

Arabic Diglossia in Algeria: Linguistic Conflicts and Code-Mixing in Higher Education

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Abstract:

This study explores the linguistic practices of students in the Faculties of Social Sciences and Biology at Tahri Mohamed University of Bechar, Algeria, with a focus on language use in academic settings. It examines the role of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), Algerian Arabic (AA), and French in class discussions, lectures, and written assignments while highlighting the prevalence of diglossia and code-switching among students. The findings reveal that while MSA remains the dominant language for formal academic writing, students often engage in code-switching and code-mixing during spoken interactions, particularly in informal settings such as study groups and class discussions. French, though rarely used in discussions, persists in scientific terminology, especially in fields like Biology and Psychology. The study indicates that code-switching serves as a strategic communicative tool, enhancing comprehension and facilitating clearer explanations. Despite language policies that prioritise MSA, students exhibit a preference for a more flexible approach, with some supporting the inclusion of AA in academic contexts. The study suggests that a more inclusive linguistic approach could improve student engagement and learning outcomes, recommending adaptive teaching strategies that recognise the multilingual reality of Algerian students.

Keywords: Diglossia, Code-Mixing, Higher Education, Algeria, Modern Standard Arabic, Algerian Arabic, French



I. Introduction

In Algeria, a multilingual context characterised by the coexistence of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), Algerian Arabic (AA), and French presents unique challenges and opportunities for higher education institutions (Benrabah, 2013). The academic environment in Algeria is often described by a phenomenon known as diglossia, where different varieties of language are used in distinct contexts: MSA for formal settings, AA for everyday

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interactions, and French for specialised scientific terms (Berkouk, 2020). This study investigates how students navigate this linguistic landscape, focusing on their language choices in class discussions, lectures, and written assignments. Additionally, it explores the practice of code-switching, where students fluidly switch between languages depending on the communicative situation.

Given the diversity of languages spoken by students, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how these linguistic practices affect academic communication and learning. The primary aim of the study is to investigate the linguistic practices of students at Tahri Mohamed University of Bechar (TMUB) in relation to their use of MSA, AA, and French in academic settings. Specifically, the study addresses the following two research questions:

1. How do students at TMUB use MSA, AA, and French in academic settings, particularly in lectures, class discussions, and writing assignments?
2. How does code-switching between these languages impact student comprehension and communication in academic contexts?

These questions seek to uncover the ways in which students navigate multilingualism in their academic lives and the role this flexibility plays in their academic performance and understanding. By examining the intersection of language policy, student behaviour, and academic performance, the study seeks to contribute to the broader conversation about language use in post-colonial educational systems. The results could inform the development of more flexible language policies that better reflect the multilingual reality of Algerian higher education and potentially improve student outcomes. This research is essential for understanding the ways in which language shapes not only the academic experience but also the broader cultural and social dynamics in Algerian society.

II. Literature Review

1. The Linguistic Situation in Algeria

Algeria's linguistic landscape is characterised by multilingualism and diglossia, shaped by historical, social, and political factors. The country's official language is MSA, but in everyday communication, most Algerians use AA or one of the Berber (Amazigh) languages, such as Kabyle, Chaouia, and Tamazight. French also holds a significant place, especially in education, business, and science, due to Algeria's colonial history (Grandguillaume, 2004; Benrabah, 2013). This complex linguistic reality creates functional compartmentalization: MSA is used in formal education, administration, and media, Darija is the primary spoken variety in daily interactions, French dominates technical and scientific fields, particularly in higher education and research, and Berber languages are spoken in specific regions and were officially recognised in 2016.

The coexistence of these languages leads to linguistic conflicts, where official policies promote Arabic, but French and Darija remain dominant in practice. This has profound implications for higher education where students frequently engage in code-mixing and code-switching to navigate between different linguistic registers.

2. Arabic Diglossia in Algeria

The linguistic situation in Algeria is best described through Ferguson's (1959) concept of diglossia, where two varieties of the same language coexist with distinct functional roles. MSA is the official language used in formal education, government, and media, while AA is the spoken variety used in daily interactions. However, unlike classical diglossia, Algeria's linguistic landscape is further complicated by the presence of French, which continues to hold a strong influence, particularly in higher education and scientific disciplines (Benrabah, 2013).

