

DIGITAL BUSINESS ENGLISH IN ALGERIAN IMPORT/EXPORT COMPANIES: PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES

Mounia Aliouche^{1*}, Laboratory of Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis,
University of El Oued, Algeria, ORCID: 0009-0006-6967-2704, aliouche-
mounia@univ-eloued.dz

Asma Nesba², Laboratory of Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis, University of El
Oued, Algeria
ORCID: 0000-0001-6038-2539, nesba-asma@univ-eloued.dz

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Abstract:

This study explores the use and perceptions of Digital Business English (DBE) in Algerian import–export companies, offering qualitative insights into its market-driven application in a multilingual, non-Western context. Based on in-depth interviews with representatives from four firms, findings show that English use depends more on trading partners’ linguistic profiles than company size. Email and instant messaging in English are common, while websites, social media, and video conferencing are rare. Participants valued English for market access, credibility, and efficiency but noted challenges such as limited sector-specific vocabulary, low confidence in spontaneous speaking, and reluctance toward interactive digital tools. While no infrastructural issues emerged, all emphasized the need for targeted training that combines technological skills with context-specific business communication to enhance competitiveness.

key words: Digital Business English, Business English as a Lingua Franca, import–export companies, Algeria, multilingual business communication.

INTRODUCTION

The accelerating globalization of trade has transformed the linguistic landscape of business communication, elevating English to the status of the predominant lingua franca in international commerce (Brannen, Piekkari, & Tietze, 2017; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010). Within this context, digital communication—via emails, corporate websites, and social media platforms—has become the principal conduit through which companies connect with global markets, negotiate transactions, and cultivate client relationships (Gimenez, 2014).

* Mounia Aliouche.

These developments have given rise to what can be termed DBE: the application of English in online business environments, encompassing both formal and informal digital genres that mediate trade interactions across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

In the import–export sector, DBE is particularly consequential. As supply chains and customer bases expand beyond national and regional markets, the ability to communicate effectively in English through digital channels directly influences market penetration, brand positioning, and operational efficiency (LouhiLuhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011; Rogerson-Revell, 2007). From multilingual email negotiations to the crafting of persuasive product descriptions on corporate websites, DBE functions not only as a medium of information exchange but also as a strategic resource that shapes perceptions of professionalism, reliability, and cultural competence (Brannen, Piekkari, & Tietze, 2017; Nickerson, 2015). In multilingual business environments, this role becomes even more complex, as English must coexist with local and regional languages in ways that balance inclusivity with international accessibility.

The Algerian import–export sector offers a compelling site for examining DBE due to its distinctive linguistic ecology. Algeria is officially bilingual in Arabic and Tamazight, yet French retains a dominant role in education, administration, and business owing to its colonial legacy (Beddiaf & Safi, 2018). English, in contrast, is a foreign language with growing prominence in government policy and the younger workforce, but it remains unevenly integrated into corporate communication practices (Aliouche & Nesba, 2024). While English is increasingly necessary for engaging with non-Francophone partners in Asia, Africa, and the Gulf, its adoption in Algerian companies—particularly in digital contexts—remains largely ad hoc and dependent on individual employee initiative.

Despite the acknowledged importance of English for international trade, the scholarly literature on its use in Algerian business contexts is both limited and uneven. Existing studies have concentrated primarily on the oil and gas industry (Beddiaf & Safi, 2018) or on general perceptions of Business English (BE) importance in multinational settings (Brannen et al., 2017; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010). Little empirical attention has been devoted to the digital dimension of English-mediated communication in Algerian import–export companies. This is a critical omission, given that digital channels now mediate nearly all stages of international transactions—from prospecting and negotiation to order fulfilment and after-sales service—and thus represent the primary locus of contact between Algerian firms and their global counterparts (Grosse, 2004; Gimenez, 2014).

