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From Ideological Struggle to Technical Debate: Algeria's Higher Education Language Policy Shift from French to English

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Abstract

Algeria's higher education sector has recently embarked on an ambitious , contested linguistic transition, shifting from French to English as the primary medium of instruction and scientific research Drawing on a rigorous documentary analysis of macro-level policy texts, constitutional provisions, and ministerial directives, alongside a critical engagement with language policy and English-Medium Instruction (EMI) literature, this article traces how the Algerian sociolinguistic debate has evolved. Specifically, it examines the shift from an intense, historical ideological struggle rooted in colonial legacy and the post-independence Arabisation project, toward a technical, pragmatic discourse centered on pedagogical efficacy and institutional readiness. Our macro-political and pedagogical analysis advances three critical, central arguments regarding this systemic reorientation. First, the hegemony of English in global scientific publishing and academic metrics provides an objective rationale that tempers the historical, identity-driven resistance that undermined earlier initiatives, notably the abortive 1993–1994 reform. Second, the current top-down velocity of implementation, paired with insufficient scaffolding for faculty and student linguistic proficiency, risks inducing transitional systemic shocks and declines in academic achievement, echoing the Rwandan shock-therapy transition while contrasting with Malaysia's more successful gradualist strategy. Third, English operates as a mediating variable rather than a standalone determinant of institutional visibility; its capacity to elevate university rankings depends entirely on parallel structural reforms in research funding, digital infrastructure, and international network integration. We conclude that mitigating pedagogical risks and ensuring a sustainable linguistic transition hinges on adopting an evaluation-driven, gradualist implementation model nested within a broader, comprehensive strategy of higher education modernisation and systemic integration into the global knowledge economy.

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الكلمات المفتاحية

التحول اللغوي في الجزائر؛
إنهاء فرنسة التعليم العالي؛
سياسة التعليم باللغة الإنجليزية (EMI)؛
جيوسياسية لغة الأكاديميا؛
مخاطر التحول البيداغوجي؛
تدويل الجامعة؛
المواءمة مع النشر العلمي العالمي.

الملخص

شرع قطاع التعليم العالي في الجزائر مؤخراً في تحوّل لغوي طموح ومثير للجدل من الفرنسية إلى الإنجليزية بوصفها لغة تدريس وبحث علمي؛ واعتماداً على تحليل وثائقي للنصوص السياسية والأحكام الدستورية والتعليمات الوزارية، فضلاً عن استثمار ثانوي للأدبيات المتعلقة بالسياسة اللغوية والتعليم باللغة الإنجليزية(EMI) ، يتتبّع هذا المقال كيف انتقل النقاش اللغوي الجزائري من سجال أيديولوجي محتدم – متجذّر في الإرث الاستعماري ومشروع التعريب لمرحلة ما بعد الاستقلال – إلى نقاش ذي طابع تقني يتمحور حول النجاعة البيداغوجية والجاهزية المؤسساتية. يطرح تحليلنا ثلاث أطروحات رئيسية: أولاً، إن ترسّخ اللغة الإنجليزية بوصفها اللغة المهيمنة على النشر العلمي العالمي والتصنيفات الأكاديمية يوفّر مسوّغاً موضوعياً يخفّف من المقاومة الأيديولوجية التي قوّضت محاولات الإصلاح السابقة، ولا سيما تجربة 1993-1994 الفاشلة؛ ثانياً، أن وتيرة التنفيذ الراهنة، المقرونة بمحدودية التدابير الاستباقية لتعزيز الكفاءة اللغوية لدى الأساتذة والطلبة، تنطوي على مخاطر تراجع انتقالي في التحصيل العلمي – وفقاً لما تكشفه الحالة الرواندية – في حين تُبرز التجربة الماليزية النجاعة المقارنة لمنهج التدرّج. ثالثاً، تعمل الإنجليزية بوصفها متغيّراً وسيطاً لا محدِّداً كافياً لمرئية الجامعة وترتيبها، إذ تظل مكاسبها المحتملة مشروطة بإصلاحات هيكلية موازية تشمل تمويل البحث العلمي والبنى التحتية والاندماج في الشبكات العلمية الدولية. يخلص المقال إلى أن نجاح التحوّل الجزائري سيتوقّف على تبنّي مقاربة تدريجية قائمة على التقييم، ضمن استراتيجية أشمل لتحديث منظومة التعليم العالي.

1. Introduction

The rising status of English as the *lingua franca* of higher education and scientific research is no longer a matter of serious dispute; indeed, this ascent has produced a global convergence of policies toward English-Medium Instruction (EMI), particularly in non-native English-speaking environments. Across Europe and Asia, and increasingly in Africa, governments and universities have been steadily integrating English into their teaching programmes, classroom activities, and research publications – doing so, they argue, as a strategic response to the demands of globalisation, the internationalisation of higher education, and the centrality of English in indexed scientific publishing. Yet this convergence unfolds within national contexts that carry deep linguistic histories, thereby generating context-specific tensions that inevitably shape the design and outcomes of language reforms.

The Algerian case, in our view, offers a particularly revealing example in this regard. Algeria's linguistic landscape is the product of a complex layering: a deep-rooted

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Arab-Islamic heritage, a 132-year French colonial occupation that systematically marginalised Arabic, a post-independence Arabisation project pursued as a sovereign reassertion of national identity, and an Amazigh dimension later constitutionally consecrated as a national and official language alongside Arabic. Beyond French and English, Arabic and Tamazight are constitutionally recognised as national and official languages, yet neither functions as a medium of instruction in scientific higher education. In classroom practice, Algerian Arabic (Darija) frequently serves as an informal bridge language, with code-switching between Arabic, French, and now English being routine. During the EMI transition, these practices may either facilitate comprehension (when used strategically) or confuse students when multiple languages compete without clear pedagogical framing.

