

# The Shift from French to English in Algeria: A Welcome Change or a Controversial Move?

Dr. Wafia TIHAL

Ecole Normale Supérieure de Bouzareah -ENSB-Algeria

E-mail: [tihal.wafia@ensb.dz](mailto:tihal.wafia@ensb.dz)

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## Abstract

This study explores Algeria's transition from French to English, a policy choice that has generated considerable discussion. Considering the country's colonial past and its increasing integration into the global community, English has been progressively incorporated into the education system, beginning in the first year of middle school and extending to primary schools in 2022. To examine public perceptions of this transition, the study employed a qualitative research approach, collecting data through an online survey administered via Google Forms. A total of 132 young respondents participated in the study, responding to a number of semi-open and closed questions. The findings reveal that most participants support the shift, viewing it as an essential step toward language independence. They believe it is high time Algeria relied less on French because English offers more opportunities in education, science, and global communication. To help make the transition smoother, the study suggests training teachers, updating outdated curricula, and ensuring there are enough resources to support English learning at all levels.

**Keywords:** language policy, linguistic shift, English education, public perception, French influence

## 1. Introduction

### *1.1 Statement of the Problem*

Algeria's language policy has changed many times over the years. For more than 130 years, French colonization had a deep impact on the country, as the French government tried to replace the Algerian language, culture, and identity with its own. Algeria made the decision to give Arabic its proper standing again. Nonetheless, French continued to be widely used in different domains, and for a long time it was regarded as the nation's first foreign language.

Recently, English has started occupying an important place in Algeria's educational system and public life due to globalization and the increasing role of English in fields such as science, technology, and business. Young Algerians, in particular, are so eager to learn English that some have started using it in their daily lives even before official policies changed. As a result, the Algerian government has been promoting an English language policy by introducing English in primary schools in 2022 and is considering prioritizing it over French as the country's primary foreign language.

This research investigates Algeria's new language policy by examining the switch from French to English in schools and in society, questioning the underlying causes for this shift, the challenges that have emerged, and the potential recommendations to overcome obstacles that may hinder its success.

-How do Algerians perceive the shift from French to English in education and society? To explore this issue in depth, the study also considers the following sub-questions: What were the causes of this shift?

What challenges arose during this transition??

What are the potential solutions that might aid in overcoming those challenges?

### *1.2 Language Policy in Algeria*

Algeria's language policy has experienced changes throughout its history, heavily influenced by certain historical events and social changes. During the colonial period (1830–1962), often referred to as the French Domination Period, the French language was imposed in all aspects of public life, including administration and education, while Arabic was deliberately marginalized in order to weaken Algerian cultural identity and promote French values (Djebbari, 2018).

When Algeria gained independence in 1962, the government introduced the Arabization policy so as to restore Arabic as the country's official language. French was gradually phased out from schools, government institutions, and the media. However, despite these efforts, French remained widely used, particularly in technical and scientific fields where it continued to hold a strong position (Abid-Houcine, 2007).

By the 1990s, social and political movements had pushed for the linguistic recognition of Tamazight (Berber), resulting in its recognition as a national language in 2002, and later, in 2016, it was declared an official language. Despite these developments, French retained a

significant role in higher education, research, and business. This resulted in a bilingual reality in which Arabic dominated government affairs, but French remained indispensable in many professional and academic contexts (Belmihoud, 2017). At the same time, interest in learning foreign languages grew, and English started to gain ground, especially in education, science, and business, despite the persistent investment of France in maintaining the presence of the French language through scholarships and educational initiatives. It is significant to highlight that the United States played an active role in promoting English through exchange programs and collaborations with Algerian institutions. Many Algerians viewed English as more modern and globally relevant, which contributed to its rising status despite ongoing governmental efforts to preserve the use of French (Abid-Houcine, 2007).

English was already noticeable in Algeria in the early 1980s. In 1984, a British Council report recognized it as the country's third language, emphasizing its importance for higher education, international training, and technology. At that time, many British teachers were working in Algeria, and the government wanted to hire more. However, financial challenges and visa-related issues complicated the process. English was also used in institutions such as *Radio Television Algérienne*. Some people in Algeria believed that giving priority to English as the main foreign language would be very beneficial for education and thus national progress, especially because it was the dominant language in science and technology. English language education also benefited from support provided by both Britain and the US. The British Council took the lead in teacher training, awarding scholarships, and facilitating English language broadcasts, whereas the US Embassy promoted cultural programs and operated an American school. However, the outbreak of the civil war in the 1990s diverged many such efforts, although a few scholarships were still available through the US (Belmihoud, 2018).