Scholars argue that Arabic diglossia in Algeria is not a simple binary division, as students and educators constantly shift between languages depending on the communicative context (Grandguillaume, 2004). While MSA is expected in academic writing and formal instruction, students frequently resort to AA for comprehension and informal discussions, particularly in social sciences, where abstract concepts are often better understood in familiar linguistic forms.

3. Code-Mixing and Code-Switching in Algerian Higher Education

Code-mixing and code-switching are prevalent linguistic phenomena in Algerian universities due to the multilingual nature of the educational system. Studies by Mouhadjer (2002) and Bentahila & Davies (1992) suggest that students and professors in Algerian universities regularly switch between MSA, AA, and French depending on the subject matter and the audience. These studies highlight the pragmatic function of code-switching—rather than being a sign of linguistic deficiency, it serves as a pedagogical strategy that facilitates knowledge acquisition and classroom interaction.

4. Linguistic Conflicts and Challenges in Higher Education

Despite its functional benefits, code-mixing in Algerian universities creates significant linguistic tensions. Government policies continue to promote MSA as the primary language of instruction, yet the reality of classroom interactions shows that students struggle with purely Arabic instruction, particularly in scientific and technical fields (Ouakrime, 2008). The linguistic gap between formal instruction and students' everyday speech often results in cognitive overload, where students must simultaneously translate, process, and conceptualize academic content (Chami, 2009).

Additionally, research suggests that faculty members themselves experience linguistic insecurities, as many professors were trained in French but are required to teach in MSA. This linguistic conflict often leads to hybrid teaching practices that combine MSA for structure, AA for clarification, and French for technical terms (Hassaine, 2016).

5. The Impact of Diglossia on Learning and Academic Performance

Several studies have examined the effects of diglossia and multilingualism on students' academic performance. Diglossia influences students' writing proficiency, as many find it difficult to adhere to the strict formal structures of MSA while naturally thinking in a mix of AA and French (Bouhadiba, 2002). This raises concerns about academic literacy development and the effectiveness of monolingual Arabic instruction in disciplines that require extensive engagement with French-language research.

6. Language Policy and the Future of Higher Education in Algeria

The ongoing debate about language policy in Algerian universities centres around two key questions:

1. Should Arabic remain the primary language of instruction, despite the increasing use of French and AA in practice?
2. Should universities adopt a more flexible multilingual approach that acknowledges the reality of code-mixing?

Benrabah (2013) advocates for a realistic language policy that reflects students' actual linguistic practices, suggesting that a more inclusive linguistic model—where Arabic and French are used interchangeably in scientific fields—could improve comprehension and knowledge transfer. Similarly, Ennaji (2005) argues that a rigid, monolingual Arabic policy ignores the sociolinguistic realities of Algerian students, ultimately hindering educational success.

III. Methodology

The methodology of this study employs both qualitative and quantitative research methods to explore the linguistic dynamics of Arabic diglossia at TMUB, particularly focusing on the code-mixing practices among university students and faculty. The research is based on data collected from two Faculties: Social Sciences (Psychology and Sociology) and Biology. The study aims to understand how MSA, AA, and French coexist in academic settings and how this multilingual environment influences student interaction, academic performance, and identity.

The data collection involves surveys distributed to students and faculty members. The survey assesses their language preferences, perceptions of academic challenges related to language use, and their attitudes toward the use of MSA, AA, and French in the classroom. The data collected from the surveys are analysed to quantify the extent of code-mixing and language switching, as well as the factors that influence these choices, such as discipline, level of study, and social background.

The study employs a structured questionnaire designed to explore linguistic practices, diglossia, and code-mixing in academic settings at TMUB. The questionnaire collects both quantitative and qualitative data from students and faculty members across the Faculties of Social Sciences and Biology. It is divided into four sections, each addressing key aspects of language use in higher education.

