

EMI Implementation in Algerian Higher Education: Teacher-Perceived Challenges and Barriers

تطبيق التعليم باللغة الإنجليزية في التعليم العالي الجزائري: التحديات والعوائق التي يواجهها الأساتذة الجامعيون

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Abstract:

Implementing English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) has recently gained prominence in higher education. Non-English-speaking countries, like Algeria, have adopted this educational approach to cultivate and enhance university students' proficiency in English. With a particular emphasis on academic proficiency, critical literacy, and communicative competence, the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research has recently launched EMI education. However, many universities have encountered unexpected intercultural, linguistic, and pedagogical challenges. The present paper aims to systematically investigate the hidden burdens of EMI praxis in Algerian higher education by examining university teachers' perspectives on student engagement. To facilitate their participation, an e-questionnaire was administered to 30 university teachers from various universities nationwide. The findings indicate an urgent need for additional efforts to foster student involvement in this emerging educational model. They confirm that localizing EMI curricula bridges a critical gap with Western-centric textbooks.

Keywords: EMI implementation, higher education, intercultural gaps, linguistic barriers, pedagogical challenges.

ملخص:

اكتسب تطبيق اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة تدريس أهمية متزايدة مؤخرًا في التعليم العالي. وقد تبنت العديد من الدول غير الناطقة بالإنجليزية، كالجزائر، هذا النهج التعليمي لتنمية مهارات طلاب الجامعات في هذه اللغة وتعزيزها. ومع التركيز بشكل خاص على الكفاءة الأكاديمية، والقراءة النقدية، والكفاءة التواصلية، أطلقت وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي في الجزائر مؤخرًا برنامج تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة تدريس. ومع ذلك، واجهت العديد من الجامعات تحديات غير متوقعة فيما يتعلق بالتفاعل الثقافي واللغوي والتربوي. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى التحقيق المنهجي في الأعباء الخفية لتطبيق اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة تدريس في التعليم العالي الجزائري من خلال دراسة آراء أساتذة الجامعات حول تفاعل الطلاب مع هذا النهج. ولتسهيل مشاركتهم، وُزِع استبيان إلكتروني على 30 أستاذًا جامعيًا من جامعات مختلفة في جميع أنحاء البلاد. تشير النتائج إلى الحاجة الملحة لبذل جهود إضافية لتعزيز مشاركة الطلاب في هذا النموذج التعليمي الناشئ. كما تؤكد النتائج أن توطيد مناهج التعليم باللغة الإنجليزية يسد فجوة حرجة مع المناهج الغربية.

كلمات مفتاحية: تطبيق التعليم باللغة الإنجليزية (EMI)، التعليم العالي، الفجوات بين الثقافات، الحواجز اللغوية، التحديات التربوية.

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1. Introduction

Implementing EMI in Algeria has long presented complex and multifaceted drawbacks, especially in higher education. Stemming from intercultural, linguistic, and pedagogical issues, these challenges can be traced back to the sudden transition to English instruction in Algerian universities. This transition entails changing the medium of instruction from Arabic or French, the first and second languages, to English. Implementing the latter language is often driven by several factors, including the increasing global integration of English in many sectors, the rising significance of English in the global job market, and the Algerian government's endeavours to enhance the quality of the higher education system. The linguistic shift towards English profoundly shapes educational outcomes by not only influencing students' acquisition of knowledge but also teachers' assessment of learning (Bredtmann et al., 2021). The present study scrutinizes Algerian university teachers' perspectives on the impact of EMI challenges on students' engagement. It aims to capture their perspectives on this practice's pros and cons, as well as potential solutions. The study addresses the following research question:

- How do teachers in Algerian universities perceive the impact of intercultural, linguistic, and pedagogical challenges on student engagement in EMI classrooms?