Furthermore, the use of DBE in Algeria’s import–export sector is situated at the intersection of several complex dynamics: the need to project a competitive

international image; the challenge of managing multilingual digital spaces; and the absence, in many firms, of formal language policies, training programs, or standardized style guides (Feely & Harzing, 2003). As a result, DBE practices often evolve informally, shaped by individual experience, personal language proficiency, and improvised solutions such as reliance on templates or machine translation tools. These factors raise questions about the consistency, effectiveness, and strategic value of DBE in Algerian business operations.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the lived experiences of employees in Algerian import–export companies who use English in digital communication with international partners. Focusing on sectors as diverse as agricultural machine parts, livestock and poultry feed, mattresses and pillows, and office and laboratory equipment, the research investigates how DBE is deployed across various online platforms, the strategies employees adopt to navigate multilingual communication, and the challenges they encounter in the absence of structured institutional support. By adopting a qualitative, interview-based methodology, the study foregrounds practitioner perspectives, providing granular insight into the realities of DBE use in a multilingual, non-Western trade environment.

In doing so, this article contributes to three strands of scholarship: first, to the literature on Business English as a lingua franca (BELF) by situating its use within the digital trade practices of a North African economy; second, to the study of multilingual business communication by examining how English coexists with French and Arabic in professional online discourse; and third, to applied business communication research by identifying policy and training implications for enhancing the effectiveness of DBE in import–export contexts. The findings aim to inform both academic understanding and practical interventions, offering a framework for improving digital language strategies in Algerian companies engaged in international trade.

LITERATURE REVIEW: Business and Digital Business English in Global Trade

The English functions as the lingua franca of global trade, enabling professionals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds to collaborate effectively across borders (Brannen, Piekkari, & Tietze, 2017; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2011). Within the BELF framework, communicative success hinges less on native-like accuracy and more on clarity, intelligibility, and the ability to build trust and shared understanding (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Nickerson, 2015). In this respect, English operates as a strategic business resource rather than a purely linguistic skill, shaping companies' access to international markets, client relationships, and competitive positioning (Grosse, 2004).

BELF users often modify vocabulary, adjust syntax, and employ explicit discourse strategies to bridge cultural and linguistic divides (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013). Such pragmatic adaptation is essential in high-stakes trade interactions, where miscommunication can lead to costly operational or reputational consequences (Charles, 2007). Although BELF has been widely examined in European and Asian contexts, research in African and particularly North African business settings remains limited, despite these regions' growing integration into global supply chains.

The ongoing digitalization of business has introduced DBE as an evolving domain that merges BELF's intercultural pragmatism with the demands of technology-mediated, multimodal, and often asynchronous communication (Gimenez, 2014; Evans, 2012). DBE spans multiple genres—from emails and corporate websites to virtual meetings and social media marketing—each shaped by platform-specific conventions and audience expectations (Bargiela-Chiappini & Zhang, 2013). The rise of multimodality and immediacy in corporate interaction is transforming traditional written genres into hybrid forms that require not only linguistic accuracy but also genre flexibility and digital literacy (Gimenez, 2014).

Recent reviews of business communication trends stress that navigating diverse, high-speed communication channels demands a hybrid skill set combining technological proficiency with interpersonal acumen (Fitria, 2024). Digital competence in English is now critical for engaging in cross-border business activities such as online presentations, virtual negotiations, and collaborative project management (Priya, Balasubramanian, & Subramanian, 2024). Pedagogical research further supports embedding digital business genres—including e-commerce, fintech, and digital marketing—into BE training to prepare learners for these new communicative demands (Fitria, 2024).

Technological advancements are also reshaping workplace communication practices. For example, WordDecipher, an explainable AI tool developed by Chen and Liu (2024), assists non-native English speakers in refining tone, style, and intent in high-stakes written exchanges, illustrating how AI can enhance communicative precision in digital business contexts. However, as Luo and Kankaanranta (2023) caution, such tools must be deployed with attention to authenticity, confidentiality, and over-reliance risks.