By the early 2000s, English programs in Algeria had expanded further. In 2013, the U.S. Embassy and Berlitz Center introduced a free English program open to all age groups. Between 2009 and 2012, an oil company partnered with the British Council to train 69 Algerian English teachers. Additionally, in 2012, ETS Global held a seminar on English language learning and testing for Algerian businesses and educational institutions. As English gained more relevance, Algeria, once heavily influenced by the French language, began to experience a linguistic shift (Belmihoud, 2018).

In recent years, this shift has become more pronounced. With the presidency of Abdelmadjid Tebboune, Algeria has been taking important steps to decrease dependence on the French language. An important piece of that policy came in 2022 when English was introduced at the primary level. That was part of a greater scheme to strengthen Algeria's international presence. Given the dominance of English in science, technology, and business, this is largely considered a strategic step to facilitate Algeria's integration into the global economy and international community (Belmihoud, 2018).

## 2. Method

The study used a qualitative methodology to investigate Algerian students' opinions regarding the switch from French to English. Data was collected using a Google Forms survey that

included mostly open-ended and a few closed-ended questions. The survey was shared with students at ENSB and posted in various student groups on Facebook to reach a wider audience. A total of 132 Algerians participated, most of whom were students between 18 and 25 years old. The participants came from different regions of Algeria, and some were Algerian students studying in Turkey. Qualitative responses were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurrent patterns and viewpoints. Descriptive statistics were also used to summarize responses to the closed-ended questions, providing a general idea of the demographic profiles and measurable data on language attitudes.

### 3. Results

In response to the research question, “*How do Algerians perceive the shift from French to English in education and society?*”, this study collected data through a questionnaire consisting of three sections.

The first section of the questionnaire focused on *demographic information*. The findings indicate that 90% of the participants were between 18 and 25 years old, 7% were aged 26 to 35, and 3% were 45 or older. This indicates that the majority of the respondents belong to the younger generation. Regarding their level of education, the results show that 50% reported holding a Bachelor’s degree, 17% a Master’s degree, and 33% stated that they are still pursuing university studies. These results suggest that the participants can be considered aware of the current situation, indicating that they are capable of critically evaluating the language shift.

The second section of the questionnaire focused on *Language Usage and Preference*. Regarding the first question, “*Which language do you use most in daily life?*” the results are best illustrated in the following figure:

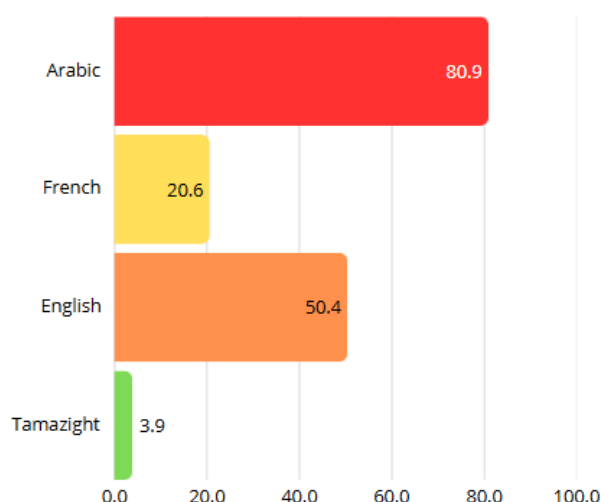


Figure 1. Language(s) mostly used in daily life

As displayed in the figure above, the findings reveal that the overwhelming majority of

participants (80.9%) use Arabic in their daily lives, pointing out that ‘Arabic’ here does not refer to Classical or Modern Standard Arabic but rather to Algerian Arabic, commonly known as ‘Derja.’ Additionally, 50.4% reported using English, while 20.6% indicated that they use French in their daily lives. A few participants (3.9%) stated that they use Tamazight daily. Since participants could select multiple languages, the total percentage exceeds the number of respondents.