It is hypothesized that teachers in Algerian universities perceive that intercultural challenges, linguistic challenges, and pedagogical challenges negatively impact student engagement in EMI classrooms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Linguistic Landscape of Algeria

During the post-independence era, Algeria embarked on a strict Arabization policy in an effort to reinforce national identity and diminish the role of French in the country. As a result, Arabic became the primary medium of instruction in primary and secondary education in several disciplines (Ghouali & Haddam Bouabdallah, 2024). The use of French was still influential, as the language was introduced as a second language from the third year, and in some cases from the second year, of primary school. English, however, was introduced in the middle school as the second foreign language in the curriculum (Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023; Hamzaoui, 2021). This historical pattern illustrates a stratified linguistic strategy where Arabic was introduced to promote national cohesion and French due to the longstanding historical colonial roots and dominance in science and technology at the university level.

The late introduction of English to the Algerian educational system has been a major concern among several linguists and educators. Boubekour (2021) points out that students' delayed introduction to English negatively affects their language proficiency, especially when measured against their proficiency in French. This disparity in language acquisition

can be aligned with the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) that posits that late learners rarely achieve a native-like proficiency due to the brain's ability to absorb languages after adolescence (DeKeyser, 2000). Consequently, the government posed a significant policy shift during 2022 to introduce English from third-year primary education alongside French (Hamzaoui, 2024, as cited in Ghouali & Haddam Bouabdallah, 2024). Such a transition was partly driven by Algeria's efforts to reduce the dominance of and the historical reliance on French as well as its initiative to engage with the global market (Imerzoukene, 2023). The new policy strives to foster early bilingual proficiency while simultaneously preparing students for a competitive international job market where English serves as the predominant *lingua franca*.

2.2 EMI Implementation in Algeria

Algerian higher education has recently witnessed a significant reform movement where English serves as a medium of instruction. Macaro et al. (2018) state that adopting EMI has become a global need in higher education due to the English language's dominance in several life sectors. The status of English in Algerian universities has long been limited as a medium of instruction, except for the English majors, where this language is mandatory, like linguistics, literature, and translation. Although teaching English in higher education was scarce, some institutions adopted this language as a medium of instruction a long time ago to teach subject content. According to Saidani and Afkir (2023), the Institute of Electric and Electronic Engineering at the Institute of Boumerdes introduced English as a medium of instruction in 1976. Introducing English to this institution was part of a collaborative agreement between the National Society for the Manufacturing and Assembly of Electrical and Electronic Equipment and the Education Development Centre. This initiative aimed to establish an institute offering high-quality training in electrical and electronic engineering, inspired by American higher education models.

The effective implementation of EMI in Algerian higher education remains ambiguously established due to several factors. Among the several factors defined is the Algerian university's readiness to adopt EMI in the educational system. These obstacles stem from teacher training, learner language proficiency, and resource availability in the target language (Sahki, 2025). Implementing EMI in Algerian universities has been hindered by faculty lack of readiness and the institutions' tendency to use French, especially for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields, and Arabic dominance in the humanities. However, it is worth noting that some higher education institutions, such as The National School of Artificial Intelligence, have introduced EMI in select programs through international partnerships. Still, this adoption requires more significant investment in teacher training, curriculum development, and institutional support. According to Oktaviani (2019), a teacher's lack of training is a significant barrier to implementing EMI in higher education. The current curricula are poorly designed to support EMI practices because of insufficient Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and training in the target language.

Students' level of proficiency is a critical consideration, driven by the lack of materials and resources. The lack of proficiency of students in English can be traced back to the intercultural and linguistic barriers throughout their educational journey. According to Hashim et al. (2020), lack of proficiency can be attributed to three critical factors: the inherent difficulty in language acquisition, psychological barriers, and unsupportive learning environments. Students often struggle with learning English because it is comprised of multiple integrated skills (Ansari, 2015, as cited in Hashim et al., 2020). Lack of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge is also a core reason for students' lack of proficiency, which hinders their ability to construct sentences and communicate effectively. According to Hashim et al. (2020), many students built a fear of negative evaluation. The negative feedback makes students afraid of making grammatical and pronunciation mistakes, which makes them anxious to speak because they think that misspelling words would negatively affect their image (Ansari, 2015). Furthermore, the lack of supporting learning environments is a critical deterrent, especially where English is a second or foreign language. The existence of these factors creates a cycle that prevents students from practicing and, thus, from achieving proficiency in English.