In multilingual environments, DBE often coexists with other languages in bilingual or multilingual content strategies, which can aid local accessibility but also risk inconsistencies in terminology, tone, and brand image if language policies are not clearly defined (Feely & Harzing, 2003).

For Algerian import–export companies, where Arabic and French dominate internal operations, English is increasingly deployed as the primary external

communication tool in dealings with non-Francophone markets across Africa, Europe, and Asia. This linguistic positioning aligns with Algeria's policy emphasis on expanding English use in commerce and higher education, reflecting both economic and political priorities. Studies on Algerian business contexts indicate that while English offers clear advantages in expanding trade networks and enhancing brand credibility abroad, its use is often ad hoc, dependent on individual employees' competence, and lacking in formalized digital communication strategies (Bouhadiba, 2021; Benrabah, 2014). In this environment, DBE skills—combining linguistic adaptability, intercultural awareness, and digital literacy—are not only valuable but essential for positioning Algerian companies competitively in the global market.

Gap in Literature

Despite the growing body of research on BELF and the rapid emergence of DBE, scholarly attention remains disproportionately focused on Western, Asian, and European corporate contexts, with limited exploration of North African trade environments. Existing BELF studies tend to emphasize multinational corporations and highly globalized sectors, overlooking the dynamics of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in transitional economies such as Algeria. Furthermore, while the integration of English into digital genres—email, websites, virtual meetings, and social media—has been well-documented in technologically mature markets, there is a notable absence of empirical work examining how these genres are adopted, adapted, or resisted in Algerian import–export companies where Arabic–French bilingualism predominates internally. This gap is particularly pronounced in relation to qualitative, interview-based research that captures the lived experiences, perceptions, and adaptive strategies of Algerian business professionals negotiating DBE in multilingual, resource-constrained, and digitally evolving environments. Addressing this gap is critical not only for enriching global BELF scholarship but also for informing targeted capacity-building initiatives that align with Algeria's strategic shift toward English as a language of trade and diplomacy.

METHODOLOGY: Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, interpretivist research design to examine the role and perceptions of DBE in Algerian import–export companies. A qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate for capturing the complex, context-bound communicative practices and the lived experiences of professionals negotiating DBE in a multilingual business environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretivist paradigm underpinned the inquiry, recognizing meaning as socially constructed and situationally dependent, and privileging the voices of participants as central to understanding the phenomenon under investigation.

Participants and Sampling

The study was conducted in the context of Algeria's evolving trade landscape, where Arabic and French remain dominant in internal communication, but English is increasingly necessary for external interactions with non-Francophone partners. Import-export companies were targeted due to their direct engagement in cross-border transactions and frequent reliance on digital communication platforms such as email, video conferencing, and social media.

A purposive sampling strategy was applied to ensure diversity in sectoral activity and company size. Four companies agreed to participate:

- Company A: Agricultural machine parts (small) – imports mainly from India and China.
- Company B: Livestock and poultry feed (large) – imports raw materials from China, manufactures locally, and exports to North Africa, Saharan countries, and Europe.
- Company C: Mattresses and pillows (very large) – exports to Sub-Saharan countries, Southern Europe, and the Gulf region.
- Company D: Office and laboratory equipment (medium) – imports manufactured wood from Italy and electrical parts from Germany, manufactures locally, and exports to African markets.

The final sample comprised six participants (marketing managers, export supervisors, sales officers) directly involved in international digital communication in English. While efforts were made to include additional companies, several declined participation, highlighting a broader challenge in gaining access to Algerian corporate settings for research purposes.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face between March and April 2025. Interviews lasted between 35 and 50 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant consent. In line with participant preferences, interviews were conducted mainly in Arabic, with English or French used when participants felt comfortable doing so. The use of Arabic allowed respondents to express themselves with greater precision and detail, ensuring richer data.

The interview protocol covered five broad thematic areas:

1. DBE usage frequency and contexts – internal vs. external communication, transactional vs. relational purposes.
2. Digital genres and platforms – email, websites, e-commerce portals, virtual meetings, and social media channels.
3. Perceived benefits of DBE – trade expansion, relationship building, and negotiation facilitation.

