

## Attitudes towards the Burgeoning Rivalry between English and French at Primary Level

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### Abstract:

The study at hand aimed at measuring the teachers' and educational inspectors' attitudes towards the incorporation of English as an additional foreign language alongside French at primary level. To this end, this study relied on a questionnaire, a semi-structured interview and a simple random sampling that covered 60 participants. The findings disclosed that the majority of the participants displayed positive attitudes towards the inclusion of English in parallel with French. These attitudes are governed by the status of English, being the world language, and the language of technology and progress. However, still a minority of the participants expressed their preference to keep the situation the way it is, with French being the sole foreign language taught.

**Keywords:** Attitude; educational inspectors; English; French; teachers

### Résumé :

L'étude en question visait à mesurer les attitudes des enseignants et des inspecteurs de l'éducation à l'égard de l'intégration de l'anglais comme langue étrangère en plus du français au niveau primaire. À cette fin, l'étude s'est appuyée sur un questionnaire, une entrevue semi-structurée et un échantillonnage aléatoire simple qui a couvert 60 participants. Les résultats ont révélé que la majorité des participants affichaient une attitude positive à l'égard de l'inclusion de l'anglais en parallèle avec le français. Ces attitudes sont régies par le statut de l'anglais, étant la langue du monde, et la langue de la technologie et du progrès. Cependant, encore une minorité des participants ont exprimé leur préférence pour maintenir la situation telle qu'elle est, le français étant la seule langue étrangère enseignée.

**Mots-clés:** Attitude; inspecteurs de l'éducation; anglais; français; enseignants

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language occupies a crucial position in national development priorities, and language choice remains a key policy issue in many societies, be they monolingual or multilingual. Language plays an important role in providing access to knowledge and learning, and its mastery contributes to educational success. Hornberger (1996) sums up the relationship between language and education in the following terms:

Education is the site where, on the one hand, larger social and political forces are reflected in the kinds of educational opportunities offered to speakers of different language varieties and, on the other, language use mediates their participation on other opportunities and ultimately, their potential contributions to the larger society (p.461).

In Algeria, different languages are used in people's daily life, each with its different varieties at play: The mother tongue known as *Algerian Arabic* is the form of Arabic used in daily life, a national language which is also the mother tongue of certain populations called *Tamazight* has recently gained official status (February, 2016). Another national and official language, *Modern Standard Arabic*, is used in formal contexts such as education, administration and media. *French* is the first foreign language of the country and more recently *English*, a language which has reached higher ground among Algerian youth is spoken in several countries across the globe and it is considered as the language of science, technology and economic progress. Nonetheless, there are many countries that still have issues dealing with this global language and Algeria is no exception.

In this complex situation, language choice in Algeria is of crucial importance in its economic, social and educational development and it requires a review of language policy and appropriate language planning to promote national development in the age of information and communication. In multilingual countries like Algeria, there is too much controversy over which foreign language to be used in schools, especially at primary level. However, today, there is a growing body of awareness among stakeholders that foreign languages used in education confront many barriers that may contribute to shortcomings on the outcomes of the education process.

The recent trends in the field of education in response to the demands of the globalized job market put a considerable focus on the development of what came to be known as ‘21st-century learning skills’ like critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and innovation, intra- and inter-cultural communication, effective oral and written communication, digital knowledge, and collaboration and teamwork (Scott, 2015; Suarta et al, 2017). These new educational expectations have added to the burden of language communication educators.

Additionally and in terms of language attitudes, “English has recently been gaining ground because of its international status and improved relations between Algeria and the U.S” (Belmihoub, 2012, p. 21). In Morocco, a survey of language attitudes (Marley, 2004) was conducted among teenagers and their teachers in public schools. Out of 156 pupil participants, 67.9% viewed English as more useful than French in the world. At the same time, among 25 teachers, 60% opined that science and technology should be taught in French, though 68% believed that English is more useful than French in the long run (Belmihoub, 2018).

This study aims at detecting the perceptions of teachers and educational inspectors towards the incorporation of English as an additional foreign language besides French at primary schools. Its importance lies in the learning of English as an additional foreign language and the extent to which it will be beneficial for pupils’ future goals and educational progress. The study at hand is centered upon the following research question: What sort of reaction do teachers and educational inspectors exhibit towards the inclusion of English as a second foreign in parallel with French at primary level? The objective of this study is to detect teachers’ and inspectors’ attitudes towards the initiative of teaching English and French simultaneously starting from the primary level in Algeria.

## **2. Literature Review**

In Algeria, at the primary level, pupils start studying French as a first foreign language in the third year of primary education, while English is learned starting from first year middle school until secondary school (Soreda, 2013). The French language is taught from the third year of primary school and continues to be studied in elementary, secondary and higher education, especially in scientific fields. French also had a great impact on the Algerian educational and administrative systems (Ennaji, 2005). However, in the last few years, the demand for the English language has been highly welcomed by the Algerian authorities (Fox, 2019).

