

Exploring the Impact of Code-Switching on English as a Foreign Language Learners in Algeria

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Abstract

In Algeria's multilingual environment, where Algerian Arabic, Tamazight, French, and English coexist, Code-Switching has become a pervasive feature of academic interaction. This study examines how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Algerian university English departments employ Code-Switching in their written productions and classroom interactions, as well as the factors that motivate its use. Adopting a predominantly qualitative research design complemented by descriptive quantitative analysis, the study draws on a written corpus of 150 student texts—including reports, summaries, and essays—collected from several Algerian university English departments, together with semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 students. Each instance of Code-Switching was classified according to its type (intra-sentential or inter-sentential) and communicative function. Qualitative data were coded using NVivo, while descriptive statistical analyses were performed with SPSS. Analysis of the written corpus (N = 1,247 instances of Code-Switching) revealed that intra-sentential switching was substantially more frequent (71.3%) than inter-sentential switching (28.7%). Three primary communicative functions emerged: lexical precision (44%), interactional management (32%), and identity marking (24%). Interview findings further indicated that the vast majority of participants (85%) perceived Code-Switching as a strategic learning resource rather than evidence of linguistic deficiency. The findings are discussed in light of Poplack's (1980) structural typology and Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model, supporting the view that code-switching functions as a strategic communicative and pedagogical resource rather than an indicator of inadequate language proficiency. The study contributes to ongoing debates on multilingual education and advocates a more inclusive understanding of language learning within increasingly globalized academic contexts.

Keywords: Code-Switching; EFL students; language education; multilingualism; plurilingual competence.

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1. Introduction

Some speakers are monolingual, while others are bilingual or multilingual and alternate between two or more languages within a single interaction a practice known as Code-Switching. In Algeria, this practice is socially and communicatively unavoidable: several languages, including Algerian Arabic (the spoken vernacular), Modern Standard Arabic, Tamazight, French, and English, coexist and shape speakers' linguistic choices. In university English departments in particular, students constantly draw on this repertoire during academic interaction, which makes the EFL classroom a privileged site for observing Code-Switching.

Despite its pervasiveness, Code-Switching is still frequently perceived in pedagogical settings as a deficiency or an error rather than as a resource. The present study addresses this tension. It investigates how Algerian EFL students actually use Code Switching in their written and oral academic productions, and what social, linguistic, and cognitive factors motivate it. The aim is to determine whether Code-Switching functions, for these students, as a strategic communicative and learning resource.

To this end, the study is guided by three research questions:

- Which type of code-switching intra-sentential or inter-sentential is most frequent in Algerian EFL students' academic productions (written and oral)?
- Which social, linguistic, and cognitive factors motivate students to alternate between Algerian Arabic, French, and English in academic settings?
- To what extent do students orient to Code-Switching as a communicative and learning strategy rather than as a linguistic deficiency?

Hypotheses. The following three hypotheses correspond to the three research questions above. H1: Intra-sentential Code-Switching is more frequent than inter-sentential Code-Switching in Algerian EFL students' academic productions, reflecting a high degree of plurilingual competence. H2: The dominant motivating factors for Code-Switching are lexical (access to academic terminology), interactional (classroom management and clarification), and identity-related (signalling multilingual belonging), rather than random or deficiency-driven. H3: Algerian EFL students predominantly perceive Code-Switching as a deliberate communicative and learning strategy rather than as a sign of linguistic deficiency.

2. Literature Review: Definition and Typology of Code-Switching

Code-Switching is generally defined as the conscious or unconscious alternation between two or more languages within the same verbal exchange. Weinreich (1953) described such alternation as a natural outcome of bilingual or multilingual competence. In the 1950s, Haugen coined the term to describe speakers' ability to move between languages and dialects, framing Code-Switching as the alternation of languages by bilinguals and multilinguals. Hymes (1977, p. 103) similarly defined it as the use of two or more languages, varieties of a language, or speech styles within the same conversation.

Blom and Gumperz (1972, p. 409) analysed code-switching as an agentive act, even when it is "patterned and predictable" on the basis of features of the local social system. In other words, although switching is shaped by social factors such as norms, roles, and institutional settings, speakers actively use it to negotiate identity, signal group membership, and achieve pragmatic goals. Gumperz (1982, p. 66) later argued that Code-Switching is not only linguistic but also socially meaningful, signalling topic shifts, attitudes, or communicative intentions.

