

At the crossroads of integrating English in the primary schools: Parents' Attitudes, challenges and impacts

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Abstract:

The question of integrating English in the Algerian primary school instead of its current state (middle school) is being asked since years ago. This year, the ministry of education has officially declared that children will start learning English from the third year primary school on September 2022. However, having a glance at the Algerian sociolinguistic situation, historical language background and the languages learned and serve as a tool for education, such issue would raise a set of attitudes, challenges and impacts on both learners, teachers, parents and social and professional needs. This article aims to shed light on parents' attitudes, challenges and impacts of such decision. The targeted parent-respondents from two different regions: Bejaia and Tizi-Ouzou.

Key words: EFL, third year primary schools, attitudes, challenges, impacts.

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1-Introduction :

Language is an expressive tool or a means people use to express their feelings, ideas, and thoughts. Accordingly, learning new languages would just be beneficial. However, foreign languages raise a number of difficulties and challenges for both main agents of the classroom; additionally, thereto this knowledge would have an impact both positively and negatively on the social and professional fields of the country.

Algeria has undertaken a new road this academic year-2022/2023 as it integrated English as a foreign language in the third year primary school instead of the first year middle school. It has been debated, for years, whether English should be taught in elementary schools hence moving English from the middle school to the elementary school in Algeria. According to a formal announcement made this year by the ministry of education, children will begin learning English in the third year of primary school starting from September 2022.

Regarding the Algerian sociolinguistic context, historical language background and the languages learned and used as a tool for learning, the decision to move English up to the primary grade would raise a set of mind-sets (i.e. different attitudes, viewpoints and perspectives towards English as an international language), challenges (i.e. introducing a second foreign language hand in hand with the first language in addition to the level age of the learners would generate difficulties in adopting new and efficient teaching and learning methods as well as materials) and impacts on both pupils, instructors, parents as well as social and professional needs (i.e. the outcomes from such decision could respond to the expectations and objectives set at the beginning as they could go against).

This article seeks to illuminate parents' view points, worries, difficulties, and effects of such a resolution particularly because the process used did not account for all potential benefits, risks, and most importantly available resources both human (teachers and teacher-trainers) and material (teaching aids). The precipitate introduction to the English language leads to uncertainty about the start date disoriented parents.... Moreover, there was no sufficient time to train instructors and consistent textbook elaboration would not take the necessary time and means to be ready in the due time.

2-The Algerian Sociolinguistic Situation

The sociolinguistic situation in Algeria is rich and complex at the same time. This is mainly due to various historical periods the country went through. Algeria has known many invasions that led its people to get in contact with several civilizations, cultures and languages. Such exposure resulted in a multicultural and a multilingual country; hence the “complexity and diversity in the Algerian network” (Bessaid, 2011, p. 153).

Today, Algerian people are using three main languages-with their varieties- in their daily life and for diverse fields: Berber, Arabic and French. In this respect, Bouhadiba (2010, p. 44) claims that these languages always get in contact in society and are mixed by individuals who form bilingual or plurilingual social groups .

In view of that, we find Berber which is the mother tongue of the minority (30%). It constitutes several varieties spoken in different regions of the country (eg. Kabyle in Tizi Ouzou, Bejaia, Bouira and Boumerdes; Chawi in Batna, Souk Ahres and Khenchla; Targui in the south of Algeria; Mzabi in Ghardaia...etc). In addition, there is the national Berber learned at school in some regions of the country. We also find Arabic with two main

statuses: the Modern Standard Arabic which is used in administration, politics...; Algerian Arabic (with a number of variations according to the region) as the mother tongue of many Algerians and the semi-formal Arabic that is used in formal situations and education. We also find French which, though its status of the first foreign language, takes an integral part in the society. It is used in administration, education, press and mass media, and even family and daily communication. Thus it is used in both formal and informal situations.

3-English in Algeria

English is considered as the second foreign language taught at school in Algeria. It holds a second place after French. English is neither a language of education and administration, media and press nor of social communication and use. In this context, Slimani (2016, p. 34) admits that since English “is not one of the historical components of the Algerian cultural identity, people do not seem to need to resort to it to live their social, intellectual and economic daily realities”, therefore, English is not present in Algerians’ daily lives.