English is the second foreign language in Algeria after French, taught from middle school (four years) until secondary school (three years). It was introduced at primary schools in 1993 as a new reform to regain the Algerian identity and reduce the use of French language as much as possible (Majumdar and Saad, 2005). It was implemented in a few primary schools before being discontinued because the majority of parents chose French instead of English (Rezig, 2011). Contrastively, today “English is used to convey prestige, is used for interpersonal communication in formal and professional setting, serve the regulative, creative/innovative functions, and instrumental function” (Belmihoub, 2017, p. 11).

The need for English has been imposed by the globalization system, media, science and technology; and especially after becoming the lingua franca of the world, used in politics, economics and tourism. Therefore, Belmihoub (2017) added that,

English in Algeria has come to be regarded as synonymous with modernization and the idealized lifestyle portrayed by the Hollywood entertainment industry. It serves as a way for the people to convey linguistic sophistication, membership in an elite group of intellectuals and celebrities, and a modern and open lifestyle consistent with that portrayed in American movies and television shows (p. 11).

In 2016, the Minister of higher education declared that the language of science and technology and academic research in Algeria is English instead of the French language (Fox, 2019). Since then, the Algerian

government is trying to develop the use of English at all levels starting from the primary level. Additionally, English is taught using a variety of learning activities in relation to the daily life context. This Approach was officially applied in Algerian education under the programme of Early Language Teaching in 2003 as an educational reform with a new textbook design that promotes multicultural aspects (Lachkar, 2012).

Algeria has started to focus more on teaching the English language at schools, but French remains the first foreign language spoken in the country. Despite this, “English, the second foreign language after French in Algeria, is most likely to replace French as it is in an insecure position, partly because of the government’s intention to drop it in favor of English” (Zerrouk, 2021, p. 35). In fact, teaching the English language at primary level is expected to be implemented one day or another, but those expectations have no official roots until today and they are still in hold.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Sample Population and Site of Research**

The present study covers 60 participants including 50 teachers, some of them are teachers of Arabic and still others of French, in addition to 10 educational inspectors. The sample population of this study has been randomly chosen from two different primary schools, namely ‘IbnMsaib’ and ‘Abouli’ situated in Tlemcen. This town is located in the North-West of Algeria and it is the place of the researchers’ residence.

#### **3.2 Research Tools**

To obtain data on the participants’ attitudes towards the strategy of teaching English as a foreign language in parallel with French at the primary level, two research tools were used. First, a mixed questionnaire including both open-ended and close-ended questions was administered to the teachers. Second, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the educational inspectors to check and reinforce the validity of the data obtained from the teacher participants.

#### **3.3 Research Design and Methods of Data Collection**

To avoid any bias, the original version of the questionnaire and interview were in English then, they had been translated into Arabic to facilitate the task for the participants to provide answers knowing that most of them lack proficiency in English. The questionnaire was handled to the participants during class sessions, and after obtaining permission from the directors of each primary school. However, the interview with directors was held after scheduling particular appointments with them. It took the researchers nearly three months to collect data from the participants engaged in the present study. The analysis of data was based on a mixed-method including both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

### 3.4 Findings

#### 3.4.1 Findings from the Teachers' Questionnaire

**Q1:** Today with globalization, what is the most appropriate foreign language to teach at primary level? Why?

**Table 1:** Teachers' opinions about the appropriate foreign language

Language	Number	Percentage
French only	5	10%
English only	15	30%
French and English	25	50%

When asked about their opinion about the most appropriate foreign language to teach at primary schools with today's globalization, Table1 above clearly shows that half of the sample population rating 50% opted for using both English and French as foreign languages at primary education whereas 30% preferred English as the sole foreign language to be taught and only 10% chose French.. When asked about the reasons behind their choice, most of them pointed out that English is an international language and the most widespread language throughout the world; thus it will allow pupils getting more opportunities in the future unlike French which usage is limited to the French speaking countries only. Others added that English is

the language of business, economy and technology; therefore, its mastery has become a must to deal with communities worldwide. The minority respondents who selected French are teachers of this language and they argued that pupils' parents are more familiar with the French language than English because of its deep rootedness in the Algerian linguistic scene following the long term colonization.