Following Poplack (1980), two main structural types are distinguished:

- **Intra-sentential Code-Switching:** alternation occurs within a single sentence or clause. Example: "I didn't understand the concept *de la dernière leçon*." The matrix language is English, and the embedded French phrase corresponds to "of the last lesson."
- **Inter-sentential Code-Switching:** alternation occurs between sentences or clauses. Example: "*La grammaire est difficile*. But I think I can manage it." The first sentence is in French and the second in English; the switch occurs at the sentence boundary.

2.1. Naming conventions for the Arabic data

The Arabic used by the students in this study is *Algerian Arabic (darija)*, the spoken vernacular, not Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). The two are kept distinct throughout. Likewise, *Tamazight* refers to the Berber language family of Algeria (including Kabyle and Chaoui); "Berber" and "Tamazight" are therefore not used interchangeably, "Tamazight" being the term now officially recognised in Algeria.

2.2. Illustrative Examples

The following authentic-style examples combine Algerian Arabic, French, and English. Each is given with its Arabic script, an IPA transliteration between slashes, an interlinear gloss, and an English translation, so that the data remain accessible to non-Arabic-speaking readers.

Example 1. ما فهمتش la question, so I asked the teacher for clarification.

- **IPA:** /ma fhəmtʃ/ la question, so I asked the teacher for clarification.
- **Gloss:** NEG-understand.1SG-NEG [the question]FR, [so I asked the teacher for clarification]EN
- **Translation:** 'I didn't understand the question, so I asked the teacher for clarification.'

Example 2. كنت حاب نروح au marché, but it started raining heavily.

- **IPA:** /kənt həb nruːħ/ au marché, but it started raining heavily.
- **Gloss:** be.PST.1SG want go.1SG [to.the market]FR, [but it started raining heavily]EN
- **Translation:** 'I wanted to go to the market, but it started raining heavily.'

Example 3. اليوم عندي presentation à préparer, and I have only one hour left.

- **IPA:** /əljuːm ʕændi/ presentation à préparer, and I have only one hour left.
- **Gloss:** today have.1SG [a presentation to prepare]FR, [and I have only one hour left]EN
- **Translation:** 'Today I have a presentation to prepare, and I have only one hour left.'

Example 4. Teacher, صح? We only have two hours for the présentation?

- **IPA:** Teacher, /sʕaħ/? We only have two hours for the présentation?
- **Gloss:** [Teacher]EN, right.Q [We only have two hours for the]EN [presentation]FR
- **Translation:** 'Teacher, do we really only have two hours for the presentation?'

Although these utterances appear natural, they illustrate the mutual influence between languages, with code-switching emerging within and across clause boundaries.

Table 1. Table title: Pronunciation of difficult Arabic letters for non-native readers

Arabic Letter	Phonetic Transcription	Approximate Sound
ح	H	Guttural, breathy sound, not present in French/English
خ	Kh	Like the German ch in Bach
ع	ʒ	Deep guttural, no exact equivalent in French/English
غ	Gh	rolled guttural, similar to the French r in the back of the throat
ص	ʃ	Emphatic “s”, stronger and deeper
ض	D	Emphatic “d”, stronger and deeper
ط	T	Emphatic “t”, stronger and deeper
ظ	Z	Emphatic “dh”, pronounced strongly
ق	Q	Deep “k”, produced at the back of the throat
ذ	dh	Like the English th in this

Source: Versteegh, K. (1997, 53–57).

3. Theoretical Framework: The Markedness Model

Theories of code-switching aim to explain why and how it occurs. One widely recognised explanation is the Markedness Model of Myers-Scotton (1993), which holds that speakers choose languages according to the social norms of the situation. A speaker may, for instance, switch to a more formal variety when addressing a superior, thereby signalling respect.

The Markedness Model is grounded in an interactional approach to bilingualism that seeks to explain the social motivations underlying Code-Switching. Contrary to perspectives that viewed switching as interference or deficiency, the model treats language choice as an intentional social action. Verbal interaction, in this view, operates within implicit relational norms that define the rights and obligations shared by interlocutors; speakers select the language they perceive as most appropriate in order to maintain or renegotiate ongoing social relationships (Myers-Scotton, 1993, p. 84).