Within this configuration, French has retained an ambiguous position – continuously contested as a colonial residue, yet deeply entrenched as the primary language of administration, the banking sector, and several scientific specialisations in higher education.

The current turn toward English – crystallised in President Abdelmadjid Tebboune's 2022 declaration that "French is a war bounty, and English is the language of the world" – marks, we contend, a significant rupture with the linguistic equilibrium that had prevailed since independence. The introduction of English from the third year of primary education during the 2022–2023 academic year, followed by the gradual replacement of French with English as the medium of instruction in scientific and technical university specialisations from 2023 onward, raises central questions for language policy studies and for the political sociology of post-colonial states. Why has the Algerian linguistic field, which resisted such change for so long, suddenly opened up to a transformation of this speed and at this particular moment? To what extent does the current configuration differ from the failed 1993–1994 experiment? And under what conditions can this reform achieve its stated goals of pedagogical modernisation and improved international visibility?

This article tackles these questions by tracing the shift in Algeria's language debate from an ideological struggle – in which linguistic choice was tied to sovereignty and identity – toward a technical discussion focused on pedagogical effectiveness and institutional readiness. Our argument unfolds in five main movements. Section 2 outlines the documentary methodology underpinning the analysis. Section 3 places the language question within its historical-ideological framework, with particular attention to the legacy of colonial education policy and the contours of the Arabisation project. Section 4 examines the gradual transition from French to English in the current period, diagnosing the political, social, and international factors that distinguish this moment from earlier, failed attempts. Section 5 scrutinises the challenges of implementation by drawing on comparative evidence from Rwanda and Malaysia, and then formulates three guiding principles (5.1, 5.2, 5.3). Section 6 critically engages with the official rationale that English will improve the international visibility and ranking of Algerian universities,

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advancing the analytical thesis that English operates as a mediator variable – that is, an enabling tool whose outcomes depend on the broader research and institutional system. By applying historical, political, and pedagogical lenses to a national case that has not yet received sufficient scholarly attention, we seek to contribute to both the empirical literature on linguistic transitions in post-colonial contexts and the wider theoretical debate on the conditions under which language policy reforms succeed or falter.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a policy-analytic, documentary research design, drawing on a purposive sample of three categories of primary source: constitutional provisions (the 1963 and 1976 Constitutions and the 1964 National Charter), ministerial directives issued between 2019 and 2024, and official policy declarations, notably the 2022 presidential statement on language policy. Documents were included on the basis of public availability and direct relevance to higher education language policy in Algeria. Analysis proceeded through thematic coding, supplemented by triangulation across the three document categories to corroborate emergent themes and to trace the shift from ideological to technical framing across successive policy texts. This design carries clear limitations: it relies on official discourse rather than on primary classroom-level data, and it does not constitute an empirical study of implementation outcomes. The findings reported below should accordingly be read as a literature-informed, document-based interpretation rather than as primary empirical evidence.

3. The Ideological Dimension of Language in Algeria

The language question in Algeria constitutes a subject of profound sensitivity, owing to its historical and ideological dimensions – dimensions that are a direct consequence of the educational policy pursued by French colonialism over 132 years of occupation (1830–1962; see Ruedy, 2005). Historians have unanimously characterised this policy as a selective strategy designed specifically to benefit a minority of European settlers, alongside an endeavour to cultivate a highly restricted French-speaking Algerian elite, while relegating the vast majority of the population to the margins of the educational system (Benrabah, 2013; Grandguillaume, 2004). Statistical data from specialised studies on education during the colonial period yield convergent figures: approximately 90% of Algerians were illiterate on the eve of independence; educational institutions had a total capacity not exceeding 300,000 children out of one million school-aged children; and the educational system was predicated upon the French language, accompanied by the complete marginalisation of Arabic (Mostari, 2009; Taleb Ibrahimi, 1995).

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Table 1.

Evolution of school enrollment rates among Algerians during the colonial period

Year	1888	1902	1912	1914	1938	1954
Rate (%)	2	3.5	4.5	5	8.9	15

Source: Mendas, D. (2021–2022). Algerian Arabic/French code-switching between international motivation and structural uniformity. (p. 17).

The implication is that the illiteracy rate among Algerians immediately following independence was estimated at somewhere between 85% and 90%, reaching as high as 98% among women (Moatassime, 1992); by contrast, numerous studies affirm that illiteracy was remarkably low before the colonial period, despite the reliance on a traditional educational system based on Quranic schools (*katātīb*), Qur'anic institutions, and religious lodges (*zawāyā*) operating in Arabic (Lafrance, 1998). In this context, reference is frequently made to the account of the German traveller Wilhelm Schimper in his *Reise nach Algier in den Jahren 1831 und 1832* (Journey to Algiers in the Years 1831 and 1832; Schimper, 1833), wherein he expressed astonishment at the prevalence of literacy among the population, to the extent that he mentioned searching for an illiterate individual without success. Meanwhile, the precise literacy rates remain a matter of scholarly dispute due to the absence of qualified institutions capable of collecting accurate data (Benrabah, 2007).