**Q2:** Which foreign language do you think is quite easy to learn in class? Is it French or English?

**Table 2:** Teachers' opinions about the easiest foreign language to learn at primary school

Language	Number	Percentage
French	20	40%
English	30	60%

Here, the teachers' respondents were asked to specify which foreign language is quite easy to learn in class. Through the table above, 40% of the teachers opined that French is easy to deal with inside the classroom whereas 60% of them selected English. ~~Those who opted for French are teachers of French and those who selected English are mainly teachers of Arabic.~~

**Q3:** What foreign language do you think your pupils are able to use easily in class?

**Table 3:** The easiest foreign language to be used in class

Language	Number	Percentage
French	20	40%
English	30	60%

Surprisingly, when the respondents were asked about the easiest foreign language the pupils will be able to use in class, the same results were obtained; that is 20 participants rating 40% opted for French while the majority rating 60% chose English.

**Q4:** Is teaching English at primary level going to be beneficial or unbeneficial to the child?

**Table 4:** Teachers’ attitudes towards the benefits of teaching English at primary level

<b>Number</b>		<b>Percentage</b>
Beneficial	35	70%
Unbeneficial	15	35%

This question attempts to determine the teachers’ attitudes towards whether teaching English at primary level is going to be beneficial or not to the pupils. The results mentioned in table 4 above clearly demystify that the majority of the respondents rating 70% revealed that it will be of great benefit to the young learners whereas the rest rating 30% considered this language as unbeneficial. This particular category of the respondents have positive attitudes towards French rather than English because, as already stated, they teach French.

**Q5:** What is your opinion with regard to the integration of English along with French in the educational sector?

This is a very important item of the questionnaire as it is meant to directly measure the teachers’ attitudes towards the implementation of English as a first foreign language in parallel with French. A teacher whose teaching experience was 20 years said “ *now, with globalization, learning English has become a must. I am for this initiative; the child’s memory is still Fresh at a fairly early age, so he is able to learn two or more languages simultaneously*”. Two other teachers opined that “ *French is no more useful for technological and scientific fields compared to English; that is why the implementation of English starting from the primary school will help*



learners years later to get better job opportunities and to deal with the external world". Still other teachers proclaimed "French is the language of the ex-colonizer; it should be banned and be completely replaced by English, a language far more effective for the future development and economic growth of the country". However, some teachers reported, "French is deeply rooted in Algeria because of colonization and our dialect is full of French loanwords, parents and their children will face problems with the English language".

**Q6:** What is your viewpoint about the future of English in the Algerian educational sector?

Here, the majority respondents said, "we seriously think that Algeria, at a national level, should abandon the French language and adopt English as the first foreign language. Actually, French no more serves the Maghreb; teaching English would bring more and better opportunities for the future of North Africans than teaching French". Other teachers claimed, "Algeria is a multilingual country, and learning English alongside French won't be a hindrance; on the contrary, it will bring fruitful results and open new horizons to this new generation that has opened her eyes on technology". Still another teacher said, "In order for this initiative to be effective, teachers of English need serious training and the syllabus needs to be well-designed and congruent with the learners' needs, otherwise, it will fail".

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### **3.4.2 Findings from the Interview with Educational Inspectors**

In this semi-structured interview, educational inspectors expressed their attitudes towards the initiative of teaching English in parallel with French at primary level. It is of paramount importance to mention that the great majority of the educational inspectors were 'Arabophones' as opposed to the teachers who constituted a mixture between 'Francophones' and 'Arabophones'.

**Q1:** Are you with or against the idea of teaching English instead of French in primary schools?

As far as the professional and academic attitudes towards replacing French with English in primary schools is concerned, two educational inspectors replied: *“as a former French teacher and an inspector, I am with the idea of adding English as a second foreign language with French”*. They showed big support towards the idea. Four other inspectors reported *“we prefer the strategy of incorporating English within the syllabus since the former has a limited usage and no more highly needed to communicate with the external world”*.

**Q2:** What are the advantages and disadvantages of this strategy?

To discover the reasons of being with or against the integration of English at primary level, inspectors were asked to list some advantages and disadvantages about this strategy. An inspector declared, *“this change will yield positive outcomes and its advantages will appear with time, not immediately. The possible hindrances may be encountered with parents who are not acquainted with English and consequently, they will not be able to aid their children learn this language at home. The knowledge and the abilities parents have about English are very limited in Algeria since most of them received their education either in Arabic or French”*. Another inspector announced the following words, *“in the beginning, this change will be difficult but its advantages lie in the fact that we are going to develop the language of the world and pupils, when they learn it from primary level, they will benefit from this in the future, the disadvantages will be always about training teachers for that task”*.