3-1-Teaching English

However, the wide spread of English use, especially in media and social networks promoted the Algerian exposure to this language, hence their interest in learning it. In the educational reform of 2000, the Algerian authorities have re-established the teaching and learning of English to the first year middle school as it recognized the importance of such language mastery at both national and international levels. Slimani (2016) lists examples of fields in which English is used and required: technology; education and research, aviation; global business and international

diplomacy. The aim from revaluing English was to provide “the Algerian learners with the language necessary to communicate efficiently in a normal social and/or working situation both in speaking and writing” (Slimani, 2016, p. 37).

4- New prospects and perspectives

Bouhadiba (2010, p.44) sustains that “...French ... takes the status of a ‘major language’ but ... has just recently had a new competitor: English”. In other words, English is infiltrating the social (social media has made English mastery essential) and even the administrative life (media and many job requirements ask for English mastery), thus communication in general, at an ever increasing pace. “Teaching foreign languages is a part of an unbalanced equation that bounds French and English as enemy languages” (Bessaid, 2011, p. 154). Henceforth, a second revalue was attributed to English this year. 3rd year primary learners start English besides French from the academic year 2022-2023; a decision full of pros and cons that would raise several views and attitudes from different concerned agents.

5-Research Design

The work relied on a questionnaire addressed to parents whom children are enrolled in the third primary school level. It addresses a number of parents from both Bejaia and Tizi Ouzou regions. It was distributed online by mail during the summer 2022 .

The questionnaire is divided into four parts. The first part, *attitudes towards ELT in the primary school*, asks the parents about their feelings towards the introduction of English as a second foreign language in the primary grade hand in hand with the French language. It consists of five questions. The second part, *challenges in teaching EFL in the primary*

school, deals with the parents’ worries about the challenges and difficulties their children and the teachers could face with the introduction of ELT. It consists of 14 questions. The third part, *impacts of teaching EFL in the primary school*, deals with the possible effects English language learning would have on both the French language and the learners. It consists of 4 questions. The last part, *further suggestions*, provides the respondents the opportunity to express themselves about the issue under study. It encompasses one question.

6- Results and Discussion

6-1-Part 1: attitudes towards ELT in the primary school:

Question 1: what do you think of English language?

Table 1. Parents’ perceptions towards English

Important	International	Not important	Both Important and International
64.29%	28.57%	0%	7.14%

64.29 %of the respondents claim that English is important while 28.57% state that it is international. 7.14% believe that English is both important and international. 0% of them state that it is not important .

The parents are obviously conscious of the status English occupies around the world and the benefit it represents for their children. It is argued that English is currently spoken by more than 380 million people as their first language, more than 550 million as their second language, and around a billion people are learning it from the four corners of the earth (IvyPanda, 2022). English, then, is a key component for successful world integration.

Questions 2, 3 and 4: is learning English essential for children? If yes, how? If no, why?

100%; that is all, of the respondents affirm that English mastery is an important asset for children. None of the respondents deny the necessity of English for children's knowledge and development. Speaking a second or a foreign language improves interpersonal relationships and increases knowledge of many cultures, locations, and way of life in addition to increasing work opportunities. The ability to express oneself would improve as his/her skill level increases. Accordingly, mastering it becomes a must for young Algerian learners. Among the justifications, the parents provided :

- *It is a door for studies, work and cooperation outside Algeria :*
- *It is an international language and highly recommended in all fields and also most of the research works worldwide are written in English so its learning is a must and it is preferable to start learning it in their early childhood :*
- *It provides children the opportunity to interact personally with the surrounding international environment :*
- *Because learning languages is generally better in the first stages of their life ie at an early age, a child can learn many languages in an easy way :*
- *It is the language of all fields throughout the world :*
- *Thanks to English, children could communicate with the whole world :*
- *Since it an international language, it represents the first world vehicle from different sides (economy, science, medicine, physics : (...)*

- *It is the most used language on earth from which comes its importance:*
- *Learning any foreign language is important for children. Indeed, they have the cognitive abilities that help them to learn many languages:*
- *Children would encounter a lot of facilities in their professional future .*

Question 5: what do you think of integrating English in the primary school ?