3. Methodology

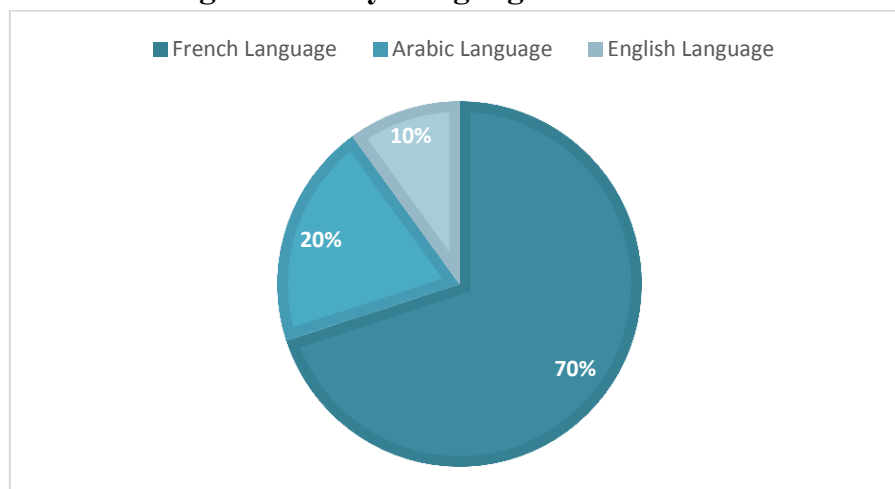
3.1 Research Methods and Procedures

The present research employed a quantitative design of study using an online questionnaire survey. Thirty university teachers across different Algerian universities, each with a different major, were requested to respond to the e-questionnaire. The study's participants were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across diverse academic performance levels and demographic backgrounds. They were asked to fill in a digital questionnaire via Google Forms to investigate the impact of EMI in Algerian universities. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. For ethical considerations, informed consent was obtained from the whole sample, and confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing their data. It is worth noting that participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study without any penalty. The e-questionnaire was posted on social media groups specifically dedicated to university teachers and distributed to some teachers via email. The survey consists of ten structured questions, each followed by a set of multiple-choice answers to elicit precise and measurable responses. The researcher opted for this method to ensure accessibility and engagement among the target population.

3.2 Questionnaire Analysis

1.Primary Language Used for Instruction

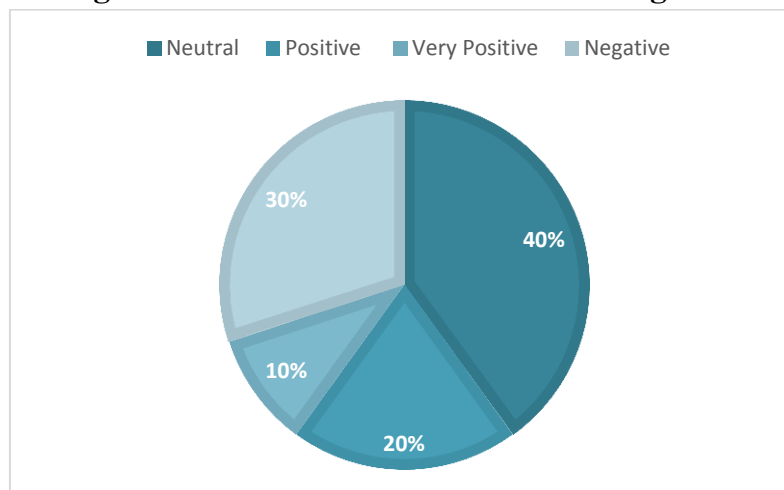
Fig.1. Primary Language of Instruction



The vast majority of university teachers (70%) primarily use French for instruction, predominantly in scientific majors. A significant portion of respondents (20%) use Arabic, mainly in humanities and social sciences. Only a small minority (10%) use English as their main language of instruction. These findings indicate a linguistic landscape where French dominates scientific education, Arabic dominates humanities, and English is the least used language in education.