Still other inspectors revealed, *“this new generation shows more interest towards the English language rather because of the advent of technology. This implementation may help not only the Algerian educational sector to flourish, but also the whole Algerian society to keep up with the world development. It can also help to step forward from the dependency on the French language only. As for the disadvantages, it will be something new for pupils and for their parents”*. Then, most inspectors carried on saying *“We do not neglect the fact that Algeria is also characterized by diglossia and our pupils face a kind of linguistic shock when they enter school where the language of instruction differs from their*

*mother tongue; the pupils will be confronted to three different languages and this implementation won't be an easy task". Another inspector claimed "I am not worried about such an implementation since most Algerians are exposed to Arabic channels that broadcast movies and cartoons in English through Nile sat'.*

**Q3:** Is there anything official as far as this initiative is concerned?

When this question was posed, most inspectors provided a negative reply. They revealed, *"there were some news and some promises about this initiative but nothing official has been declared yet"*. Indeed, there are no official news or documents until now that tackle the implementation of English at primary schools in Algeria. On the flip side, three inspectors claim the same statement and thus, said *"hopefully, it will be applied in the near future. They continue by stating that "the dissemination of the English language in primary education! Certainly, according to the statements provided by the Ministry of Education and the President Tebboune"*. Another inspector declared, *"yes, why not. Because back in 1991 the English language was indeed implemented in some primary schools and it was successful, so yes and why not definitely and hopefully in the near future!"*

#### **4. Discussion**

The results of this study revealed that the majority respondents, especially the so-called 'Arabophones' expressed a great deal of comfort towards teaching these foreign languages simultaneously. They favoured English as a language of the future to such a point that they thought of the complete abolishment of French in the field of education. The teacher respondents also admitted that English is easy to learn at primary level especially with the fact that the pupils are still young and are able to acquire some English words when watching cartoons in English via TV channels; Nevertheless, some teachers, especially teachers of French declined this idea; their attitudes seemed negative towards this initiative. This can be explained by the deep rootedness of the French language, which is still pervading the mother tongues of most Algerians after 60 years of independence. In Algeria, the uncontested concurrence that English should

be more outstanding as a language of science and technology raises questions about the status of French. Belmihoub (2018, p.161) correctly says, “I argue that including English as a main language of instruction does not necessarily exclude French”.

The results also revealed that the majority respondents opined that this strategy would provide better opportunities and open new horizons to the pupils in the future. Yet, they had some fears and doubts concerning the syllabus design and that some parents cannot help their children at home because they lack proficiency in English.

Moreover, the results disclosed that the great majority of the teacher respondents expressed positive views towards English itself. The reason that comes in the forefront is that English is the language of life and global development, in contrary with French, the ex-coloniser language which has left painful memories among the population. This really matches with Zerrouk’s view who said that English is most likely to replace French as this latter is in an insecure position, partly because of the government’s intention to omit it in favor of English” (Zerrouk, 2021). Most of the respondents supported this idea and declared that it is the right decision to teach English in primary schools, even though the process of English teaching at primary schools may face some obstacles and challenges.

The respondents expressed their satisfaction regarding this initiative and seem to hold English in high esteem, and that this language will be one of the best challenges ever because it will make education rise to the best, for English is the language of globalization, openness to the external world and technology. It also seems that English has recently been gaining ground because of its international status (Belmihoub, 2012). Today, the demand for English has raised and has been highly welcomed not only by the Algerian authorities (Fox, 2019), but also by the Algerian population itself. The demand for opening private schools where foreign languages are taught especially English is more and more increasing and many Algerian youth are searching for diplomas in English in order to carry on their studies abroad.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study has been to measure the attitudes of teachers and educational inspectors towards the inclusion of English as an additional foreign language in parallel with French at primary level. It is worth noting that the majority of the participants who have supported this idea, were teachers of Arabic, unlike the teachers of French who have rather expressed negative attitudes towards it. Additionally, most of the respondents have agreed with this change, stating that it is very important for pupils to learn English, for it is the language of globalization, technology and it promotes better future opportunities to them.

Undoubtedly, making pupils learn English and French simultaneously is a strategy that has no official basis and its implementation seems rather fuzzy for the moment. Such initiative is a shared responsibility between all members involved in education, starting from the child's home environment and social context to the school and ministry of education. Indeed, if the initiative is going to be implemented, children need to be exposed to some English before reaching school age and in this case, the role of parents remains a key factor in yielding a satisfactory linguistic level in primary education.

In fact, such initiative needs to go through a whole language planning in order to be successfully implemented. Language planners should, therefore, promote linguistic plans to overcome the implementation of English at primary level because what is at stake is the role of French and English in the educational sphere. They should also review and modify the content of the language lessons offered, and they might take into consideration the efficiency of authority strategies to favour the use of English as a modern language.

This study has its limitations in that the number of the respondents and the sites of research are quite limited to provide generalisations about the issue tackled. The possible pedagogical problems that may be faced regarding the implementation of another foreign language at primary schools need to be taken into account. Another thorny issue that needs

deeper scrutiny is why it is so important to insert English at primary level while it is already taught at middle school in the Algerian education sector.

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