Almost all of the respondents assert that integrating English in the primary school is an ingenious proposal though there are some who find it intricate too. That is to say, the parents are for the introduction of English at an early stage than it was before. Indeed, before this school year (2022/2023), English was taught from the first year middle school. This in essence promotes the number of years learners are in contact with this fundamental language (from 7 years to 10 years). It is actually a great outlook. In this context, it is stated (Language Connects Foundation. (nd.)) that learning different languages at an early age has many benefits; children devote more time to language learning hence feed their brains and boost their academic achievement; they nurture their curiosity, cultural sensitivity, empathy, and tolerance, moreover acceptance of other cultures and open-mindedness towards the world, they also own easiness in learning from mistakes, an aspect which makes learning easier comparing to adults.

The answers are gathered under the following headings:

- a very good idea
- a gift for children
- a step for innovation and development

- a burden but good
- very nice but complex in its application

Part two: challenges in teaching EFL in the primary school:

Questions 6, 7, 8 and 9: do you think that integrating English in the primary school is challenging? If yes, in which way? If no, why? If yes, for whom is it challenging?

For 92.86 %, “English is challenging”. They cite for whom it is challenging: all the partners; mainly learners who are not so much exposed to authentic input, teachers who are not trained to teach so young children, parents who do not know English, administrators, textbook elaborators and syllabus designers. While 7.14% answered “no”, that is English is not challenging. In fact, teaching and learning a foreign language is already a hard task for teachers. Moreover, facing the real context is harder. In other words, the intricacies from the social context in which the language is taught and learned are making both the task of teaching and the task of learning problematical and intense. Moreover, the absence of the social use of the language, the cultural differences with the native culture(s) and the co-existence of other new languages render it all together more arduous to fruitfully acquire it.

The answers can be categorized as follows :

Yes answer:

- Lack of English teachers
- Lack of teacher training
- Lack of materials
- Overcrowded classes
- Strenuous and laborious
- Non-presence of English in society

- Two foreign languages at the same time
- Difference between the English and Algerian cultures
- Too fast decision
- Lack of time allotted

No answer:

- Children have the necessary cognitive abilities to learn many languages at the same time.
- Children are interested in languages
- English is omnipresent in social media, YouTube videos and video games of which children are fond

The respondents’ arguments are sustained by researchers in the field who highlighted the challenging side of learning a new language. Copland, Garton & Burns (2014) have referred to several intra-language and extra-language difficulties faced while teaching a foreign language, among which: teaching speaking, writing and grammar; learners’ motivation, discipline and differences; large classes and teacher’s competence .

Question 10: do you think that introducing two foreign languages (French and English) to young learners at the same time is:

Table n°2. Parents’ perceptions towards introducing both French and English at the same time to 3rd primary learners

Easy	Difficult	Good	Bad	Difficult but good
4.28 %	21.42 %	57.14 %	4.28 %	12.85 %

The table n°2 highlights the parents' perceptions towards the introduction of French and English, as two foreign languages, at the same for 3rd year primary learners. The results state that 4.28% claim that it is easy whereas 21.42 it is difficult. On the other hand, 57.14% believe that it is a good idea however, 4.28 % is a bad idea. As expected, some of the parents (12.85%) consider such decision as both good and difficult.

Nevertheless, some parents ascertain the ease for children to learn various languages at the same time since they are innately endowed with mental abilities that allow them to easily learn, internalize and apply different types of knowledge. In fact, young children possess a natural ability to learn many languages at the same time. In this context . it is claimed that "children who learn two languages simultaneously go through the same processes and progress at the same rate as children who learn only one language" (Montreal Children's Hospital. (nd.)). As a result, children would develop a greater ability to communicate in these languages as well as advanced cognitive abilities which may result in a better ability to solve problems, more creativity, more opportunities on a personal and professional level (ibid). Moreover, they would enjoy ease of communication while travelling, choice of schools, opens more options for job searching.