2. Attitude Towards the Use of English as a Language of Instruction

Fig.2. Teachers' Attitudes Towards Using EMI



The participants' attitudes towards using English are mixed or neutral due to its limited application, with 40% remaining neutral and 30% expressing negative attitudes. Only 20% have a positive view, and a smaller portion of the respondents, 10%, have a very positive view. These results indicate significant skepticism or insufficient conviction for adopting a broader EMI-based educational system. The negative view of such a method's implementation can be traced back to the limited faculty support for expanding EMI, with

many considering it as unnecessary or challenging given the established use of French and Arabic.

3. Perception of How EMI Influences Students' English Proficiency

Teachers' perception rate of EMI's impact on student English skills ranges from 1 (significantly improved) to 5 (decreased). In that vein, 40% of them observed a moderate improvement (3), while 30% noted a slightly higher benefit (2). Only 20% perceived a significant improvement (1), and 10% saw a minimal improvement (4). No participant believed student proficiency had decreased (5). The overall findings of the third question indicate that teachers generally view the use of EMI as beneficial for language learning, while most consider such an improvement as moderate. The results suggest that EMI's impact as a language learning method may be secondary to its academic purpose.

4. The Impact of EMI on Students' Academic Performance

A large majority of respondents (90%) believe that EMI positively or neutrally impacts students' academic performance, and many are confident in its benefits, considering the fourth inquiry about teachers' beliefs. In contrast, a minor portion of the respondents (10%) did not provide any positive or negative perspectives about what such an approach can offer to students' academic performance, while no instructor believes EMI negatively impacts student performance. These findings suggest that teachers are highly confident that EMI does not hinder students' learning; rather, it can even enhance their performance. By doing so, EMI reinforces its validity as an effective instructional approach.

5. Confidence in Students' Ability to Understand Lectures in English

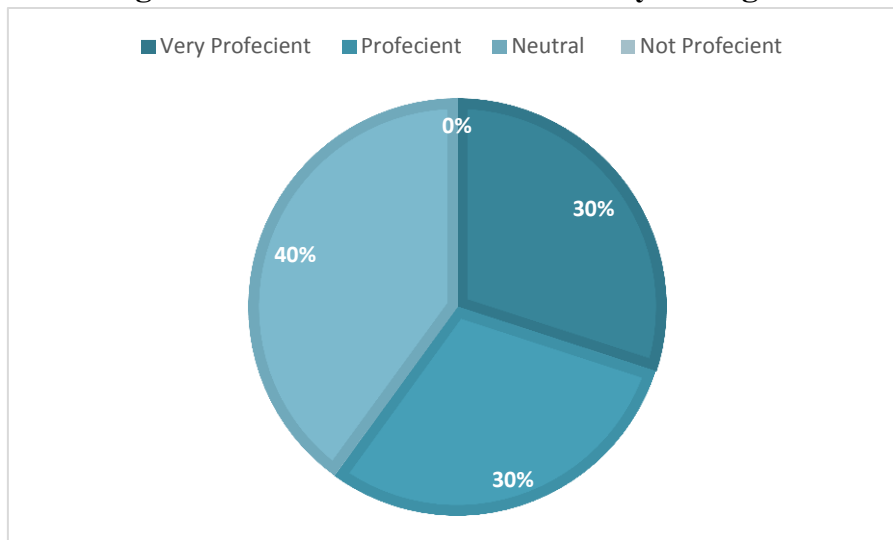
Regarding the fifth question of the questionnaire, the teachers rated their confidence in students' comprehension as 1=Very confident to 5=Not confident at all. The majority, 60%, feel confident (1 or 2) about their students' ability to understand lectures in English, while 30% reported a moderate level of student ability (3). A smaller portion of respondents (10%) expresses lower confidence in their students' abilities (4 or 5). Reflecting on this question's analysis, the results indicate that many of them are confident in their students' listening comprehension, but a significant number acknowledge that some students struggle with understanding the subject matter in English. These findings highlight variability in the student's levels of preparedness.