4. Challenges and barriers – linguistic proficiency, technological limitations, and cultural factors.
5. Organizational policies and training – institutional support for English use in digital communication.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase approach:

1. Familiarization with the data.
2. Generation of initial codes.
3. Identification of preliminary themes.
4. Review of themes against the dataset.
5. Definition and naming of final themes.
6. Production of the analytic narrative.

NVivo 14 software facilitated systematic coding and retrieval, ensuring rigor and transparency in the analytic process. Thematic saturation was reached when no new patterns emerged from the data.

Validity and Reliability

To enhance credibility and reliability, the analysis was carried out by two researchers independently, with coding results compared and discussed to resolve differences. This process reduced individual bias and strengthened the validity of the findings. Member checking was also applied, with participants reviewing key thematic summaries to confirm the accuracy of interpretations.

FINDINGS

The thematic analysis of six semi-structured interviews with professionals from four Algerian import–export companies revealed four core themes: (1) Determinants of English Use, (2) DBE Genres and Their Frequency, (3) Perceived Value of English, and (4) Proficiency Levels and Challenges. These themes highlight the interplay between market dynamics, technological adoption, and linguistic capacity in shaping DBE practices.

Determinants of English Use

A prominent finding is that English use in Algerian import–export companies is driven not by company size but by trade partners and market orientation. Participants consistently stressed that the linguistic profile of their target markets dictates the language of communication.

Company A (small, agricultural machine parts) conducts all international communication in English, despite its limited size, because it deals exclusively with India and China, where English is the lingua franca for trade. Conversely, Company D (medium, office and laboratory equipment) engages mostly with Italy and Francophone African countries, relying more on French and Italian.

“Size doesn’t matter here. We speak English because our suppliers and clients are in countries where French is useless” (Participant 2, Company A).

“Even though we are a large company, our main market is Italy, so most communication is in Italian or French” (Participant 5, Company D).

“If tomorrow we have a good deal with an English-speaking country, we will switch — it’s all about the market” (Participant 4, Company C).

“We use English with China, but with Mali or Tunisia, it’s always French” (Participant 1, Company B).

This market-driven approach demonstrates a pragmatic language policy in practice — companies adapt linguistic choices to maximize commercial opportunities. The decision is transactional, rather than institutional or cultural, reflecting the flexibility of business actors in multilingual contexts.

Digital Business English Genres and Their Frequency

When asked about specific DBE genres, participants provided genre-by-genre accounts of use, frequency, and rationale. Instant messaging emerged as the dominant channel for English-language exchanges, valued for speed, informality, and the ability to send mixed media (photos, PDFs, voice messages). All six participants confirmed daily use of messaging apps like WhatsApp or Viber with foreign partners.

“WhatsApp is our office now — contracts start on email but details are always sorted here” (Participant 6, Company C).

“It’s quicker to get an answer on Viber than waiting for a formal email” (Participant 3, Company B).

Email remains important for formal correspondence, contracts, quotations, and specifications, especially when documentation needs to be archived or when dealing with new partners. Email in English is widely used even among companies with low overall English usage, though it is more formal and less frequent than instant messaging.

“For new clients, everything starts in email, then moves to messaging if the deal goes forward” (Participant 4, Company C).

Websites are rare. Only Company C maintains an English-language website, and even then, updates are infrequent and content is limited.

Social media is used by only two companies (B and C), and postings in English are rare. Most posts target domestic or Francophone markets, making English-language engagement minimal.

“We post in English maybe twice a year, if there’s a new product for foreign clients” (Participant 6, Company C).

“Social media in English is not a priority... most clients don’t come from there” (Participant 1, Company B).

Video conferencing in English is entirely absent from the communication repertoire. Participants unanimously reported never using Zoom, Teams, or similar platforms, preferring asynchronous channels due to scheduling flexibility and perceived sufficiency.