Question 11: do you think that learners are going to:

Table n°3: Parents' perceptions towards students' foreign languages learning

Master both languages	35.71%
Mix the two languages (code switch)	17.14 %
Distinguish Easily the Two Languages	7.14%
Master One Language and Let Aside the Other	0.%
Confuse between the Two Languages	7.14%

Ignore both Languages	0%
No idea	4.29%
Master both Languages and Distinguish Easily the Two Languages	8.58%
Master one language And Let Aside the Other and Confuse between the Two Languages	5.71%
Mix the Two Languages (Code Switch) and Confuse between the Two Languages	14.29%

This question addresses mainly the parents' perceptions about the learning outcomes their children would exhibit in the future regarding the two languages. Hence, 35.71% claim that their children would "master both languages"; 17.14 % would "mix the two languages (code switch)"; 7.14% would "distinguish easily the two languages"; 0.% would neither "master one language and let aside the other" nor "ignore both languages"; 7.14% would "confuse between the two languages"; 8.58% would "master both languages and distinguish easily the two languages"; 5.71% would "master one language and let aside the other and confuse between the two languages"; 14.29% would "mix the two languages (code switch) and confuse between the two languages"; finally, 4.29% have "no idea" about their children's future languages outcomes.

Despite their apprehension, the parents show more eagerness and enthusiasm for a simultaneous learning of both French and English; as they see it more an asset for their children's future than a hindrance. In fact, though the learners could face some difficulties and make mistakes at the beginning of the learning process but at a long term, they would show positive results.

Questions 12, 13 and 14: are the primary schools able to succeed in the integration of EFL? If yes, how? If no, why?

62.85% of the respondents answer with “yes” and 35.71% claim a “no” answer, while 1.42% provide no answer. Various arguments were provided to justify their answer; they are gathered in the following:

Yes answer:

- *A job opportunity for graduated students*
- *Collaboration of all agents*
- *Easy task*
- *New and young teachers*
- *Lighten the syllabuses of other subject matters.*

For some of the respondents , it is not possible to evaluate such issue since it needs time to get the results and only the future could tell us.

No answer:

- *Difficulty in changing teaching habits;*
- *No teacher training has consistently done*
- *Many neglected aspects*
- *Lack of means*
- *Lack of suitable teaching methodology*
- *Need of time, efforts investment and commitment.*

Questions 15 and 16: how many hours do you think should be attributed to the teaching of English in the third year primary school? Would you please justify your answer?

Table n° 4. Parents' points of view towards the ideal time to allot to English teaching

1 hour	2 hours	3 hours	More
18.57%	42.85%	28.58 %	10 %

For the ideal number of hours to afford the English teaching in the third year primary education, the parents have different points of view. 18.57 % believe that 1 hour per week is sufficient, 42.85 % think that 2 hours would be perfect, 28.58% claim 3 hours, whereas 10 % of the population assume more than 3 hours per week. They provided justifications for their different considerations as follows:

1 hour:

- *It is the first experience;*
- *Too many subject matters to learn besides*
- *Beginners need just an initiation*

2 hours:

- *Ideal time for memorization;*
- *It needs theory and practice;*
- *One hour for two language skills;*
- *It needs time for practice since classes are overcrowded;*
- *Too many subject matters to learn besides*

3 hours:

- *It requires the introduction of the cultural dimension;*
- *Foreign language learning needs time for a successful internalization;*
- *A perfect length for identification, practice, then consolidation*

More than 3 hours:

- *A too demanding task which requires time as much as possible*

Questions 17 and 18: how many learners should be enrolled in the classroom? Would you please justify your answer?

Table n°5. Parents' opinions about the number of learners in class

15	20	25	30	35	More
11.42 %	64.31 %	21.42 %	2.85 %	0 %	0 %

11, 42 % of the parents assume 15 learners in the class, 64.3 % believe that 20 is the perfect number, 21.42 % consider 25 as the adequate number whereas 2.85 opt for 30 students. 35 learners or more are not considered by the parents as tolerable. They state that young learners and beginners require time and attention while teachers need time to identify learners' difficulties; control the discipline and manage the class.