In response to the question: “*In which language do you feel most comfortable communicating in formal settings (education, work, administration)?*”, the findings are illustrated as follows:

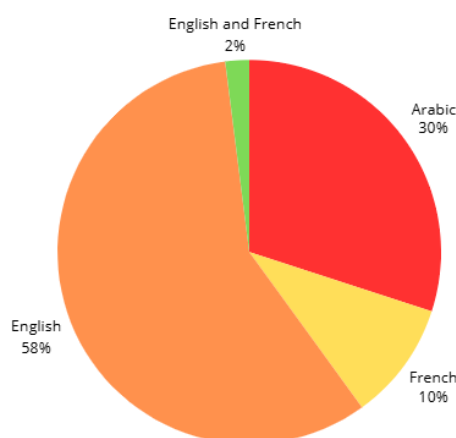


Figure 2. Preferred Language in Formal Settings

Figure 2 shows that the majority of participants (58%) stated that they feel more comfortable using English in formal settings while 30% prefer Arabic and consider it the most comfortable language in such a setting. Additionally, 10% indicated French as their preferred language, and 2% replied that they resort to both English and French in formal settings. This suggests that, in terms of foreign languages, the younger generation is more inclined toward English, probably due to their exposure to digital learning and online resources. The widespread use of social media platforms has strengthened the role of English, making it more accessible in professional and academic environments.

The following question was: “*How often do you speak English with your friends?*”, the purpose of asking this question is to know if English is used in informal settings

The participants responses are displayed in the following figure:

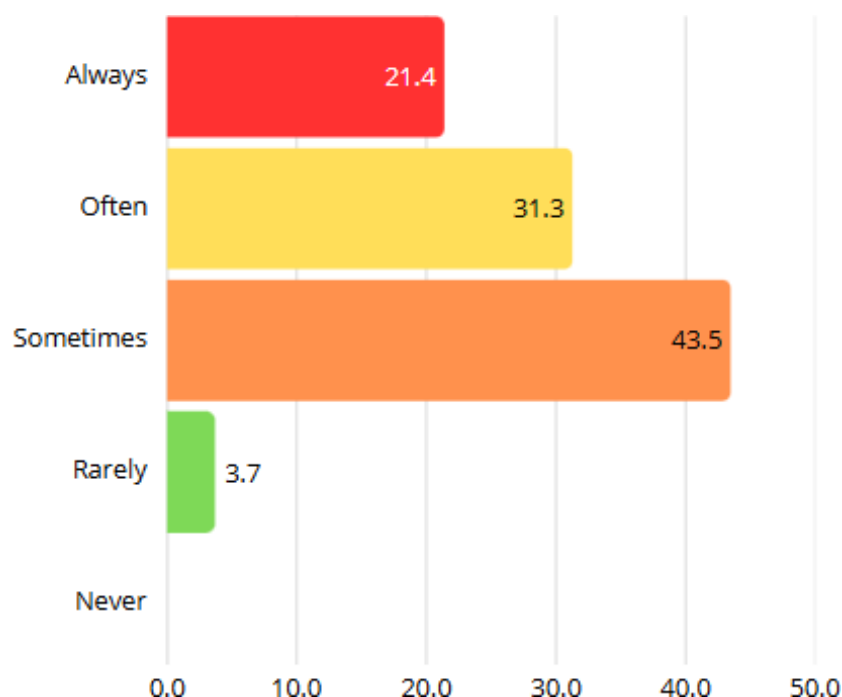


Figure 3. Students' Use of English in Social Interaction

As shown in Figure 3, the results reveal that 43.5% of the participants indicated that they sometimes use English to speak with their friends, while 31.3% claimed that they often do so. Additionally, 21.4% stated that they always use English, whereas 3.8% affirmed that they rarely do. The graph clearly reveals that English is used among friends to varying degrees and is never completely unused, indicating that English holds a place among the younger Algerian generation. What is striking is that no one chose the 'never' option, which clearly shows that the younger generation is predisposed to the linguistic shift.

Section 3 of the questionnaire focused on participants' perceptions of the language shift. It explores their attitudes and personal opinions regarding the language shift in both education and society.

The first question asked in this section was: *"Do you think Algeria's shift to English will benefit the country?"* The purpose of this question was to gather respondents' perceptions and attitudes toward the language shift, and assess whether they view the policy change as beneficial, neutral, or potentially disadvantageous. Some of the responses are:

- *"This is a great decision! English is the global language of science, technology, and business."*
- *"Algeria will benefit economically since English opens doors to international trade and collaboration."*
- *"It's about time! I'm sure English will give students more opportunities worldwide."*
- *"I fully support this shift. English is more useful for research, higher education, and global*

communication.”

- *“This change will help Algeria connect with the world and reduce dependence on French influence.”*

The vast majority of respondents responded positively, believing the policy will definitely have a beneficial impact. However, a smaller group remained neutral, stating that it is too early to determine the potential advantages of this decision.