Section one gathers background data on participants, including faculty affiliation, academic level, and first language. These variables help contextualize the responses and analyse potential differences in language use across disciplines and educational levels. Section two examines the languages used in various academic contexts, such as class discussions, lectures, writing assignments, and peer interactions. The responses provide insight into the degree of diglossia and the role of French in different academic activities. Section three investigates the frequency and motivations behind code-switching, as well as

any difficulties participants may experience. By analysing why students mix languages—whether to facilitate comprehension, improve expression, or due to linguistic constraints—this section assesses whether code-mixing is a strategic academic tool or a potential barrier to learning. The final section explores participants' views on language policy in higher education, particularly regarding the role of MSA, AA, and French in academic instruction. It includes both multiple-choice and open-ended questions, allowing respondents to express their opinions on language policy reforms and suggest improvements for language use in university settings.

The questionnaire is structured to balance closed-ended questions with open-ended responses. The collected data will be analysed using descriptive statistics for quantitative responses and thematic analysis for qualitative answers, offering a comprehensive understanding of linguistic practices and attitudes toward language policy in Algerian higher education.

IV. Results and Discussion

1. Interpretation of the Results

The findings of this study reveal significant insights into the linguistic dynamics of Arabic diglossia and code-mixing practices at TMUB. Through a survey, several key patterns emerged regarding the use of MSA, AA, and French among students and faculty in both Social Sciences and Biology.

a) Participant Distribution

Figure 1 below illustrates the number of participants from two academic faculties: Social Sciences and Biology. The data reveals that the biology faculty has a slightly higher number of participants, with approximately 42 students, compared to the Social Sciences faculty, which has around 35 students. This distribution suggests a relatively balanced representation of participants from both faculties, though with a slight predominance of Biology students. Such a distribution is important in ensuring that the study captures linguistic behaviours across different academic disciplines, which may have varying language use patterns and preferences.

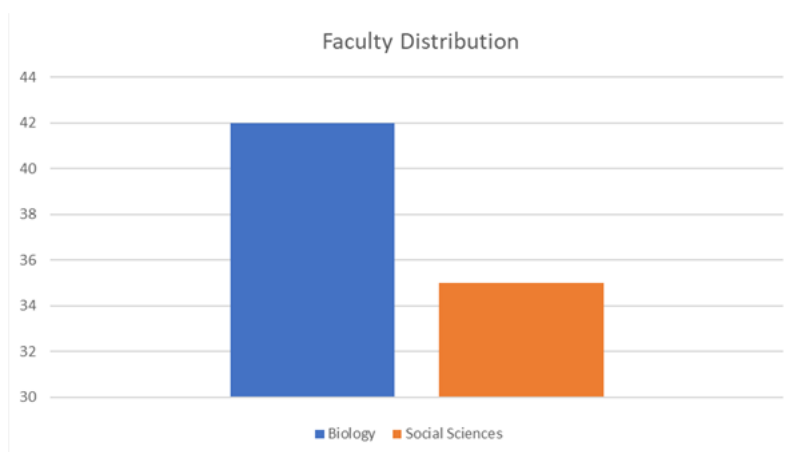


Figure 1: Participant Distribution

Figure 2 below illustrates the distribution of students based on their academic levels. The largest proportion, 47%, consists of first- and second-year undergraduates, represented in blue. Another significant portion, 46%, includes other undergraduate students, shown in orange. Meanwhile, Master's students form the smallest group, accounting for only 7% of the total participants, indicated in grey. This distribution highlights that the majority of students are in the early stages of their academic journey, with a relatively small percentage continuing to postgraduate studies.