The number of learners, especially, beginners to enroll in a classroom for successful teaching and learning is an issue schools suffer from. The lack of infrastructure and means drive the Algerian schools, mainly in big towns, to enroll more than 35 learners in one class. As an example, the “Ikhwa Taib” primary school-in Tizi Ouzou town, where my daughters are currently enrolled, encompasses 45 children in first, second and third years.

Question 19: what do you think of recruiting novice teachers for teaching beginners?

Almost all the parents state that novice and young teachers could be an asset for learners because of their commitment, motivation, understanding and fresh spirit. However, lack of training could draw the asset to a factual disaster, as working with young learners takes not only time

and energy but also requires real competences and skills likely to be developed with experience.

Part three: impacts of teaching EFL in the primary school:

Questions 20, 21 and 22: do you think that English is going to replace French? If yes, how? If no, why?

Table n°5. Parents' views of the places occupied by English and French

Yes	4.28 %
No	95.72 %

The majority (95.72 %) of the parents affirm that English cannot replace French because of many reasons, mainly the presence of French in daily social life of the Algerians. 4.28 %, on the other hand, assume that this replacement could occur as English is more attractive and easier to master than French.

Yes answer:

- *English is easier to learn than French*

No answer:

- *French is anchored in the society since decades;*
- *Learning new languages is not an obstacle for the already existing ones;*
- *French is important both locally and internationally;*
- *Historical reasons give French a particular position in Algeria;*

On the one hand, some Algerians are in favor of this replacement because they think that French-the language of the colonizer-should disappear. This position was sustained mostly with the crisis the state knows (El-Hirak). On the other hand, other Algerians insist on the fact that this

decision is “just a political manoeuvre by the government that will have dire consequences for the Algerian people” (Bouattia, 2022).

Question 23: what impact could TEFL have on the future citizens and society?

Almost all of the participants claim a positive impact of English integration in the primary school for both future citizens and society since English, as an international language and a lingua-franca would provide future Algerians access to various opportunities. This in fact, would lead our learners to develop tolerance and open-mindedness towards other cultures and religions as English would enlarge one's horizons and enhance world awareness and commitment. Moreover, it offers credibility to the Algerian system of education as it puts the learners in the same line with other learners from four corners of the world.

However, a small percentage of those surveyed voice concern for their mother tongue, namely Tamazight. They ascertain their fear about valuing foreign languages and neglecting their mother tongue, as it is already an issue in the Algerian society. They avow that mastering foreign languages, particularly English, is a determinant feature for both future studies and professional life but not at the expense of our identity.

Part four: further suggestions:

Question 24: please, feel free to add any comments or suggestions about integrating English in the primary school.

Not all the parents have contributed to this question. The following headlines gather the answers:

- Teacher training:
- Recruiting young, dynamic and comprehensive teachers.

- A deep reflection on suitable teaching methodology as teaching children is different from other age levels.
- Providing necessary materials
- Providing adequate conditions
- Integrating technology in class.

As a matter of fact, today's parents play an integral role in their kids' studies and future. They are aware of not only what is important for them but also what lacks to achieve these goals.

7- Conclusion :

Research indicates that bilingual kids are more adept at planning, coordinating, and multitasking, according to study, in addition to having greater problem-solving skills. Furthermore, they perform better on standardized assessments. Early instruction in a second language, then, lays the groundwork for your child's future success. Growing up to be skilled problem-solvers and imaginative thinkers is a trait shared by children who acquire a second language. From an early age, as infants strive to determine which language to speak and when, their brains are constantly put through a mental workout.

Likewise, Copland, Garton & Burns (2014) listed three reasons schools are required to integrate English from an early stage: language learning is commonly thought more successful at an early age; English is now widely used due to economic globalization, and many governments consider having an English-speaking workforce necessary for them to remain competitive. In addition to that, parents want their children to learn English so they can take advantage of the new world order. Copland, Garton & Burns (2014, p.738) assume that "teacher education should focus less on

introducing teachers to general approaches to English language teaching and more on supporting teachers to meet the challenges that they have identified”.

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