students would be able to reflect on their learning and identifying their weaknesses and what it is needed to be corrected , benefit from others experiences , knowledge and information so that they can create their own learning styles, gathering more information or sharing the study load especially if their work is conducted within groups, ultimately the strategies applied by the learners would improve and enhance their academic achievements and aid them to reach comprehension when the language of instruction shifts.

4. Conclusion

As a final conclusion the study highlights different strategies such as translation, note taking , dictionaries , which allow students access to direct meaning of the subjects studied, in a similar way to the finding of the previously mentioned studies, moreover learners adopt group work and peer assessment as study habits to overcome their language barriers and create a suitable learning environment where the language of instruction does not heavily impact their learning process , in addition language courses and group work are also used by first year students at different situation related to their studies , in which it plays an important role in developing students' language and communicative competencies as well as the learners will be able to develop better learning methods towards facilitating their learning in a multilingual environment.

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Therefore the goal of this study is to account for the different learning strategies and its impact on the learners' achievements in bilingual settings, it will help and contribute for further studies in providing insight for lectures and teachers in planning course design, thus generating better approaches to address students in bilingual environments, because it is critical to identify how students learn in order to help them achieve better learning and teaching goals, thus coping with a foreign medium of instruction involves the cooperative efforts of both students and teachers Suliman and Tadros (2011), to insure that applicable and appropriate learning techniques are being used which take the full advantages of students linguistic abilities.

In this regard the present paper suggests further research in the application of bilingual education in first year scientific branches especially dual language learning and teaching with more attention toward the use of translanguaging practices, since most of the strategies used by student are linked to their MSA background, thus the role of MSA in the students' learning process is evident enough for policy makers to re-consider the status of Arabic in learning science at university level. Relatively, because of the study focus on the strategies used by the learners, it is suitable to engage in further research concerning the teachers dealing with bilingual students in bilingual/ multilingual settings with relation to the impact of the language when the instruction shifts.

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