



Francophonie and Anglicization in Algeria: Between Colonial Heritage and Strategic Realignment

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Abstract

This article explores Algeria's evolving language policy, focusing on the strategic replacement of French with English in higher education. Drawing on a qualitative study conducted with university faculty in both French and English departments, the paper examines whether this shift is driven by pedagogical needs or political motives. The findings reveal a sharp divide: French professors see the reform as a symbolic rupture with the colonial past, while English professors view it as a pragmatic adaptation to global academic norms. The study highlights the role of language in shaping identity, scientific access, and national positioning. Ultimately, it questions whether Algeria's linguistic pivot reflects a genuine modernization effort or a politically charged realignment.

Keywords: Language policy, Colonial legacy, English Medium Instruction, Francophonie, Linguistic identity.

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Résumé

Cet article examine l'évolution de la politique linguistique en Algérie, en particulier le remplacement progressif du français par l'anglais dans l'enseignement supérieur. À partir d'une étude qualitative menée auprès d'enseignants universitaires des départements de français et d'anglais, il interroge les motivations de cette réforme : s'agit-il d'une nécessité pédagogique ou d'un choix principalement politique ? Les résultats révèlent une fracture nette : les enseignants de français perçoivent cette transition comme une rupture symbolique avec le passé colonial, tandis que ceux d'anglais la considèrent comme un ajustement pragmatique aux normes académiques mondiales. L'étude met en lumière les liens entre langue, identité professionnelle, accès au savoir et positionnement géopolitique. Elle soulève in fine la question suivante : cette bascule linguistique reflète-t-elle une modernisation réelle ou une reconfiguration idéologique et politique ?

Mots clés : Politique linguistique, Héritage colonial, Enseignement en anglais, Francophonie, Identité linguistique.

Introduction

Language policy in Algeria has become a highly charged and symbolic terrain, reflecting the country's colonial past, current geopolitical alignments, and aspirations for global integration. At the heart of this evolving linguistic landscape lies a fundamental tension: the enduring legacy of the French language versus the strategic appeal of English in a rapidly globalizing world. For decades, French has held a privileged position in Algerian education, administration, and intellectual life, a status rooted in the deep imprint of colonialism. As Ghouali and Bouabdallah (2024) note, French continues to “permeate daily conversations, administration, media, business, and scientific research” (p. 25), making it more than a mere communication tool; it is a cultural and institutional pillar.

Yet recent developments suggest that this historical balance is shifting. Algerian authorities have announced a gradual but determined effort to replace French with English as the primary medium of instruction in university-level scientific and technical fields. Simultaneously, English is being introduced earlier in the school system and promoted as a gateway to scientific knowledge, innovation, and global competitiveness (Arab News, 2022). This policy pivot has sparked a national debate. While some applaud the shift as a necessary modernization aligned with global linguistic trends, others decry it as a politically motivated rupture with France, what some analysts call a “quiet divorce” (Caulcutt, 2022).

This controversy raises critical questions. Is the push for English a reflection of educational and scientific necessity, or is it primarily a symbolic move meant to reassert national sovereignty and distance the country from its colonial past? In other words, is Algeria adopting English because it is *useful*, or because French has become *unacceptable*?

In this paper, we aim to explore this tension by examining both the historical context of language in Algeria and the current policy discourse. We further investigate how this macro-level shift is experienced at the micro-level by university faculty. Specifically, we address two research questions:

- **RQ1:** Is Algeria's shift from French to English in higher education primarily politically motivated, or is it justified on scientific and pedagogical grounds?
- **RQ2:** How do university faculty in French and English departments perceive this language policy change in terms of cultural identity and practical utility?

To answer these questions, we begin with a historical and contextual review of the roles of French and English in Algeria's education system. We then present findings from a qualitative study involving university professors from both language departments, highlighting how professional identity, perceived language utility, and political perceptions shape their views. Through this dual approach, historical and empirical, we seek to provide a nuanced understanding of whether the current linguistic realignment represents a forward-looking educational strategy or a politically driven act of linguistic decolonization.

Historical Background: French and English in Algeria

Algeria's linguistic landscape is rooted in over a century of French colonial rule (1830–1962). During this period, the French administration aggressively promoted its language and culture, aiming to “Frenchify” the education system and public life (Ghouali & Bouabdallah, 2024; Habri & Hamzaoui, 2024). Arabic, the language of the majority, was systematically sidelined. As Ghouali and Bouabdallah (2024) note, French “left a significant imprint ... permeating daily conversations, administration, media, business, and scientific research in universities” (p.25). By independence in 1962, French had become the lingua franca of the elite

and the intelligentsia, despite the nationalist regime's post-independence goal of Arabization (Miliani, 2012; Mostari, 2004).