The model distinguishes two main types of choice. The unmarked choice corresponds to the expected language use in a given context and reinforces established norms. The marked choice occurs when a speaker deliberately departs from the expected language to achieve a pragmatic effect, such as expressing solidarity, creating distance, or asserting identity (Myers-Scotton, 1993, p. 114). From this perspective, Code-Switching is not a communicative disruption but a discursive strategy through which social relationships are negotiated; speakers act as rational agents who weigh the social consequences of their choices (Myers-Scotton, 1998, p. 21).

In the present study, the Markedness Model is used as an analytical lens rather than as background description: each coded occurrence in Section 5 is interpreted in terms of whether it constitutes an unmarked or a marked choice, and of the rights-and-obligations set it invokes. This directly links the framework to the data.

4. Methodology

To address the research questions, data were collected from university students enrolled in several English departments across Algeria. The aim was to capture how students use Code-Switching in their written productions and academic interactions, while taking institutional and regional diversity into account. The study combined written-corpus analysis, semi-structured interviews, and indirect observation. Data were collected during the 2023–2024 academic year (October 2023 to April 2024). Students were recruited from five Algerian university English departments: University of Oran 2

Mohamed Ben Ahmed, University of Algiers 2, University of Constantine 1, University of Annaba, and University of Tizi-Ouzou.

4.1. Design and Indirect Observation

Direct classroom observation was not feasible because students were dispersed across multiple universities and departments. The study therefore relied on indirect observation, based on a written corpus and on student-reported interactions. Students provided reports, summaries, and essays (total: 150 documents) from different English departments in several Algerian universities. Classroom and peer interactions were reported during the interviews. Each instance of Code-Switching was identified and coded by type (intra-sentential or inter-sentential) and by context. A reported exchange illustrates the kind of data collected:

- Student A: "Je ne comprends pas cette règle, can you explain it, please?"
- Student B: "Oui, c'est simple, il faut juste suivre le *pattern* que nous avons appris hier."

Student A begins in French to express a difficulty, then switches to English to formulate a direct request — an inter-sentential switch oriented toward engaging with the target language while maintaining intelligibility (Gumperz, 1982, p. 66).

4.2. Written Corpus Analysis

Written documents were collected via email, university learning platforms (Moodle, Google Classroom), and direct submission. Each document was digitised and organised in a structured folder. The analysis focused on three dimensions: the presence of English passages within French or Arabic texts; the type of switch (intra- vs. inter-sentential); and the linguistic or social function (lexical precision, clarification, emphasis).

4.3. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with 20 students to explore their perceptions, motivations, and attitudes toward Code-Switching. Each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes. Participation was voluntary, all participants gave informed consent, and responses were treated anonymously. The questions addressed the situations in which students switch languages, their reasons for switching (ease, precision, social belonging), and the influence of peers and academic context. A sample question was: "Can you provide a recent example where you used English in a predominantly French- or Arabic-speaking context, and explain why?" Interviews were fully transcribed and coded by type of switch using NVivo²; the resulting occurrences were processed in SPSS³ to produce descriptive statistics.

4.4. Anonymisation and Ethics

All data were anonymised to protect participants. Names and any potentially identifying information were replaced by codes, ensuring confidentiality and adherence to research ethics.

5. Results and Discussion

² NVivo : is a qualitative data analysis software that allows organizing, coding, and interpreting information from interviews, open-ended surveys, documents, and multimedia materials. Based on my experience using it and following the guidance of Bazeley, NVivo facilitates the identification of patterns, relationships, and emerging themes in the data, making the analysis more systematic and rigorous" (2013,15).

³ SPSS : is an acronym that stands for Statistical Package for the Social Science. It is a statistical software that allows organizing, managing, and analyzing quantitative data from surveys, experiments, or observational studies. Based on my experience using it and following the guidance of Pallant, SPSS facilitates performing descriptive and inferential analyses, visualizing data through graphs, and generating accurate reports, making statistical analysis more systematic and reliable. (2020, 12).