“We never do video calls in English — emails and WhatsApp are enough” (Participant 2, Company A).

This absence of synchronous video interaction limits opportunities for real-time negotiation and could impact relationship-building with Anglophone clients.

Perceived Value of English

Even companies with limited English use acknowledged its strategic importance across three interconnected levels:

1 Market Access

English is viewed as essential for entering and sustaining relationships in non-Francophone markets.

“Without English, there are markets we can’t even approach” (Participant 3, Company B).

2 Professional Image

Using English signals competence, reliability, and alignment with international norms.

“Clients trust us more when they see we can communicate in English” (Participant 6, Company C).

3 Operational Efficiency

English reduces the need for translation and facilitates direct, accurate exchanges in urgent situations.

“It saves time... no need for a translator in urgent situations” (Participant 2, Company A).

These sub-themes show that English’s value is not solely transactional but also symbolic — shaping brand identity, signalling global readiness, and enabling agility in fast-moving negotiations.

Proficiency Levels and Challenges

A strong link exists between frequency of English use and employee proficiency. Companies engaging more often in English-mediated transactions (A and C) report greater fluency, sector-specific vocabulary knowledge, and confidence.

“Because we use English every day, it has become natural” (Participant 2, Company A).

In contrast, companies with sporadic use (B and D) report hesitancy in spontaneous exchanges and difficulty with technical terms.

“We can manage, but when the topic gets technical, it’s harder” (Participant 5, Company D).

Notably, no infrastructural barriers were reported — internet access, devices, and basic IT capacity are sufficient across the sample. The main constraint is the absence of structured training in BE tailored to sector-specific terminology and genres.

“We have the internet, we have the computers... what we don’t have is specialised training” (Participant 1, Company B).

DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore the use and perceptions of DBE in Algerian import–export companies through in-depth interviews. The findings reveal a complex interplay between market orientation, digital genre adoption, perceived value, and proficiency development, offering both confirmations of prior research and new contributions to the literature on BELF and DBE in multilingual, non-Western contexts.

English Use as a Market-Driven Practice

The finding that English use is determined more by trading partners than by company size challenges assumptions that larger firms are necessarily more globally Anglicized. Prior studies in Algerian contexts have noted that linguistic choices in business are strongly influenced by the linguistic landscapes of trade partners (Bouhadiba, 2021; Maraf & Osam, 2023), but this research provides qualitative evidence from diverse sectors showing that language choice is a pragmatic, client-oriented strategy rather than an internal policy. This aligns with Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta’s (2011) concept of BELF as “situated practice,” where communicative choices are driven by the immediate needs of transactions rather than institutional standardization.

Uneven Digital Genre Adoption

The dominance of instant messaging and email in English, alongside the near absence of English-language websites, minimal social media use, and the complete lack of video conferencing, reflects a selective adoption of DBE genres. This mirrors findings in Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) that BELF communication is shaped by functional sufficiency rather than by adopting the full spectrum of available digital tools. However, unlike in high-tech European firms (Evans, 2012), the companies in this study use digital tools almost exclusively for asynchronous communication, suggesting that speed, convenience, and cost-effectiveness outweigh any perceived benefits of synchronous interaction.

The minimal use of English-language websites and social media posts, even among companies with global clients, resonates with earlier Algerian research highlighting a domestic-facing digital presence and limited English visibility

online (AFOUNAS, 2021). The absence of English in these public-facing genres may limit brand internationalization and digital market penetration — a risk noted in emerging market trade literature (Bondi, 2015).

Perceived Value of English: Beyond Transactions

Participants' emphasis on English's value for market access, professional image, and operational efficiency supports earlier research on the symbolic and strategic dimensions of BELF (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2018). However, this study extends those findings by identifying context-specific benefits in Algerian import–export settings, where English serves not only as a transactional tool but as a marker of international credibility in markets dominated by French and Arabic.