After independence, the Algerian government launched an ambitious Arabization program. Arabic was declared the official language, Tamazight later recognized as well, and new Arabic-medium schools and administration were established (Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023). The intent was to restore national identity and undo colonial legacies. However, this process proved incomplete. Miliani (2012) and Benhamlaoui and Benzadri (2024) document that the rapid Arabization efforts faced severe challenges: shortages of qualified teachers, lack of suitable materials, and resistance from a population still accustomed to French instruction. As a result, French remained firmly entrenched in universities, especially in scientific, technical, and medical faculties, where Arabization was especially difficult (Rezig, 2011). By the early 21st century, Algeria had effectively become functionally bilingual, with French often dominant in higher education and research despite Arabic's official status.

English was introduced gradually, initially as a secondary foreign language in schools. Its role grew slowly: English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English courses appeared in many university programs (Benabdallah, 2023; Hamzaoui, 2021). Still, English remained a minority language compared to French, mainly confined to language departments and limited use in technical fields. Many Algerians, especially in academia and business, continued to learn French because of historical ties and because a vast body of knowledge was available in French.

Politically, language has always been sensitive. Outbreaks of protest or diplomatic rows with France often rekindled debates over French. French presidents' visits have occasionally been marked by symbolic gestures: for example, when President Macron visited in 2022, the Algerian lectern's sign was in English ("Presidency of the Republic") rather than French, a move some analysts called a deliberate message that "there is nothing special about French; it's a language like any other". As Caulcutt (2022) reported, former French ambassador Xavier Driencourt observed that this choice of language was "very deliberate," signaling to both Algeria and France that "the language of the colonizer" was being de-emphasized (Caulcutt, 2022, p. 159).

1. Language in School and University Systems

In today's schools and universities, French remains prominent but contested. After early Arabization, French regained a foothold due to pragmatic needs: many scientific and technical textbooks and journals are in French, and many faculty were trained in French. Thus even as Arabic expanded, French medium instruction continued or was reintroduced, particularly in higher education (Rezig, 2011). In 2012, for example, around 90% of first-year university students began their studies in French or a mix of French and Arabic, according to Education Ministry data (Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023). The biomedical, engineering, and natural science fields especially relied on French literature and pedagogy. However, by the 2020s a new generation of leaders began questioning French's place.

President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has been a vocal advocate for English. In 2022 he stated plainly that "the French language is war booty, but English is the international language". Soon after, he ordered English lessons in primary schools and promoted English in science classes. This policy of "Englishization" of education was framed as modernizing and liberating: English, the global lingua franca, would connect Algerian youth to international science and commerce. Notably, Tebboune's rhetoric often contrasted English's practicality with French's colonial baggage. In private remarks and public communications, officials emphasized career advantages in STEM fields from English mastery.

However, implementation has been uneven. In primary schools, English was phased in starting in third grade in 2022 (Ghouali & Bouabdallah, 2024). In universities, the Ministry of Higher Education has set targets for shifting science and medicine courses to English.

Preparatory training for teachers and pilot programs have begun. Yet many professors and students still have limited English proficiency, making the transition challenging. Critics warn of a sudden “race against the clock” to hire qualified English-speaking instructors – indeed, 5,000 teachers were rapidly recruited for English instruction within two months in 2022.

Despite challenges, the trend is clear: Algeria is systematically boosting English tuition at the expense of French. In one striking move, the Algerian Football Federation even “Arabized” its internal communications and is promoting English usage instead of French in official documents. These steps coincide with a broader national agenda: as one government statement put it, Algerian institutions are “officially abandoning French in favor of Arabic and English in their official and administrative documents ... amid rising tensions with France”. Analysts have noted that this linguistic pivot accelerated after 2019, reflecting a deliberate realignment (Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023).

2. Political Tensions and Linguistic Consequences

Language policy in Algeria cannot be disentangled from politics. The state’s shifting relationship with France has repeatedly influenced language debates. Tensions over contested historical memory, visas, economic relations and national pride frequently spill into language symbols. For instance, diplomatic crises have coincided with pushes to downplay French: during a rift with Paris, Algerian officials publicly equated use of French with lingering colonial influence. After France criticized Algeria on issues such as migration and memory law in 2021-2023, the Algerian foreign ministry and media routinely described French policies as neo-colonial aggression, while emphasizing Algerian sovereignty. In this charged context, reducing French-language presence is seen by many in Algiers as reclaiming independence. As Caulcutt (2022) observed, even seemingly minor acts (like the language on a lectern) are interpreted as symbolic messages to the French government and to Algerians that French is no longer privileged.