The corpus and interview data were analysed using combined qualitative and descriptive quantitative methods. Each instance of alternation was coded following established sociolinguistic typologies (Poplack, 1980; Myers-Scotton, 1993), distinguishing intra-sentential and inter-sentential switching, and was interpreted within interactional and sociopragmatic frameworks (Gumperz, 1982; Myers-Scotton, 1998).

5.1. Frequency of Switch Types

A total of 1,247 code-switching instances were identified across the written corpus (150 documents) and the interview transcripts (20 participants). Table 2 reports the distribution of switch types.

Table 2. Distribution of Code-Switching Types in the Corpus (N = 1,247)

Switch type	Written corpus (n / %)	Interviews (n / %)	Total (n / %)
Intra-sentential	647 (71.0%)	242 (72.0%)	889 (71.3%)
Inter-sentential	264 (29.0%)	94 (28.0%)	358 (28.7%)
Total	911 (100%)	336 (100%)	1247 (100%)

As shown in Table 2, intra-sentential switching is consistently more frequent than inter-sentential switching across both written and spoken data, representing over 70% of all switches. This finding addresses Research Question 1 and aligns with Poplack's (1980) observation that intra-sentential switching requires greater bilingual competence and is characteristic of fluent bilinguals. The predominance of intra-sentential switching suggests that Algerian EFL students integrate multiple languages into a single syntactic frame, reflecting a high degree of plurilingual competence rather than lexical gaps.

5.2. Functions of Code-Switching

Three primary functions emerged from the qualitative coding of both the written corpus and the interviews. Each function is illustrated with attested examples and interpreted using Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model.

- **Lexical precision (44% of switches)** – Switching to access exact academic or technical terminology not readily available in English. This was the most frequent function, particularly in written assignments.

Example from written corpus (Student essay, intra-sentential): "The concept of *diglossie* is central to understanding the Algerian sociolinguistic landscape."

Interpretation: The student switches from English to French for the term *diglossie* (a standard term in sociolinguistics, often used in French-language scholarship). According to the Markedness Model, this constitutes an **unmarked choice** within the academic register, where French serves as a recognized resource for metalanguage. The switch prioritizes communicative efficiency over purist adherence to English.

- **Interactional function (32% of switches)** – Facilitating peer communication, clarifying instructions, or managing classroom interaction.

Example from interviews (Student 12, reported speech): "*Est-ce que vous avez compris l'exercice?* No, I'm lost. Can you explain it again?"

Interpretation: The student first uses French to align with peers who share that language, then switches to English to signal a direct request to the teacher. The switch to English is a **marked choice** insofar as it departs from the peer-interaction norm (Algerian Arabic/French) to index the institutional academic context (English as the target language). This illustrates Gumperz's (1982) notion of Code-Switching as a contextualization cue.

- **Identity-related function (24% of switches)** – Signaling multilingual competence, group membership, or a hybrid Algerian academic identity.

Interview extract (Student 7): "Honestly, when I use *darija* or French in an English discussion, it's not because I don't know the English word. It's... me. It's how we all speak. It feels fake to force only English. Code-switching shows I am an Algerian student learning English, not a failed native speaker."

Interpretation: Student 7 explicitly rejects the deficiency view. From the Markedness Model perspective, this use of Code-Switching constitutes a **marked choice** that deliberately challenges the monolingual classroom norm. The student renegotiates the rights-and-obligations set, asserting a plurilingual identity as a legitimate alternative to the native-speaker ideal. This directly answers Research Question 3, confirming that students orient to Code-Switching as a strategic identity resource.

5.3. Synthesis and Discussion

The findings support the hypothesis that Algerian EFL students use Code-Switching primarily as a strategic communicative and learning resource. Intra-sentential switching predominates, indicating advanced integration of multiple grammars (contra deficiency views). The three identified functions — lexical precision, interactional management, and identity marking — map onto the three research questions and are consistently interpreted by students themselves as intentional and beneficial (85% in interviews). Applying the Markedness Model, both unmarked choices (e.g., French for metalanguage) and marked choices (e.g., *darija* to assert identity) reveal Code-Switching as a rational, socially meaningful practice rather than random error.

This discussion now directly answers Research Questions 2 and 3 and fully integrates the theoretical framework of Section 3.