Colonial policy thus resulted in the systematic marginalisation of the indigenous Algerian population (Ruedy, 2005); it is sufficient to note that the number of Algerian teachers in secondary and higher education was estimated at 183 for a population exceeding eight million – including one million children of school age – with educational institutions whose capacity did not surpass 300,000 (Benrabah, 2013). The situation was further exacerbated by the mass emigration of the overwhelming majority of European teachers, who elected to depart from Algeria (Grandguillaume, 2004). Consequently, the Algerian authorities had no alternative but to continue operating the same educational system while pursuing all available means to attract qualified teachers to assume instructional responsibilities, all the while retaining French as the language of instruction across various educational levels and as the language of administrative and economic institutions during a transitional period, in accordance with Article 76 of the 1963 Constitution (Algerian Constitution, 1963).

This article concurrently affirmed the state's commitment to achieving the generalisation of Arabic throughout the territory of the Republic. The first Algerian National Charter of 1964 delineated the milestones to be followed by the political leadership to consolidate linguistic identity and the means of its reinforcement across various domains of life, particularly education and administration – domains that constitute fertile ground for the propagation of any language (Algerian National Charter, 1964). Thus, the commitment of the post-independence authorities to one of the

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fundamental objectives articulated by the revolution leaders in the November 1954 Declaration, the Soummam Conference of 1956, and the Tripoli Conference of 1962 is confirmed: namely, the emphasis on the national and historical dimension of the Arabic language, which had been subjected to systematic injustice and suppression by the French colonial authorities (Harbi, 1980; Stora, 2004).

A significant segment of those who had formerly fought against colonialism regarded this situation as a perpetuation of the vestiges of colonial policy that must be eradicated – on the grounds that language is not merely an educational instrument but rather a symbol of the nation's identity and the completion of the national character (Benrabah, 2007). This signifies, in other words, the renewal or persistence of the conflict between the Arabic language – with its symbolic burden associated with national identity and cultural independence, representing a fundamental pillar of the state's sovereign discourse – and the French language, which acquired a portion of its status from its historical linkage to the administrative and scientific institutions formed during the colonial era and perpetuated after independence (Grandguillaume, 2004). As for the English language, it was entirely absent until it gradually began to emerge in recent years within educational and research policies as the language of science and global academic communication (Mostari, 2009).

The linguistic ideological conflict manifested itself with pronounced clarity following independence, after the Algerian authorities commenced the adoption of a gradual policy of Arabising education in Algeria, beginning with primary education and subsequently extending to the remaining levels – including higher education and administration – in accordance with available capabilities (TalebIbrahimi, 1995). The most significant challenge was the human factor, characterised by a dearth of qualified instructors capable of teaching in Arabic, particularly for scientific disciplines; this necessitated the launch of a broad international programme in coordination with a number of Arab countries to recruit teachers of various nationalities – from Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, for example (Mostari, 2009). The objectives of the Arabisation policy were explicitly articulated: they were not confined solely to the educational goal of enabling the child to learn in their mother tongue, but rather aimed primarily to sever cultural ties with the French coloniser and to restore the Arabic language to its former status as a symbol of national sovereignty (Benrabah, 2013).

However, Arabisation produced three unintended consequences: first, a linguistic mismatch where students learned science in Arabic at secondary level but encountered French textbooks at university; second, a functional diglossia where Arabic symbolised national identity while French remained the language of administration and technocratic power; third, uneven teacher preparation due to rapid recruitment from other Arab countries without full synchronisation with local pedagogical needs. This orientation assumed a more potent political dimension through the 1976 Constitution, which consecrated Arabic alone as the national and official language, with an emphasis on the state's duty to work toward its generalisation in the official domain – primarily

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encompassing the functioning of administrative institutions and the entire educational system (Algerian Constitution, 1976).

This orientation provided powerful impetus to the Arabisation policy, which began to achieve highly tangible gains for the Arabic language at the expense of French; however, it continued to encounter numerous obstacles and challenges that hindered or delayed the attainment of the set objectives in certain sectors or levels. The adopted policy led to the complete Arabisation of the three educational stages (primary, middle, secondary); it even resulted in some unintended weakening of proficiency in French – the impact of which would become clearly evident at the higher education level for certain technical and scientific specialisations that continued to be taught in French, such as medicine and computer science (Mostari, 2009).

In these fields, the student is compelled to pursue their university education in French, which they had acquired as a first foreign language within a completely Arabised educational system, and which continues as the language of learning in their university specialisation. A kind of coexistence between Arabic and French also persisted in the operation of administrations, certain economic institutions, and primarily the banking sector, owing to the dominance and resistance to change on the part of Francophone-trained elites – whether because of ideological convictions or apprehension regarding adaptation difficulties (Grandguillaume, 2004).

Nonetheless, this resistance to change subsided over time as a result of changes in numerous influential factors that circumscribed the ideological resistance previously present at certain levels of state responsibility; the same elites who influence political decision-making no longer occupy sensitive positions within the state apparatus (Benrabah, 2007). The state has also far surpassed the levels of deficiency with respect to educational institutions and the human competencies required for the success of any educational policy; furthermore, a transformation has occurred at the level of pupils and students, whose numbers have reached nearly ten million across the education and higher education sectors, the vast majority of whom are products of a completely Arabised educational system (Ministry of National Education, Algeria, 2020). Added to the foregoing is a highly decisive factor imposed by the influences of the international environment, which cannot be ignored – this factor unequivocally confirms the dominance and diffusion of English as a language of learning and scientific research at the global level, at the expense of all languages, not merely French (Crystal, 2012; Phillipson, 2009).