This “quiet divorce” from France is reciprocated by French officials expressing regret or alarm. In 2024, France’s Interior Minister blamed Algeria’s language policy for straining ties, noting that wanting to “relinquish the French language in favor of English in schools” was aggravating the bilateral crisis.

French commentators frame the Algerian shift as a rejection of the historical relationship and worry about losing influence in North Africa. Meanwhile, Algerian officials typically emphasize practical benefits: they highlight English as the language of science and international communication (Arab News, 2022). They also underscore Algeria’s right to linguistic freedom, arguing that continuing reliance on French is a form of cultural dependency (Arab News, 2022). The tension between these perspectives encapsulates the central question: is the Anglicization drive a strategic break from a difficult past, or a genuine step for educational advancement?

3. The Global Role of English in Science and Development

Beyond politics, there is a global context to consider. English has become the de facto language of science, technology, and business. Approximately 1.5 billion people speak English worldwide, and about 80% of published scientific papers are in English (Statista, 2024; Saidoun & Bensemmane, 2024). For non-English countries, English medium instruction (EMI) is often viewed as a pathway to modern education and economic competitiveness (Macaro et al., 2018; Touhami & Bakar, 2024). In Africa and Asia, many former French colonies have adopted bilingual

or English-oriented models (e.g. Rwanda and Mauritius) to attract foreign investment and to improve research collaboration.

In Algeria, proponents argue that strong English skills will help students and researchers participate in international conferences, access cutting-edge knowledge, and publish in higher-impact journals. They claim that decades of emphasis on French have isolated Algeria scientifically; many key texts and software resources are now only available in English. Moreover, English is linked with ICT and global business, which Algerian youth increasingly aspire to enter. Thus, raising English proficiency could potentially boost national development (Benhamlaoui & Benzadri, 2024).

Critics, however, point to practical difficulties. They question whether the educational system can support such a rapid switch, asking how many qualified English-speaking teachers are available, and whether students, especially in rural areas, can cope without strong proficiency. There is also concern about linguistic imperialism: replacing French with English may simply substitute one global power language for another. Some scholars warn that without a realistic plan, the policy could worsen educational outcomes if content understanding is lost in translation (Mizab, 2024; Mostari, 2004). In sum, the move toward English taps into debates about modernization and identity that are playing out globally in post-colonial contexts (Arar, 2020).

4. Methodology

To explore how these tensions are reflected on the ground, we conducted a qualitative study at the University of Oum El Bouaghi in northeastern Algeria. Our participants were ten faculty members, five from the French department (specializing in French language and literature) and five from the English department (English language and literature). This purposive sampling ensured we captured perspectives from those directly invested in either language tradition. The study was approved by the university ethics board, and participants gave informed consent.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews conducted in late 2024. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was held in Arabic (or occasionally in French/English if preferred by the participant). Interview questions covered perceptions of the new language policy, attitudes toward French and English, and reflections on identity and career needs. For example, we asked: “Do you see the policy to switch to English as motivated by politics or by educational needs?” and “How does language relate to your professional identity and to the future of your students?”

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. We analyzed the data using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two authors independently coded the transcripts, identifying recurring themes. We then met to reconcile codes and organize them into higher-order themes, focusing on comparisons between the French- and English-department respondents. Representative quotes were selected to illustrate each theme. For confidentiality, we refer to interviewees by generic identifiers (e.g., “French Dept. Professor 1”). In addition to qualitative analysis, we constructed a simple quantitative summary: each faculty member rated key attitudes on a 1–5 scale, enabling us to generate a comparative table (Table 1). We also conceptualized their responses in terms of “identity attachment” versus “perceived language utility,” which we illustrate in a conceptual graph (Figure 1).

5. Findings: Faculty Perspectives on Language Shift

5.1. Theme 1: Language and Professional Identity

A consistent theme was the strong emotional connection faculty have to their subjects’ language. French Department professors often described French as integral to their identity as scholars and intellectuals. For instance, one French professor commented, “French is part of who

we are, it carries our literary heritage and academic rigor.” This sentiment reflects the deep cultural imprint of French in Algerian higher education, especially in humanities and social sciences (Ghouali & Bouabdallah, 2024). In contrast, English Department professors tended to frame English as part of their scholarly toolkit but not central to national identity. One English lecturer noted, “English is important for my teaching and research, but it’s not my mother tongue or culture; it’s a tool for communication.”