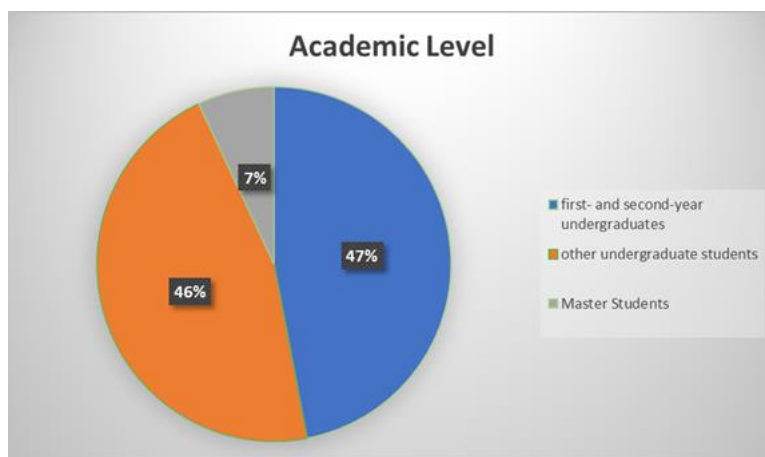


Figure 2: Participant Distribution

b) Code-Mixing Frequency and Contexts

The use of code-mixing was widespread across all academic levels. Algerian Arabic was frequently used in informal contexts, such as peer discussions, casual interactions with faculty, and group work, while French was predominantly used in scientific terminology, especially in the fields of Psychology and Biology. MSA, though the official language of instruction, was mainly reserved for formal lectures, written assignments, and examinations. This finding highlights a linguistic hierarchy in which MSA maintains its status as the "academic language," while AA serves as a conversational tool, and French dominates in technical and scientific contexts.

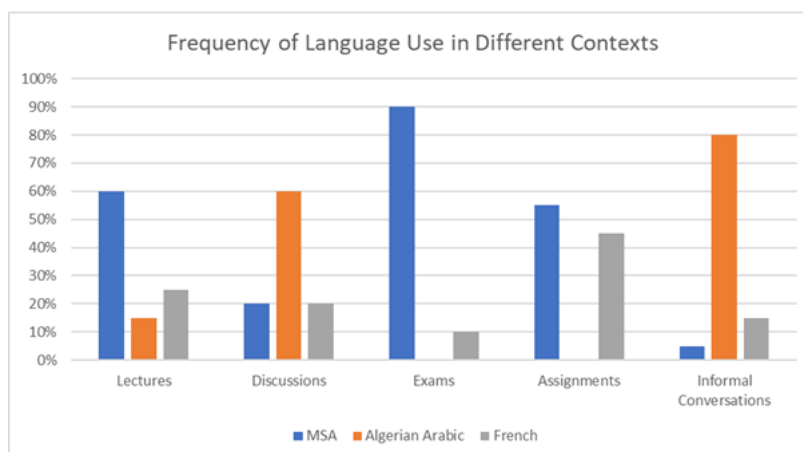


Figure 2: Language Use in Different Academic Contexts

The above figure illustrates the percentage of usage of MSA, AA, and French across five academic settings: lectures, discussions, exams, assignments, and informal conversations. The data reveals distinct patterns of language use depending on the context. In lectures, MSA is the most dominant language, with over 60% usage, followed by French at around 25%, while AA is the least used at approximately 15%. This suggests that while MSA remains the primary medium of instruction, French plays a significant role, likely due to its influence in scientific disciplines.

In academic discussions, AA emerges as the most frequently used language (60%), with MSA and French having similar usage (20%). This highlights students' preference for their native dialect when engaging in peer communication and explaining concepts. However, the language landscape shifts dramatically in exams, where MSA is overwhelmingly dominant (90%), while French plays a limited role (10%) and no AA use. This reinforces the institutionalised role of MSA as the required language for formal assessments. Similarly, assignments also reflect strong reliance on MSA (55%), though French plays a more significant role (45%), suggesting that many academic subjects, particularly in scientific fields, require French-based references or explanations.

The contrast is most evident in informal conversations, where AA is overwhelmingly used (80%), while MSA and French have minimal presence (5% and 15%, respectively). This confirms that AA serves as the primary language for everyday interactions, even within

academic settings. Overall, the data strongly supports the presence of diglossia in Algerian higher education, where MSA dominates formal academic contexts, AA prevails in informal and peer interactions, and French is integrated into scientific and technical fields. Additionally, the patterns indicate frequent code-mixing, particularly between MSA and French, suggesting that students navigate between languages depending on the demands of each context. These findings underscore the need for language policies that recognize the functional roles of each language, promoting effective multilingual strategies rather than rigid monolingual approaches.

c) Students' Perceptions of Language Use

The survey results indicated that students felt comfortable using all three languages but acknowledged the challenges posed by switching between them. While most students preferred speaking in AA in informal settings, they reported feeling compelled to use MSA in formal academic contexts, such as exams and written assignments. French, particularly in the sciences, was viewed as essential for understanding technical material but was not commonly spoken outside of the classroom. Additionally, many students expressed a sense of frustration when they were required to switch between languages, as it sometimes interfered with their comprehension and fluency.