6. The Key Challenges Students Face in an EMI Environment

Considering the sixth question, the participants identified three critical challenges students face in an EMI setting. These challenges include insufficient English proficiency with limited language skills (60%), difficulty understanding academic content in the target language (50%), and cultural differences in teaching and learning styles (40%). A group of 30% noted that students struggle with limited access to resources in the target language. None of the teachers cited inadequate support from themselves as a primary challenge. These results indicate that teachers attribute EMI challenges to students' pre-existing language skills and the complexity of the content, rather than a lack of instructor support.

7. Self/Peer Assessment of English Language Proficiency

Fig.3. Teachers' Levels of Proficiency in English



Within the seventh question context, the participants were asked to rate the overall proficiency of EMI faculty. In that vein, the majority of the respondents (a total of 60%) believe that professors are very proficient (30%) or proficient (30%). A group of 40% rated general proficiency as neutral, while no instructors were rated as not proficient. Reflecting on the responses to this question, there is a strong belief in the sufficiency of faculty English skills for EMI education, although there is an acknowledgment that proficiency levels may vary across departments.

8. Perception of Whether EMI Hinders Students' Comprehension of Course Material

When asked about their perceptions of whether EMI hinders students' comprehension of course material, the majority of instructors (70%) responded that they do not believe it significantly hinders overall student comprehension. In contrast, a significant minority of teachers (30%) acknowledged that EMI serves as a critical barrier to understanding for some students. Therefore, while this approach is generally considered effective for content delivery, a large number of teachers still recognize that language barriers can hinder learning for some students.

9. Key Student Motivations for Taking EMI Courses

As far as the ninth question is concerned, the participants believe that the primary motivations of students are to enhance future career opportunities (80%) and to improve English proficiency (80%). In addition, a minority of respondents perceive a significantly lower number of students motivated by international exposure (20%) or pure interest in the subject (20%). These findings suggest that teachers view students as instrumentally motivated, focusing on the tangible merits of improved language skills and better job opportunities.

10. Resources and Support Necessary for Student Success in EMI

The last question concerns the main resources and support teachers believe are necessary for student success in EMI. In that regard, most of them advocate for several key supports: additional language assistance for students (e.g., workshops and extra sessions) (70%), improved or tailored EMI course materials (60%), and implementation of bilingual

teaching assistants (50%). Additionally, a group of 40% suggest implementing more interactive teaching methods to enhance comprehension. A smaller minority of teachers (10%) values promoting peer support structures and collaboration. These results indicate that instructors recognize that effective EMI requires institutional investment in student support systems, particularly in language development, and are open to adapting their teaching methodologies to improve engagement and comprehension.

4. Discussion and Findings

Implementing EMI in Algerian higher education presents a critical shift in the country's academic landscape, with consequences that affect both pedagogical practices and students' academic experiences. The findings of this study offer substantial insights about the broader trends and challenges associated with EMI, as well as the specific context of Algerian universities. These results contribute to the growing body of literature on the internationalization of higher education.

The main salient finding of the study highlights the country's specific sociolinguistic context. According to Ghouali & Bouabdallah (2024), Khenioui & Boulkroun (2023), and Hamzaoui (2021), the Algerian educational system includes not only a first and second language but is also a complex and often conflicted environment where Arabic is the national and official language, French serves as the first foreign language historically used as the *de facto* language of science, technology, and professional sectors, and English is increasingly promoted as a significant language for instruction and global integration. Teachers' awareness of linguistic challenges and low confidence in students' English abilities extends beyond their limited language skills.

The findings underscore there is a major concern about students being forced to navigate a “trilingual jump.” Students now are expected to learn in a third language, where their foundational schooling was in Arabic and their core scientific education is often in French. Such an endeavor creates a greater cognitive load than simply learning content in another language. Students are effectively managing three linguistic codes, which can lead to confusion if the implementation of this language is not strategically and expertly managed by pedagogical design. Furthermore, the findings explain the reason behind the teachers' feeling of unreadiness to adopt EMI. The sudden transition to English forces them to adapt new teaching strategies to bridge the gaps between Arabic, French, and English (Hamzaoui, 2024, as cited in Ghouali & Haddam Bouabdallah, 2024)). The teachers' neutral or negative stance towards the second question explains their logical reaction to a policy that seems coercive and inconsistent with the language realities they and their students face.