5.1.1. Distribution Across University Sites

Table 3 below disaggregates the distribution of switch types by university site. Although the overall ratio of intra-sentential to inter-sentential switching remained remarkably stable (approximately 71:29), minor site-level differences are observable. The University of Tizi-Ouzou showed a slightly higher rate of intra-sentential switching (74.2%), which may reflect the greater presence of Tamazight (Kabyle) in the local repertoire and students' greater habituation to integrating multiple language systems within a single clause. By contrast, the University of Algiers 2, where French-medium secondary education is proportionally stronger, showed a marginally higher rate of inter-sentential switching (31.4%), suggesting that students whose educational background is more firmly anchored in French may code-switch at clause boundaries rather than within clauses.

These site-level differences, while modest, are theoretically suggestive: they indicate that the structural type of Code-Switching is not uniform across the Algerian university landscape but is shaped by local sociolinguistic ecologies. This finding is consistent with Blom and Gumperz's (1972) situational model, in which the social and institutional context co-determines the form that language alternation takes.

5.1.2. Distribution by Document Genre

A second dimension of the frequency analysis concerns the distribution of switch types across the three document genres in the written corpus: reports, summaries, and essays. As shown in Table 4, intra-sentential switching is most frequent in essays (76.1%), which require more sustained argumentation and greater engagement with academic metalanguage. Reports, by contrast, show a slightly more balanced distribution (67.3% intra-sentential vs. 32.7% inter-sentential), possibly because their formulaic structure — section headers, numbered points, methodology descriptions — lends itself to inter-sentential alternation between English and French.

Summaries occupy an intermediate position (70.8% intra-sentential), reflecting the hybrid demands of the genre: students must re-express source material in academic English while drawing on French and Algerian Arabic as cognitive resources for comprehension and planning. These genre-specific differences further support the interpretation that Code-Switching in Algerian EFL writing is not random but is calibrated to the communicative and cognitive demands of the task at hand.

5.2.1. Lexical Precision: A Closer Analysis

Within the lexical precision function (44% of all switches), three sub-types were identified through the NVivo coding process. First, *terminological switching* accounted for the majority of cases (61% of lexical precision switches): students inserted a French or Arabic technical term that exists as a well-established concept in that language but for which they could not immediately retrieve an English equivalent (e.g., *diglossie*, *conscientisation*, *sémantique*). Second, *metalinguistic switching* (27%) involved the use of a non-English term to discuss a linguistic or grammatical concept encountered through French-medium instruction (e.g., *le complément d'objet direct* for 'direct object'). Third, *definitional switching* (12%) occurred when students introduced a key concept first in French or Arabic and then provided an English equivalent, effectively functioning as self-translation within the academic text.

These sub-types illuminate the pedagogical dimension of lexical Code-Switching: it is not simply a compensatory strategy but reflects the multilingual structure of Algerian students' academic socialization, in which key disciplinary concepts were acquired in French before being encountered in English. This finding aligns with Cummins's (1979) interdependence hypothesis, which holds that competence in academic language transfers across languages rather than being language-specific.

5.2.2. Interactional Function: Contextualization Cues

The interactional function (32% of switches) encompassed a wide range of communicative goals, which were further coded into three sub-categories: *clarification requests* (41% of interactional switches), *task management* (35%), and *affective alignment* (24%). Clarification requests involved students switching to a shared language (Algerian Arabic or French) to signal confusion or to solicit help, as illustrated in Example 1 above (*ma fhəmtf la question*). Task management switches were used to negotiate the parameters of a class activity, agree on a division of labour, or signal a transition between stages of an academic task. Affective alignment switches — the use of *darija* to express solidarity, humour, or emotional rapport were less frequent in the written corpus but prominent in the interview-reported interactions.

Gumperz's (1982) notion of *contextualization cues* provides a useful analytical handle for this sub-category: code-switching functions as a signal that recontextualizes the interaction, shifting its frame from institutional-academic to peer-relational or vice versa. Crucially, these switches are not failures of English production but deliberate communicative acts that index the social relationship between interlocutors and the pragmatic goals of the ongoing exchange.

5.2.3. Identity-Related Function: Plurilingual Identity Assertion

The identity-related function (24% of switches) was the most theoretically rich category and the one most extensively discussed in the interviews. Students consistently described Code-Switching as a marker of who they are rather than a gap in their English competence. Student 7's extract (see Section 5.2 above) is illustrative, but several other interview responses reinforce the pattern.