It is certain that the latter factor does not favour the further empowerment of Arabic; nevertheless, it is likely to bring about a fundamental transformation in the Algerian educational landscape – primarily in the higher education sector – which may lead to the near-complete disappearance of French in Algeria in the future in favour of English (Benrabah, 2013). This is predicated upon objectives of a purely academic and scientific nature, the primary purpose of which is to enable the Algerian university to keep pace with its global counterparts through the improvement of education quality indicators and the ranking levels of higher education institutions; this aligns with the objectives set by

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the Algerian authorities, which have adopted in recent years a policy aimed at the gradual transition to adopting English as a language of instruction and scientific research – not only as a substitute for French but even for certain specialisations that are taught entirely in Arabic (see various ministerial directives from 2019 onward). This choice has, to some extent, revived the debate over the ideological conflict surrounding language, albeit in a considerably milder form than previously; the debate no longer concerns the substance of the choice but rather the justifications, possibilities, and implications of the speed of transition or implementation (Mostari, 2009).

4. The Gradual Transition from French to English

"French is a war bounty, and English is the language of the world." With this sentence, the Algerian President, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, expressed in 2022 the decision of the country's highest authorities to adopt English as a foreign language starting from the third year of primary education; consequently, the pupil begins learning two foreign languages simultaneously – English and French – alongside basic education in Arabic. Concrete data on the 2023 rollout remain limited, but ministry communications indicate that EMI was introduced in approximately 30% of scientific and technical specialisations nationally during the 2023–2024 academic year, with full implementation targeted for 2026. The speed of this reform cannot be separated from geopolitical factors: Algeria's deteriorating relations with France (2019–2024) coincided with strengthened educational partnerships with the UK (teacher training, 2025–2027) and the US (university twinning programmes). Whether this geopolitical realignment will sustain long-term institutional capacity remains an open question.

The implementation of this decision effectively commenced from the 2022–2023 academic year. This situation has sparked debate regarding the ability of children to learn two foreign languages at once alongside their mother tongue, especially given the existence of classes where the Amazigh language is also taught (it too is considered a national and official language alongside Arabic); this situation has raised concerns among some experts as well as parents regarding their children's capacity to achieve satisfactory academic performance. Some proponents of Francophonie did not hesitate to consider this a hasty step, predicting that it would not achieve its stated objectives.

It is worth noting that this is not the first time a decision has been made to enhance the status of English within the educational system; indeed, this was preceded by an experimental attempt during the 1993–1994 academic year, through the selection of model institutions where pupils studied English at the primary level instead of French, with the intention of expanding the experiment over time. However, that attempt failed miserably for several reasons: the lack of adequate supervision by English language teachers; the apprehension of parents who did not engage further with the endeavour due to the significant entrenchment of French in Algerian society at that time compared to English; and concerns about their children's future academic prospects, particularly in higher education. Among the most important reasons as well were the obstacles caused by the

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highly influential Francophone current during that period, which considered all such attempts as a tool in the hands of Arabisation advocates seeking to rid themselves of the hegemony of French.

Yet, after nearly three decades, circumstances have changed in a way that tilts the balance in favour of proponents of enhancing the status of English; the spread and dominance of English have increased globally due to globalisation, the reinforcement of modern technologies, and communication techniques. This is in addition to internal factors specific to Algerian society, such as the political conditions of the post-Hirak (popular movement) period of 2019, which, alongside its political demands – strongly raised the demand for adopting English instead of French. This indicates a change in the social environment that facilitates the achievement of the desired linguistic transition; these are political data that cannot be ignored. It is no coincidence that bilateral relations between Algeria and France deteriorated during the period coinciding with this linguistic reform, while simultaneously improving in the same area with both Britain and the United States, through the launch of joint programmes under the supervision of the embassies of the two countries and the opening of private educational institutions fundamentally based on English. An example of this is the special training programme supervised by the government of the United Kingdom to train one thousand teachers of English remotely and 145 primary inspectors through in-person training for the period extending from 2025 to 2027.

What further strengthens the hypothesis that the choice to enhance the status of English this time is irreversible are the recruitment processes in the education sector, from which the English language teaching specialisation has received a substantial share, allowing for effective supervision according to the actual needs of the sector; a special programme has been adopted in cooperation with the higher education sector to train the required number of English language teachers through the Higher Colleges for Teacher Training. Furthermore, the linguistic reform is subject to special monitoring by specialised committees that work to make the required technical adjustments each academic year based on the results of field evaluations – which are trending toward reducing the time allocated to French in favour of English, with the possibility of commencing the teaching of English starting from the second year of primary education. However, what is criticised about this aspect of the reforms is the fear of falling into the trap of haste and not sufficiently consulting specialists in the field through broadening consultations or valuing scientific research related to the subject.

These concerns have clearly emerged in the higher education sector, which – during the same period, i.e., starting from 2023 – began replacing French with English as the language of instruction in certain scientific and technical specialisations, alongside teaching certain subjects in English within specialisations that were previously taught entirely in Arabic. This transformation was accompanied by administrative instructions in favour of empowering English through its adoption in official correspondence instead of French, as well as on directional and guidance signs within higher education institutions,

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in addition to websites and social media pages of higher education institutions, which have begun publishing exclusively in Arabic and English.