In light of the study's findings, teachers' reservations about maintaining academic quality and relevance to internal markets reflect deep intercultural dimensions. People frequently view the focus on English from a geopolitical lens. As noted by Ghouali & Bouabdallah (2024), it may signify a move away from the Francophone power towards an Anglo-Saxon sphere, which leads to tensions. Hashim et al. (2020) have also highlighted in similar post-colonial settings the legitimate worry that introducing English atop the existing Arabic-French divide might further marginalize Arabic in prestigious academic domains.

This leading barrier plays a critical role in engagement. Teachers will be less willing to embrace the policy if they perceive it as politically inspired rather than grounded in pedagogy. As contended by Ansari (2015), teachers' beliefs about educational reform play a central role in its success or failure. Their skepticism serves as a safeguard to preserve the quality of the learning environment against changes they regard as potentially disruptive and inadequately designed.

The teachers' suggested remedies, including comprehensive language training, development of tailored materials, and targeted pedagogical training, directly address the complexities of the trilingual challenge they encounter. Rather than pursuing fundamental English instruction, the participants emphasize the urgent need for a well-structured system that adequately supports the connected integration of Arabic, French, and English in education. Such an approach aligns closely with Sahki's (2025) proposed solution for systemic issues, which includes a bilingual or multilingual set of glossaries devoted to explicitly linking Arabic, French, and English terminologies to facilitate clearer comprehension. The study's findings provide a clear and consistent answer to the research question stated above. Based on the analysis of their responses, Algerian university teachers perceive the intercultural, linguistic, and pedagogical challenges as considerable, closely interconnected, and deeply detrimental barriers to effective student engagement. The findings provide robust evidence to support the hypothesis that the complex interaction of these barriers cultivates a learning context more prone to disengagement, cognitive burden, and academic anxiety rather than encouraging active engagement and deep learning.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the transition to EMI education in Algeria extends beyond a mere change of language; it expands to include a profound pedagogical and cultural transformation. The success of such an approach depends primarily on perceiving the multilingual environment and the prevalent low proficiency levels not as shortcomings but as a crucial initial step for developing structured and purposeful interventions. In light of the results obtained, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Early Exposure to EMI

A critical earlier step for successful EMI education in the country is more than teaching English as an independent subject. Integrating EMI at earlier stages is critical, rather than delivering certain subjects in French or at least the subjects required for the international job market. Early and continuous exposure to EMI cultivates a robust and strong language foundation and proficiency, which facilitates a more flexible and effective transition to EMI in higher education.

2. Teachers and Faculty Members' Vital Role

University teachers need to be equipped with a strong proficiency in English and EMI pedagogy. To achieve this, engaging in Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and official training in EMI are critical steps towards better EMI implementation. Not only is the teacher's role essential, but also other faculty members' contributions by collaborating

with language experts and peer mentoring among faculties can enhance teaching practices and produce well-structured curricula.

3. Policy Makers and Curriculum Developers' Supporting Ecosystem

Policymakers and developers should develop contextual and flexible EMI policies with regard to resource availability and adaptability. They should design culturally adaptive EMI curricula that bridge language barriers and increase English use, for instance, supporting multilingual or bilingual glossaries for each discipline that provide key jargon in Arabic, French, and English or Arabic and English to bridge knowledge gaps. They could also consider language proficiency as one of the main criteria when hiring new faculty members.

4. Student Empowerment and Engagement in EMI

Students should be engaged in continuous development as well. They need to be supported to engage in academic centres that offer workshops and lectures in English to cope with their low proficiency in this language. Initially, universities should inform students about the benefits and expectations of EMI courses before enrolling to ensure they take them seriously. To achieve this, universities can create a pretest to assess students' English proficiency levels. Students also need to be encouraged to use educational apps and engage in language learning groups related to their fields, which allows them to receive continuous feedback for their improvement.

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