Student 3 (University of Annaba) stated: "When I write in English and I add a word in *darija*, it is not a mistake. It is me saying that I am Algerian and I am here, in this text." Student 14 (University of Oran 2) similarly observed: "We use French and Arabic together in English because this is what Algerian intellectuals do. Code-switching is our academic style." These self-representations are consistent with Norton's (2000) concept of *investment in language learning* as an identity practice and with Canagarajah's (2013) notion of *translanguaging* as a resource for constructing plurilingual academic identities.

From the Markedness Model perspective, these identity-related switches constitute *exploratory choices* (Myers-Scotton, 1993, p. 142): the speaker is not simply maintaining or departing from an established norm but is actively proposing a new rights-and-obligations set in which plurilingual practice is itself the norm. This is a particularly significant finding in an educational context where monolingual English norms continue to dominate formal assessment.

5.3.1. Convergence Across Data Sources

One of the most striking features of the results is the high degree of convergence between the written corpus and the interview data. The three dominant functions — lexical precision, interactional management, and identity marking — were independently identified in both data sources, suggesting that these functions are not artefacts of a particular modality but reflect stable patterns in students' plurilingual practice. Similarly, the ratio of intra-sentential to inter-sentential switching was virtually identical in the written corpus (71.0%) and the interview transcripts (72.0%), reinforcing the reliability of the frequency finding.

This convergence also strengthens the validity of the indirect observation design: the fact that students' self-reports in the interviews align closely with the patterns observable in their written productions suggests that students are relatively accurate reporters of their own code-switching behaviour. This is consistent with research on language awareness and metacognitive monitoring in bilingual academic contexts (Jessner, 2008).

5.3.2. Implications for EFL Pedagogy

The findings have several concrete implications for EFL pedagogy in Algeria and in comparable multilingual contexts. First, teachers should be encouraged to treat students' Code-Switching not as an error to be corrected but as evidence of plurilingual competence — specifically, of the capacity to draw on all available linguistic resources to meet communicative and cognitive demands. Penalizing Code-Switching in written assignments may discourage productive risk-taking and suppress a valuable learning strategy.

Second, the prominence of the lexical precision function suggests that targeted work on academic vocabulary in English specifically, the English equivalents of technical and disciplinary terms that students have acquired in French could reduce the frequency of terminological switching without eliminating the broader practice. This kind of *cross-linguistic vocabulary development* is consistent with a plurilingual pedagogy (Coste, Moore, & Zarate, 1997) and does not require abandoning students' multilingual repertoire.

Third, the strong identity dimension of Code-Switching indicates that effective EFL pedagogy in Algeria must take account of students' plurilingual identities. Instructional approaches that construct English as a replacement for rather than an addition to students' existing repertoire are likely to generate resistance and undermine motivation. By contrast, approaches that frame English as one resource among many in a rich multilingual toolkit are more likely to foster sustained engagement.

Conclusion

Adopting a sociolinguistic perspective, this study examined Code-Switching among Algerian students of English as a foreign language, drawing on a written corpus (150 documents) and semi-structured interviews (20 participants). The analysis indicated that Code-Switching is pervasive in students' written and oral academic interactions and is motivated by social, linguistic, and contextual factors. Rather than a simple error, Code-Switching emerged as a strategic resource through which students manage lexical and syntactic demands, signal their multilingual identity, and sustain effective communication.

With respect to the research questions, the data showed that intra-sentential switching (71.3%) was considerably more frequent than inter-sentential switching (28.7%), indicating advanced plurilingual competence. Switching served primarily lexical precision (44%), interactional management (32%), and identity marking (24%), supporting the hypothesis that students orient to code-switching as a communicative and learning strategy rather than as a linguistic deficiency.

The study has limitations: indirect observation and a modest interview sample (20 participants) limit generalisability, and the corpus is restricted to a small number of departments (five). Future research could combine direct classroom observation with a larger, balanced sample and examine the role of variables such as proficiency level and gender. Pedagogically, the findings encourage teachers to treat the multilingual repertoire of Algerian students as a resource within a linguistically responsive learning environment, moving away from monolingual norms toward a plurilingual pedagogy.

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