This transformation has been described by some recent studies as hasty, given the level of English proficiency among those directly concerned – namely, teachers and students; consequently, there is a legitimate concern that a significant gap exists between the reality of university education based on English and political ambitions, which have pushed toward this strategic choice. Undoubtedly, this requires a considerable period of time to assess its effectiveness according to purely scientific foundations – not less than the period required for the first cohorts of reforms in the education sector to reach university, i.e., no less than ten years of rigorous implementation and continuous monitoring capable of shifting the debate from justifying choices to evaluating the effectiveness of public policies.

5. From Ideological Debate to Technical Discussion

It becomes clearly evident, through tracking reactions – whether academic or political – regarding the sudden decision to adopt English as the language of instruction in universities, that the ideological character of expressed positions has receded, giving way to a predominantly pedagogical character. This in itself is a positive indicator of the potential success of this step compared to previous attempts, in which the political factor was a decisive marker in determining the fate of implemented reforms. However, this should not overlook certain fundamental indicators for achieving the required quality, rather than being content with merely eliminating French as a colonial legacy; the responsible authorities must work to take into account the factor of gradualism in implementing the required reforms, avoid pressures associated with the time factor, and improve the English language proficiency of both teachers and students.

5.1. Gradualism in Implementing Reforms

The Stanford study by Laitin and Ramachandran (2016) confirmed that the cost of Rwanda's sudden transition was estimated at the loss of an average of 0.54 years of schooling per generation exposed to the reform, alongside a decline in secondary school enrollment rates; the lesson for the Algerian case is unequivocal: gradualism is not merely a pedagogical choice but a prudent economic one. Given that the Algerian case is considered a model characterised by complex linguistic diversity – further intensified by its connection to historical and political accumulations – the responsible authorities must ensure the adoption of a phased plan to achieve the specified objectives.

The literature of linguistic studies confirms that sudden transition, as in the Algerian case, may negatively affect the achievement of desired outcomes, which require taking into account the institutional and pedagogical capacity to absorb linguistic transition within an accumulative trajectory requiring several years, as affirmed by Canadian researcher Jim Cummins (2000). As for the required time period, it varies according to the host environment and the available conditions for realising the linguistic transition;

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the Rwandan government previously took a similar decision to transition rapidly from French to English in 2008, despite weak linguistic proficiency among teachers and a lack of institutional capabilities, but driven by a strong political motive in a country that was the victim of a serious genocide in which France was accused of involvement.

Consequently, some preliminary evaluations showed a temporary decline in academic achievement levels and deficiencies in linguistic proficiency. In contrast, the Malaysian experience presents a more successful model, as it adopted – despite facing some difficulties – a gradual approach that allowed avoiding pedagogical shocks and a decline in academic achievement levels; the Malaysian government approved the gradual introduction of teaching scientific subjects in English starting in 2003. This policy enabled the achievement of positive results for the higher education sector, which has aspired to become a regional and global hub attracting more international students to study in Malaysia (Gill, 2005; Kirkpatrick, 2012).Contextual differentiation is essential: Rwanda's sudden shift (2008) occurred in a smaller higher education sector with heavy donor-driven teacher training, yet still produced learning losses (0.54 years). Malaysia's gradual approach (2003 onward) benefited from stronger research funding and existing bilingual teacher capacity. Algeria's larger scale, weaker English proficiency, and absence of comparable donor support make the Malaysian model more relevant, but only if teacher training and research funding are prioritised.

Alhamami's (2024) systematic review of EMI policy across the Arab world offers a sobering corrective to any uncritical optimism about top-down language reforms; synthesising 49 Scopus-indexed studies, he concludes that while EMI is often implemented as a successful top-down policy well-suited to Arab demographics, it is viewed negatively by most students – not because of ideological opposition to English per se, but because programmes are poorly designed and instructors are insufficiently prepared to teach EMI courses effectively. This finding supports our argument that the Algerian case, while politically feasible in the current moment, remains vulnerable to pedagogical failure unless accompanied by sustained investment in teacher training, curriculum redesign, and stakeholder consultation.

Belmihoub's (2023) comprehensive review of Arabicisation versus Englishisation in Arab higher education provides essential historical depth to our discussion of gradualism; tracing four decades of language policy debates across twenty-two Arab countries, he concludes that higher education Arabicisation movements have not brought about their desired outcomes due to persistent structural barriers, whereas Englishisation policies and practices have increasingly expanded in the region over the last three decades. This historical pattern does not, however, imply that Algerian policymakers should accelerate the current transition; on the contrary, Belmihoub's review suggests that the failure of Arabicisation was not a failure of the Arabic language itself but rather a failure of implementation – insufficient teacher training, inadequate curriculum development, and weak institutional support. The Algerian EMI transition risks repeating precisely these

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same implementation failures if it proceeds at its current pace without addressing the structural deficiencies we have identified.

5.2. Controlling the Pressure of the Time Factor

This pressure is a direct result of haste in implementing public policies without providing the structural and pedagogical conditions necessary to ensure their effectiveness – which often leads to a gap between declared objectives and the results of actual implementation. This is a consequence warned against by education experts such as Michael Fullan (2007), who affirms that educational reforms fail when imposed at a pace faster than the ability of the actors to absorb them; he emphasises that genuine change requires time to adjust practices, not merely to change texts. The Algerian case appears closer to this situation than to one where reforms are built on a flexible, gradual approach based on prior preparation, phased experimentation, and continuous evaluation – an approach that would transform this reform from a political decision into an effective and sustainable pedagogical practice. Addressing this flaw requires a comprehensive, phased timeline that allows monitoring of the implementation of reforms and their effects on the academic achievement levels of pupils and students, as well as the performance of teachers responsible for teaching in English.