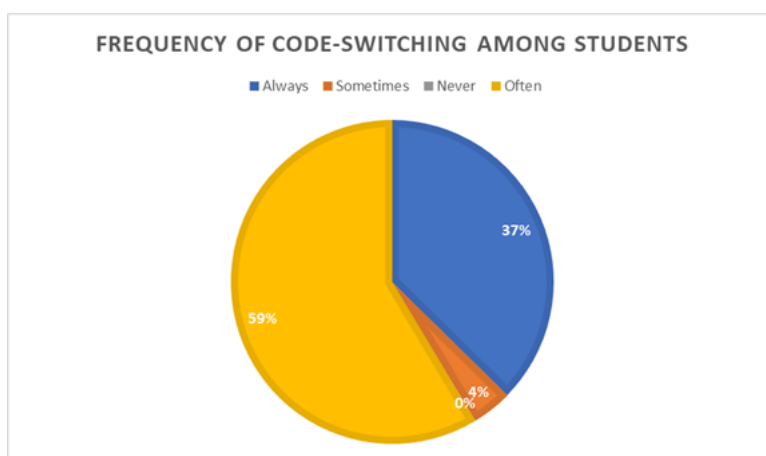


Figure 3: Frequency of Code-Switching Among Students

Figure 3 represents the frequency of code-switching among students. The majority of students, 59%, reported that they "Often" code-switch, followed by 37% who "Always" code-switch. A small percentage, 4%, mentioned that they "Sometimes" engage in code-switching, while none of the students reported "Never" code-switching. The chart visually supports the notion that code-switching is a common and strategic linguistic practice in Algerian academia. In fact, when asked about the challenges they face while switching or mixing, all participants said that they switch languages easily without difficulties.

d) Language Policy and Pedagogical Implications

Figure 4 below illustrates the perceived effect of code-mixing on academic performance. The majority of respondents (58%) reported that code-mixing has no impact on their academic performance, while the remaining 42% were uncertain about its effects. Notably, no respondents claimed that code-mixing negatively affects their academic performance, reinforcing the idea that it does not pose a significant barrier to learning.