When asked about national identity, French faculty overwhelmingly affirmed that French still symbolized Algeria’s modern identity, whereas English faculty often said Algeria’s identity is ultimately rooted in Arabic and Berber heritage. For example, a French professor said, “Many Algerians who learned French feel proud that we mastered a global language. It’s part of our identity as educated Algerians.” Meanwhile, an English professor remarked, “Our core identity comes from Arabic culture; English helps us engage internationally but doesn’t replace that identity.” The difference suggests a split: French teachers view their language as a heritage marker (consistent with the notion of Francophonie as cultural capital), whereas English teachers see English more instrumentally.

This contrast is quantified in Table 1 (below). On a scale of 1–5 (where 5=strong attachment), French faculty gave an average 4.5 score to their identity attachment to French, versus only 2.0 for their attachment to English. English faculty showed the opposite pattern (identity score ~4.0 for English, 1.7 for French). These patterns are plotted conceptually in Figure 1, which shows a cluster of French faculty (blue circles) at high identity/low utility for English, and English faculty (red triangles) at high identity/utility for English.

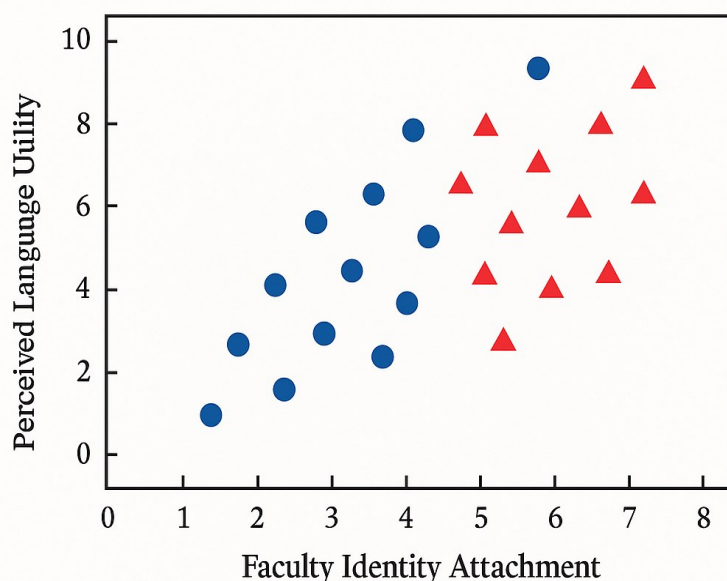


Figure 1. Conceptual scatterplot illustrating faculty identity attachment (x-axis) and perceived language utility (y-axis) from interview data: Each point represents one faculty member. Blue circles represent French Department; red triangles represent English Department. (Note: axes are qualitative scales 0-10; diagram is illustrative on-

5.2. Theme 2: Perceived Utility of English and French

While identity divided along departmental lines, all faculty recognized the practical importance of English. French Department respondents, though nostalgic for French, admitted that English has become almost indispensable in science and international academia. One said, “Even though I teach French, I cannot ignore English anymore: our students need it for research

and for job opportunities.” English faculty naturally echoed this, often describing English as the language of global science and technology. “Without English, Algerian research will remain invisible,” said one English lecturer. The notion that English confers access to modern knowledge and development resources was widely accepted.

This view was reflected in our attitude scores (Table 1): on average, English faculty rated the value of English for education very high (4.6/5) and the value of French low (2.1/5). French faculty rated English somewhat lower (3.0/5) but still acknowledged its importance, whereas they rated French higher (4.2/5). These results show that English is broadly seen as valuable, even by French faculty, though not universally loved. For instance, one French teacher cautioned that “introducing English is sensible in theory, but we must first ensure students and teachers can handle it,” reflecting concerns about readiness.

5.3. Theme 3: Political Motives vs. Pedagogical Justification

Interviewees were split on whether the shift was driven mainly by politics or by pragmatic reasons. Many French professors were skeptical, viewing the policy as largely political. One remarked cynically, “Every time Algeria has a fight with France, officials say ‘drop French,’ as if switching a language can solve diplomacy.” Another said, “This is about showing we are independent; otherwise, we would see a slow integration of English, not this sudden break.” These voices argued that the change was presented as modernization, but that its timing and rhetoric (e.g. calling French “war booty” arabnews.com) pointed to an anti-colonial stance.