5.3. Improving the English Language Proficiency of Teachers and Students

International indicators provide an objective measurement of this challenge; the latest edition of the EF English Proficiency Index (2025), based on test results from 2.2 million examinees across 123 countries, shows the following:

Table 2.

Algeria's Ranking in the EF English Proficiency Index 2025 Compared to Selected Countries

Country	Global Ranking	Score	Proficiency Level	Speaking	Writing
Netherlands (1st globally)	1	624	Very High	—	—
Sweden	8	609	Very High	—	—
Global Average	—	488	Low	—	—
Tunisia	66	498	Low	—	—
Morocco	68	492	Low	—	—
Algeria	82	468	Low	443	403
Egypt	89	458	Low	—	—
Saudi Arabia	115	404	Very Low	—	—

Source: EF Education First. (2025). *EF English Proficiency Index – 2025 Edition*. Retrieved from https://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/

Algeria's position in the "Low Proficiency" band, lagging behind both Tunisia and Morocco, is striking; yet the more concerning finding lies in the breakdown by skill:

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writing proficiency stands at only 403 points – precisely the skill most demanded in academic contexts and scientific publication. This gap constitutes a structural challenge for the ambition of enhancing scientific publication in indexed international journals. The success of the linguistic transition is linked to the linguistic competence of teachers and students; accordingly, it is necessary for the responsible authorities to support their decisions with special programmes to improve the linguistic proficiency of teachers and students. Accompanying the key actors, whether supervisors or learners, is a critical condition for the success of the policy of transitioning to English as a language of instruction and avoiding any temporary decline in academic achievement levels that may result from this transition.

On this point, some criticisms of the decision to commence teaching in English instead of French were based – even if applied gradually. The first indicators emerged during the Hirak period in 2019, through the survey commissioned by the then Minister of Higher Education, TayebBouzid, to collect the opinions of students and teachers regarding the enhancement and use of English in teaching scientific subjects, along with a directive dated July 19, 2019, to replace French with English alongside Arabic in writing identifying data in administrative correspondence (*les en-têtes*), without this being accompanied by the adoption of any training programmes specifically for training teachers and students in English. In this context, the establishment of intensive language teaching centres at each university cannot be considered a sufficient step, even if it may help improve linguistic proficiency – given that they are dedicated to all languages for which there is demand and competent staff capable of supervising them, not only English. Moreover, they are open to everyone within mixed departments not based on precise programmes directed, for example, to teachers to prepare them for teaching in their specialisations or to students to prepare for academic reception in English; therefore, they have not achieved significant demand, especially among teachers, many of whom considered them unsuitable for their needs – as reflected by the enrolment figures of teachers at the University of Oran 2 in its intensive language teaching centre.

We acknowledge two methodological limitations: the EF EPI relies on a self-selected, non-probability sample and is used here as a directional signal only; the Constantine Polytechnic study (82 teachers, single institution) is not generalisable, and its sampling frame was not disclosed. Our analysis is therefore policy-analytic and literature-based, not a substitute for large-scale primary data collection. Among the steps also considered unstudied in the context of paving the way for empowering English is the directive issued by the Secretary-General of the Ministry – which was not actually realised on the ground – permitting doctoral and master's students to prepare and defend their theses in English; this optional procedure depends on the linguistic proficiency of the student, the supervising professor, and the examination committee. While this may be achieved independently by some, it did not see significant demand from students and

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teachers, who continued to work in Arabic and French according to their respective specialisations.

A study conducted at the Malek Bennabi National Polytechnic School of Constantine during the 2022–2023 academic year reflects the institution's lack of readiness for the sudden transition to teaching in English. The study included a sample of 82 teachers distributed across five departments; among the most prominent findings, the study concluded the general interaction with the possibility of transitioning to teaching in English, which produced three groups summarised in the following table:

	Participation in English training programmes	**Impression regarding the policy of teaching in English**	**Readiness to teach in English**
First Group	Diligent attendance of training sessions	Positive attitude toward implementing the policy	Ready to engage in the process
Second Group	Attendance of training sessions	Skepticism about the feasibility of implementing the policy	Hesitation due to lack of enthusiasm for learning English
Third Group	Non-participation in training	Consider English a secondary subject	Absolute refusal to teach in English

It is worth noting that, according to the study, the third group represents a minority with a strong Francophone background, reflecting the notable change in the linguistic environment within the university, which has become less opposed to the possibility of deciding to transition to teaching in English; this study also indicates that its results are consistent with many previous studies that included other samples from different institutions.

The Ministry of Higher Education attempted to address the issue of lack of linguistic proficiency following the decision to transition to teaching in English starting in 2023, by approving a number of measures and procedures, among which we can mention:

- Launching a national programme to train thousands of teachers in English, adopting both in-person and remote modes.
- Directing intensive language teaching centres to support the ministry's programme in training teachers and students in English as a permanent institutional tool.
- Incorporating educational units for English at all educational levels (Bachelor's – Master's – Doctorate).
- Launching a national digital platform for learning English.
- Generalising the institutional character of English in the university environment to provide a supportive linguistic environment – through administrative correspondence, signage within institutions, and university website interfaces.
- Encouraging the use of English in the dissemination of scientific research.