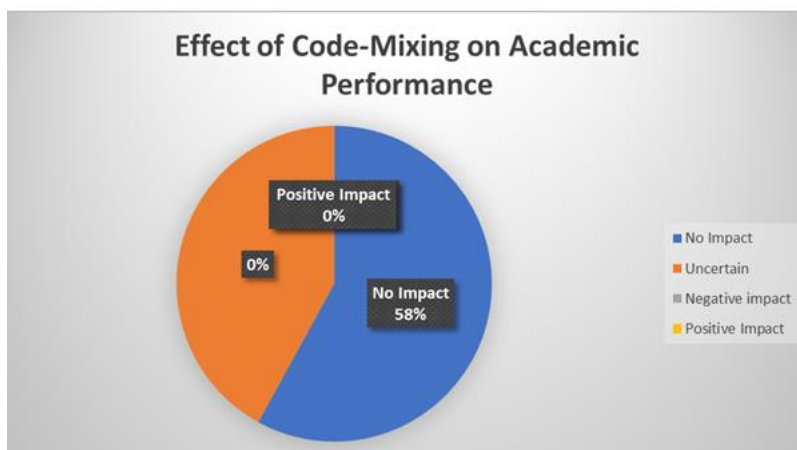


Figure 4: The Effects of Code-Mixing on Students' Performance

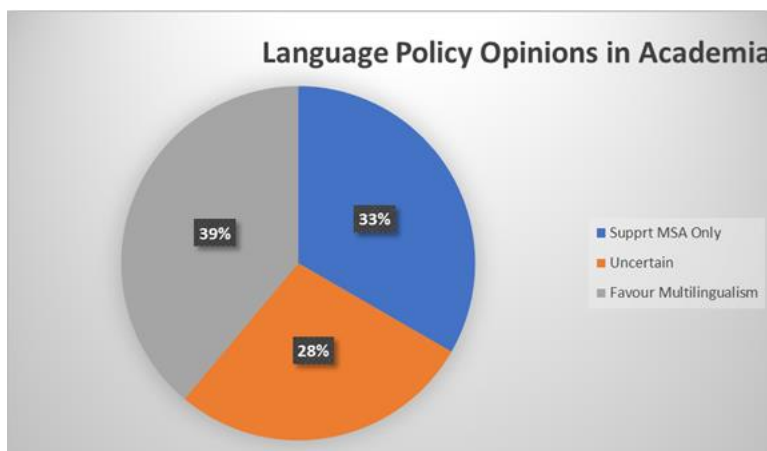


Figure 5: Language Policy Opinions in Academia

The above figure represents students' opinions on language policy in academia. 33% of respondents support Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) as the sole language of instruction, reflecting a preference for linguistic uniformity. However, 39% favour multilingual flexibility, suggesting that a portion of students value the ability to incorporate multiple languages in academic settings. Meanwhile, 28% remain uncertain, indicating an ongoing debate about the most effective language policy in higher education. These findings highlight the complexities of language use in Algerian academia, with significant support for both standardization and linguistic diversity.

2. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a complex linguistic reality in Algerian higher education, particularly within the Faculties of Social Sciences and Biology at TMUB. The demographic data show a relatively balanced distribution between Social Sciences (36 students) and Biology (43 students), with a majority being undergraduate students. This suggests that the study captures the linguistic experiences of students at different stages of their academic journey, with a particular focus on early university experiences.

Regarding language use in academic settings, the results highlight a prominent presence of diglossic practices. MSA remains the dominant language in class discussions (23%) and lectures (45%). However, a significant proportion of students report using a mix of MSA and AA in their discussions and interactions. This mixed usage, which accounts for more than half of the responses, suggests that students naturally navigate between formal and informal varieties of Arabic depending on the context. The findings are consistent with the broader literature on diglossia in Algeria, where MSA is seen as the prestigious form, while AA serves as the everyday language (Berkouk, 2020). French, while rarely used in class discussions (8%), remains present in scientific terminology and lectures (12%), especially in disciplines such as Biology and Psychology. This finding is in line with Benrabah's (2013) assertion that French continues to play a significant role in higher education, particularly in scientific and technical fields, despite efforts to promote Arabic as the language of instruction.

In terms of writing assignments, all participants preferred MSA, indicating that despite the widespread use of code-mixing in spoken interactions, students recognize the need for standardization in formal academic writing. This preference reflects the persistent influence of language policies that enforce MSA as the official medium of instruction in Algerian universities (Berkouk, 2020). However, peer discussions and study groups tell a different story. All students reported using a mix of MSA and AA in their study groups, reinforcing the idea that students rely on their natural linguistic repertoire when communicating informally, even in academic contexts. This aligns with findings by Bell (2013), who notes that informal language use among students often involves a blend of formal and colloquial varieties.

Code-switching emerges as a frequent and strategic linguistic practice. A substantial 69% of students reported switching languages "often" or "always" in class discussions, while none of the participants indicated that they "never" switch languages. The reasons behind code-switching further support its functional role: all students agreed that they switch languages to explain concepts more clearly, simplify terminology, and maintain a natural flow of conversation. This suggests that code-mixing is not a sign of linguistic deficiency but rather a communicative tool that enhances understanding (Poplack, 2001). The fact that all students reported no difficulties in switching between languages challenges traditional perceptions that code-mixing hinders academic performance. Instead, the data indicate that students feel comfortable navigating between languages and do not perceive code-switching as a barrier to learning. These findings echo research by Wei (2013), who argues that code-

switching can serve as an effective communication strategy, especially in multilingual settings.

Despite these findings, language policy remains a contentious issue. 33% of the students believe that MSA should remain the sole language of instruction, while 39% support a more flexible linguistic approach. Similarly, opinions on the use of AA in academic settings are divided: 25% believe it should be allowed for explanations and discussions, 23% oppose it, and the rest remain undecided. These results highlight the ongoing tension between official language policies, which prioritize MSA, and the actual linguistic practices of students, which involve a fluid interplay of languages. This tension is consistent with the broader debate on the role of language policy in post-colonial states, where language choices often reflect historical, political, and social dynamics (Riley, 2016).