While participants reported no infrastructural constraints or technological limitations, they expressed a clear interest in receiving more training in both technology use and BE proficiency, particularly for spoken genres such as negotiation, video conferencing (if adopted), and telephone communication. Several interviewees admitted that their limited vocabulary in technical and sector-specific contexts hindered fluency, even when their general English comprehension was adequate. This points to the importance of targeted, context-based language development initiatives that go beyond general English instruction.

Challenges in Digital Business English Use

Despite recognizing the strategic value of English, participants identified several challenges that affect the scope and quality of DBE practices in their companies. The most common issue was limited vocabulary, particularly in specialized terminology related to trade documentation, product specifications, and regulatory compliance. This aligns with earlier observations by Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2018) that BELF users often face gaps in technical lexicons, even when conversational competence is strong.

Another challenge was limited confidence in spoken English, especially in spontaneous exchanges. Even in companies with relatively high exposure to English, employees sometimes avoided direct verbal interaction in favor of written communication, which they perceived as easier to control linguistically. This mirrors findings in Algerian and wider MENA business contexts where written genres dominate due to their lower cognitive load and greater opportunity for revision (AFOUNAS, 2021).

Finally, while participants were generally comfortable with basic digital tools such as email and instant messaging, there was hesitancy in adopting more interactive or public-facing genres (e.g., video conferencing, social media content creation in English) due to a lack of prior experience and fear of making linguistic errors in a live or visible setting. This suggests that technical training and linguistic

coaching need to be integrated, focusing not only on “how to use” digital platforms but also on “how to communicate effectively” through them in English.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to examine the use and perceptions of DBE in Algerian import–export companies, offering qualitative insights from four firms representing diverse sectors and sizes. The findings challenge the assumption that larger companies necessarily use English more extensively, revealing instead that language choice is primarily driven by market orientation and the linguistic profile of trading partners. This market-driven approach underscores the flexible, situated nature of BELF in multilingual, non-Western trade contexts.

The investigation further demonstrates a selective adoption of digital genres. While email and instant messaging in English are common, public-facing digital communication in English—through websites or social media—is minimal, and synchronous genres such as video conferencing remain absent. This asymmetrical use reflects a pragmatic orientation towards communication channels that are perceived as functional, cost-effective, and low-risk. Nevertheless, such limited adoption of DBE genres can constrain international visibility and market penetration, a concern that is increasingly relevant as global trade moves towards greater digital interconnectedness.

Participants across all companies recognized the strategic value of English beyond its transactional function, identifying its role in enhancing professional credibility, improving operational efficiency, and facilitating entry into non-Francophone markets. Yet, they also reported persistent challenges, including restricted sector-specific vocabulary, limited confidence in spontaneous spoken exchanges, and hesitancy in adopting more interactive or public-facing digital tools. While infrastructural or technological constraints were not identified, participants expressed a strong interest in targeted training—both in technological competence and in the communicative demands of specific business genres.

To address these challenges and fully leverage DBE as a strategic asset, companies should adopt a capacity-building approach that integrates specialized vocabulary development with technical training in the use of digital communication platforms. Such initiatives should prioritize the genres most relevant to each firm’s operational and market context, ensuring that employees are equipped to handle high-stakes spoken interactions such as negotiations, client consultations, and regulatory discussions. Embedding linguistic coaching within technology training can build both competence and confidence, while gradually incorporating synchronous communication formats may encourage greater fluency and reduce performance anxiety.

Equally important is the expansion of public-facing English-language digital presence. Optimized websites, strategically managed social media accounts, and consistent branding in English can enhance visibility, project international credibility, and facilitate engagement with a wider client base. Industry associations and trade networks in Algeria could further support this transition by fostering peer-learning platforms where companies can exchange practical strategies and share best practices for DBE use.

By reframing DBE from an ad hoc operational tool to a deliberate, strategic component of communication policy, Algerian import–export companies can strengthen their competitive positioning in increasingly interconnected global markets. This shift would not only address immediate linguistic and technological gaps but also establish a sustainable foundation for growth, innovation, and international collaboration in the years ahead.

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