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- Creating a special programme within the framework of benefiting from short-term training abroad, giving priority to teachers and students who choose training at a university in an Anglophone country, and to teachers who sign a commitment to teach in English and demonstrate a certain level of English proficiency.
- Directing the ministry to directors of higher education institutions to encourage and facilitate the enrolment of teachers in preparing for a Bachelor's degree in English within faculties of foreign languages.
- Creating certain dual Bachelor's degree pathways (English and a specialisation in another field) to enhance students' scientific training in English – for example, the opening of a dual specialisation (English – International Relations) at the Faculty of Law and Political Science at the University of Oran 2, alongside other specialisations in various universities across the country.

This divergence between political ambition and classroom reality is precisely what Ghouali and Haddam Bouabdallah (2024) capture in their recent empirical study; surveying Algerian EMI teachers, they found that while instructors generally acknowledge the growing importance of English in a globalised world, significant challenges remain – chief among them limited English proficiency among faculty, which the authors argue may severely hinder effective content delivery and student comprehension. Their findings corroborate our earlier observation that the intensive language teaching centres established by the ministry have failed to generate meaningful demand among teachers, precisely because these centres offer general language instruction rather than the discipline-specific English for Academic Purposes (EAP) that faculty members actually require.

6. English as a Lever for Improving the Visibility and Ranking of the Algerian University

With the increasing importance that global rankings of higher education institutions have come to assume – as one of the fundamental indicators for measuring university performance and the level of international competitiveness of national institutions – much discussion has arisen in Algeria regarding the weak ranking of Algerian institutions, despite the significant investments made by the Algerian government in the higher education sector and the availability of highly competent human qualifications and world-class infrastructure.

The relationship between EMI policy and institutional ranking must be situated within the broader regional context; as Curle, Ali, Alhassan and Scatolini (2022) demonstrate in their edited volume on EMI in the Middle East and North Africa, the region remains significantly under-researched with respect to the effects and challenges of EMI implementation, particularly from a decolonial critical perspective. Their comparative framework, which brings together empirical studies from Iran, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Turkey, reveals that EMI policies across the MENA region are

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frequently adopted as top-down internationalisation strategies without adequate attention to local linguistic ecologies – a pattern that resonates strongly with the Algerian case and that we must guard against replicating. Successive officials overseeing Algeria's higher education sector have consistently reiterated, as a policy objective, the goal of improving the ranking of Algerian institutions according to the most renowned global rankings; in the same context, they have justified the decision to transition to teaching in English by the same objective – namely, improving the visibility and ranking of institutions.

Although the Algerian environment carries certain specificities that could affect the reform measures adopted or the results achieved, this does not undermine a more general claim: language does not play a direct role in university rankings but rather operates as a mediator variable that may contribute to enhancing ranking. Accordingly, we argue that, as a matter of principle, the decision to transition to English cannot be expected to improve the visibility and ranking of Algerian universities in the near or medium term unless this endeavour is linked to an effective scientific research system, including funding, quality of training, infrastructure, and integration into international scientific networks. We use the term 'mediator variable' here in a qualitative, conceptual sense rather than a strict statistical one, since our policy-analytic study does not operationalise it quantitatively. Conceptually, English functions as an enabling condition: it opens possibilities, but those possibilities materialise only when embedded in a coherent structural reform package, and it cannot substitute for the deeper reforms themselves.

This factor is sufficient to explain why the linguistic transition policy succeeded in some Scandinavian countries and failed in some African countries, despite the linguistic tool being the same – namely English; Northern European countries improved the ranking of their universities, but not solely by virtue of teaching in English – rather, they did so because they possess a strong research system and very high funding, whereas many African countries lack this, and their universities have not seen an improvement in ranking despite their transition to teaching in English.

This analysis is, to a large extent, consistent with what some specialised professors of the English language – such as David Crystal (2012) – have argued. In his book *English as a Global Language*, Crystal points out that the hegemony of English is a direct result of its association with the economic and scientific power of the countries in which it is spoken – whether through colonial Britain or through the modern hegemony of the United States of America; he also affirms the contribution of the technological revolution and the spread of modern means of communication in making English a primary means of communication in the fields that constitute contemporary scientific and professional life, thereby consolidating its position as a dominant language in academic publishing and international scientific exchange.

Similarly, John Flowerdew (2015) demonstrates, through a study published entitled *English for Research Publication Purposes*, that English has become a structural condition for integration into the global system of scientific publication, constituting the primary gateway to accessing indexed journals and achieving international academic

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recognition; he also demonstrates that this reality is not without problems, as non-native English-speaking researchers face linguistic and institutional challenges that may limit their opportunities to publish their work, thereby perpetuating a kind of inequality in the production of knowledge within a global system dominated by indexed journals that adopt unified editorial and linguistic standards in which English is the central language. Accordingly, from his perspective, the role of English in scientific research transcends being merely a communication tool to become an influential factor in the evaluation and acceptance of scientific production – which necessitates the development of specialised linguistic competencies among researchers to ensure effective integration into the international scientific community.

In this context, the importance of English is closely connected to many indicators adopted by institutions that oversee international ranking processes, such as the volume of scientific production, citation counts, academic reputation, and international cooperation – indicators that English helps researchers meet, given the vast number of scientific journals that publish research in English worldwide. Statistics indicate that approximately 80% of scientific publications are in English. A more granular reading of international databases reveals the magnitude of this dominance across disciplines:

Table 3.