Overall, the study provides strong evidence that diglossia and code-switching are integral to the academic experiences of students in Algeria. While MSA remains the formal language of instruction and writing, students naturally incorporate AA and, to a lesser extent, French, into their spoken academic interactions. These findings suggest that a more inclusive linguistic approach in higher education could improve student comprehension and engagement. Rather than enforcing rigid language policies, universities might benefit from adaptive teaching strategies that acknowledge and accommodate students' multilingual reality (Benrabah, 2013). This could help foster a more effective and flexible learning environment that recognizes the dynamic linguistic practices of students.

V. Conclusion

This study has shed light on the complex linguistic landscape of Algerian higher education, particularly within the Faculties of Social Sciences and Biology at TMUB. The findings indicate that, despite official language policies that prioritize MSA as the medium of instruction, students exhibit a high degree of linguistic flexibility, integrating AA and, to a lesser extent, French into their academic interactions. This fluidity between languages reflects the ongoing diglossia present in Algerian society, where MSA, AA, and French coexist in different domains.

The prevalence of code-switching and code-mixing in academic discussions underscores the adaptability of students, who navigate between languages to clarify concepts, simplify complex terminology, and maintain the flow of conversation. The strategic use of multiple languages in informal settings, such as study groups, highlights the students' natural linguistic repertoire and their ability to switch between registers and varieties seamlessly. These practices, far from being indicative of linguistic inadequacy, serve as valuable communication tools that enhance comprehension and learning.

Moreover, while students generally support the continued use of MSA for formal writing and instruction, the debate over the inclusion of AA in academic contexts remains divided. This reflects a broader tension between traditional language policies and the linguistic reality of students, who often rely on their multilingual abilities to express themselves effectively in both academic and social contexts.

In conclusion, this study calls for a reconsideration of rigid language policies in Algerian universities. It suggests that adopting a more flexible, inclusive approach that acknowledges the multilingual nature of the student body could enhance academic engagement and improve learning outcomes. By accommodating the dynamic linguistic practices of students, higher education institutions in Algeria can create a more effective and supportive learning environment that reflects the linguistic diversity of the country. Future research could further explore the impact of such linguistic practices on student performance, as well as the potential benefits of integrating Algerian Arabic into formal academic settings.

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Appendix

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. What is your faculty?

- ☐ Social Sciences (Psychology/Sociology)
☐ Biology

2. What is your current academic level?

- ☐ First-year undergraduate
☐ Second-year undergraduate
☐ Third-year undergraduate
☐ Master's student

Section 2: Language Use in Academic Settings

3. Which language do you primarily use in class discussions?

- ☐ Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)
☐ Algerian Arabic
☐ French
☐ A mix (please specify: _____)

4. Which language do your professors use most in lectures? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)
☐ Algerian Arabic
☐ French
☐ A mix (please specify: _____)

5. Which language do you prefer for writing assignments?

- ☐ MSA
☐ French
☐ A mix (please specify: _____)

6. Which language do you use in peer discussions and study groups?

- ☐ MSA
☐ Algerian Arabic
☐ French
☐ A mix (please specify: _____)

Section 3: Code-Mixing and Challenges

7. How often do you switch between languages in class discussions?

- ☐ Never
☐ Sometimes
☐ Often
☐ Always

8. Why do you code-switch? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ To explain concepts more clearly

☐ Because some terms are easier in a specific language

☐ To maintain a natural flow of conversation

☐ Due to difficulty expressing ideas in one language

☐ Other (please specify: _____)

9. **Do you face difficulties when switching between languages?**

☐ No, I switch easily

☐ Sometimes, especially between MSA and French

☐ Often, it makes understanding harder

☐ Yes, it creates confusion in academic work

10. **Do you think code-mixing affects your academic performance?**

☐ No impact

☐ Some impact

☐ Strong impact

☐ Not sure

Section 4: Language Policy and Pedagogical Implications

11. **Do you believe MSA should be the only language of instruction at the university?**

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Not sure

12. **Do you think Algerian Arabic should be allowed in academic settings?**

☐ Yes, for explanations and discussions

☐ No, it should not be used

☐ Not sure

13. **Do you think French should remain dominant in scientific disciplines?**

☐ Yes, it is necessary for scientific research

☐ No, more materials should be available in Arabic

☐ Not sure

14. **What changes would you suggest to improve language use in academic settings? (Open-ended response)**