English professors, by contrast, were more likely to endorse a mixed motivation. They acknowledged that geopolitical factors loom large (one said, “I won’t pretend politics aren’t involved”), but emphasized that scientific competitiveness is equally important. One English lecturer summed it up: “Yes, it’s political to some extent, but we also need this. It’s pragmatic: our students must speak English to succeed in global science.” Several English teachers noted that even if political will initiated the policy, it could yield real benefits.

Reflecting these views, our scale of beliefs shows French faculty scored higher on “policy is politically motivated” (mean 4.0/5) than English faculty (2.0/5). Conversely, English faculty saw the policy as scientifically justified (mean 4.2/5) while French faculty were less convinced (mean 2.8/5). We interpret this to mean French professors lean toward a cynical view of the policy’s origins, whereas English professors appreciate its rationale for advancing research and global integration.

5.4. Theme 4: Challenges and Resistance

Both groups reported concerns about implementation. A common issue was the lack of English proficiency among faculty and students. “Transitioning medical courses to English overnight is unrealistic,” said a French lecturer. An English lecturer echoed, “We still have many colleagues who struggle to teach in English. More training is needed.” Many worried that rushed policy might compromise content comprehension, especially in earlier years. Such challenges, they feared, could undermine education quality before any potential gains.

Some faculty also expressed resistance rooted in the fear of French marginalization. French teachers worried that their own discipline might decline: one said, “If our students lose ground in French, French studies itself might wither.” They felt that French, as a scholarly language, should not be abandoned simply. Meanwhile, English teachers noted a potential equity issue: students from poorer backgrounds, who had little exposure to English, might be left behind. This point is crucial for policymakers aiming to be equitable.

Despite misgivings, most interviewees agreed that a gradual, supported shift could work. Both groups suggested phased implementation and continued French instruction alongside English initially. Some explicitly recommended bilingual curricula and better teacher training, implying that success depends on careful planning rather than ideology alone.

6. Comparative Data Table

Table 1 summarizes key attitudes of the two faculty groups, drawn from both our qualitative coding and the attitude ratings (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Attitude or Belief	French Dept. (Mean 1-5)	English Dept. (Mean 1-5)
<i>Value of French for academic instruction</i>	4.2	2.1
<i>Value of English for academic instruction</i>	3.0	4.6
<i>Support for English-first policy</i>	2.4	4.8
<i>View policy as politically motivated</i>	4.0	2.0
<i>View policy as scientifically justified</i>	2.8	4.2
<i>Identity attachment to French (cultural)</i>	4.5	1.7
<i>Identity attachment to English (globalist)</i>	2.0	4.0

Table 1. Comparison of attitude scores between French and English department faculty. Values are mean responses on a 1–5 Likert scale (higher means stronger agreement or greater perceived importance) based on interview questions and follow-up surveys.

Table 1 reinforces the themes above: French faculty gave high scores for French’s value and identity ties, but low scores to English benefits, whereas English faculty showed the opposite bias. Both groups did recognize English’s growing importance, though to different extents. The stark difference in “support for policy” (2.4 vs. 4.8) highlights the controversy: English teachers largely support the change, while French teachers are mostly opposed.

Conclusion

Our investigation reveals that Algeria’s language policy shift is complex and multifaceted. Historically, French has dominated Algerian higher education as a colonial legacy. Recent policy changes seek to introduce English in a major way, arguably at French’s expense. Faculty responses show that personal and collective identities are deeply entwined with language: French department professors feel a sense of heritage loss, whereas English professors feel an opportunity for progress.

The data suggest that French is indeed being marginalized in favor of English, confirming our hypothesis. President Tebboune’s declaration that replacing French with English is “the right decision” resonates with English department faculty, who see clear advantages in science and global integration. In contrast, French faculty largely interpret the shift as politically motivated, aimed at breaking symbolic ties with France (Politico, 2022) rather than purely advancing pedagogy. This division reflects broader national tensions: while the government touts modernization and independence from colonial hangovers, many educated Algerians worry about losing access to Francophone culture and the educational resources in French.

Ultimately, Algeria’s experiment will depend on implementation. Both sets of faculty emphasized the need for training and gradual transition. If the government can mitigate the challenges, improving English teacher training and ensuring students’ language support, this policy might strengthen Algeria’s scientific engagement. However, if it is pursued as a mere political statement without resources, it risks academic setbacks and social resentment. The outcome will reveal whether Anglicization becomes a strategic boost or a symbolic rupture in Algeria’s educational heritage.

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