Distribution of International Scientific Publications by Language of Publication

Database / Field	**Share of English**	**Dominant Non-English Language(s)**	**Reference Period**	**Source(s)**
Natural Sciences (international journals)	> 90%	Historically: German, French, Russian, Japanese	1990s–2010s	Hamel (2007); Ammon (2010, 2012)
Science Citation Index Expanded (SCIE)	~97%	Historically German & French; recently Chinese	2005–2015	Liu et al. (2017)
Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI)	~95%	Historically French, German, Spanish	2005–2015	Liu et al. (2017)
Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI)	~73%	French, German, Spanish	2005–2015	Liu et al. (2017)
Total Web of Science (WoS) documents	95.4%	50 other languages (each < 1%)	2018	Vera-Baceta, Thelwall&Kousha (2019)

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Database / Field	Share of English	Dominant Non-English Language(s)	Reference Period	Source(s)
Total Scopus documents	92.6%	50 other languages	2018	Vera-Baceta, Thelwall&Kousha (2019)
Global scientific output (general estimate)	~80% to ~98% (range varies by source and field)	—	2012–2024	van Weijen (2012); Bocanegra-Valle (2024)

Bibliometric studies further demonstrate that articles published in English receive a higher number of citations than their counterparts in other languages – even after controlling for year, journal, and article length (van Weijen, 2012); this places researchers writing exclusively in French or Arabic before a structural barrier that limits their international visibility. Moreover, most prestigious international platforms for publishing scientific research operate primarily in English; likewise, given the large number of university institutions where teaching is conducted in English, the opportunities for cooperation and mobility for teachers and students in both directions are thereby increased – which enhances the visibility of the university institutions concerned.

Our analytical distinction between English as a mediator variable versus a sufficient determinant of university ranking finds conceptual support in the emerging framework of 'Critical EMI'; Mirhosseini and De Costa (2024) argue that the booming trends of EMI have generally foregrounded the technical aspects of instruction and related linguistic challenges, while neglecting the deeper ideological, political and social justice dimensions that accompany the neocolonial spread and dominance of English. From this critical perspective, Algeria's linguistic transition cannot be assessed solely through metrics of publication counts or citation indices; rather, policymakers must confront questions of epistemic justice, linguistic dependency, and the extent to which the shift to English genuinely empowers Algerian researchers or merely substitutes one form of linguistic hegemony for another.

7. Conclusion

Algeria's linguistic transition from French to English in the higher education sector represents, in our reading, a genuine turning point in the post-independence language policy of the country. The analysis presented in this article demonstrates that the current transition differs fundamentally from previous attempts: it benefits from a transformed international environment in which English has become the de facto language of scientific publication and academic mobility; from a domestic political configuration that is far less ideologically hostile to language reform than in previous decades; and from a pragmatic discourse increasingly framed in technical rather than identity-based terms. Taken

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together, these conditions provide an objective basis for cautious optimism regarding the medium-term prospects of this policy.

Yet our analysis also uncovers a fundamental tension at the heart of the reform; the pace of implementation has outpaced the structural and pedagogical preparations necessary to absorb a linguistic shift of this magnitude. The directive to introduce English in scientific specialisations and administrative correspondence from 2023 onward – in the absence of well-designed, proactive training programmes for faculty and students – evokes the very conditions that produced a documented decline in academic achievement in the Rwandan case. By contrast, the Malaysian experience shows that gradualism – when combined with sustained investment in teacher training, phased pedagogical integration, and continuous evaluation – can transform a language reform into a lever for regional educational competitiveness. The Algerian case currently sits somewhere between these two trajectories, and its eventual outcome will be determined by the policy adjustments made during the current transitional decade.

The second major contribution concerns the official rationale linking the linguistic transition to improved university visibility and ranking; while this rationale is not groundless, it requires an important analytical qualification. English operates as a mediator variable: it enables access to indexed journals, international scientific networks, and academic mobility opportunities, but it cannot substitute for the structural reforms – research funding, infrastructure, quality of training, and international cooperation – that are the actual determinants of institutional performance. The observed variation in outcomes between Northern European universities and those in certain African countries, despite the same linguistic choice, confirms the validity of this analytical distinction.

Three policy implications follow from the above, in our view. First, the relevant authorities should formalise a multi-year implementation plan based on gradualism, with explicit measurable indicators of linguistic proficiency for both teachers and students, in line with the analytical frameworks proposed by Cummins (2000) and Fullan (2007) regarding the temporal and absorptive requirements of educational change. Second, intensive language teaching centres and digital training platforms need to be restructured to offer specialised, free programmes tailored to the actual pedagogical needs of university actors, rather than providing only general language instruction. Third, the language reform should be embedded within a broader strategy of higher education modernisation – encompassing research funding, internationalisation, and institutional governance – for without this, the expected gains in visibility and ranking are unlikely to materialise.

The main limitation of the analysis presented here is its largely policy-analytic character; future research would therefore benefit from complementing our approach with longitudinal field data on student achievement, classroom practices of faculty, and the bibliometric output of Algerian universities in English-language venues. Cross-national comparison with other post-colonial contexts in the Maghreb – particularly Morocco and Tunisia – would also strengthen the empirical foundations of this research field. Such work, we believe, is a necessary condition for transforming Algeria's linguistic

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experiment from a political decision into an evidence-based public policy – one that is evaluable, adjustable, and ultimately judged by its results rather than its announcements.

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Authors' Contributions

The authors conceived the study, conducted the documentary analysis, wrote the initial draft of the manuscript, and approved the final version. All work presented in this article was completed independently by the authors.

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