Moving on to the next question: *“Why do you think Algeria is replacing French with English?”* This question aims to provide a bird’s-eye view of how respondents reflect on the shift and their level of awareness about changes in their country and the world. The participants’ responses were categorized into four key themes.

The first theme emerging from the findings is ***the French influence***. The participants agree that the Algerian policy decision to shift from French to English was primarily aimed at reducing the enduring influence of French over Algeria in various aspects of life, including education, administration, business, healthcare, research, and tourism. They view this decision as a symbolic end to French dominance and a step toward full sovereignty.

Many respondents expressed their views on this issue. One participant stated, *“Algeria was under French control for a long time, and French is still everywhere. Switching to English will help us move on.”* Another added, *“French is still in our schools and offices. Using English instead will help Algeria be more independent.”* Others highlighted how French is deeply embedded in daily communication, with one saying, *“Many Algerians mix French with Arabic when they talk. Learning English will help us speak differently and be less influenced by French.”* Some participants saw the shift as a way to leave the past behind, as one noted, *“French has been part of our daily life for too long. Changing to English is a way to leave the past behind.”* Lastly, another respondent emphasized the future benefits of English, explaining, *“This decision helps Algeria grow without always depending on French. English connects us to more countries and new opportunities.”* It goes without saying that the long French colonial period had a significant impact on the linguistic repertoire of Algerians. Algerian Arabic has many French words mixed into it. It is hard for Algerians to speak without using at least one French word. Because of this, Algerian Arabic is strongly influenced by French.

The second theme emerging from the findings is ***the dominance of English in science and global communication***. The participants argued that English is the world’s most widely spoken and influential language. They added that it is the world’s lingua franca, which they consider crucial for global engagement. French, according to them, is mainly spoken in certain regions while English is used almost everywhere, allowing Algerians to connect more easily with people from different countries. It is also the main language of science and research, giving students and professionals access to a wealth of international knowledge, academic publications, and career opportunities. By adopting English, Algeria is opening doors to the world and keeping up with global progress.

Some of the participants expressed their views as follows:



- *English is the language of the future. If we want to advance in science and technology, we must master it.*
- *Almost all scientific research and academic materials are in English. If we rely on French, we will always be behind.*
- *French is spoken in only few countries whereas English is spoken everywhere. Speaking English will help us communicate with the world.*
- *I want to study abroad in an English-speaking country. If I only speak French, my opportunities will be very limited.*

These responses clearly show the common belief that transitioning to English will provide Algerians with better access to global opportunities and keep the nation up to date with developments around the world.

The third factor recurring among the participants' responses with regard to the reasons why Algeria is replacing French with English has been **public request and youth expectations and hope**. The participants indicated that social media platforms have exposed Algerians to extensive English, making them more inclined to learn English than French. Many of them pointed out that younger generations are the main drivers behind Algeria's linguistic transition, with one participant stating, "*I prefer using English because it is the dominant language on social media.*" Unlike older generations who primarily used French, today's youth increasingly engage with English in their digital interactions, whether through social media, online discussions, or gaming communities. Another participant explained, "*When I chat with Algerians online, we mix Arabic and English. We don't use French*". This shift is not only a matter of preference but also a reflection of changing future expectations. Some respondents highlighted that English is seen as the language of opportunities, particularly for careers in business, science, and technology. One participant remarked, "*For a future career, I think English will offer many opportunities*" Others noted that English is incorporated in their daily communication, with one stating, "*English is commonly used in memes and online jokes, unlike French*" These responses suggest that the participants' preference for English stems from internal and external factors, and strongly reinforces the idea that young people's future expectations and the digital world play a significant role in Algeria's linguistic shift.

The last theme emerging from the findings is *political in nature*. According to the participants, the shift from French to English is not just about language but also a political choice. They believe that Algeria is promoting English to reduce France's influence, as the country was once a French colony. By focusing on English, Algeria wants to show its independence. English is the main language in international politics, business, and education, so using it helps Algeria build stronger ties with English-speaking countries, expand its global partnerships, and rely less on French-speaking nations.

As part of the ongoing effort to gauge respondents' preferences regarding the linguistic shift in Algeria, the following question was asked:

- *Would you prefer:*



- *French to remain the dominant foreign language*
- *English to replace French*
- *Both English and French to be equally important*

The purpose of this question is to collect measurable data on language attitudes by offering specific choices. In other words, this question serves as the cornerstone of the questionnaire, as it aims to assess whether the current linguistic shift is perceived as a welcomed change or an unwelcome move among the population.

The responses are best displayed in the following figure:

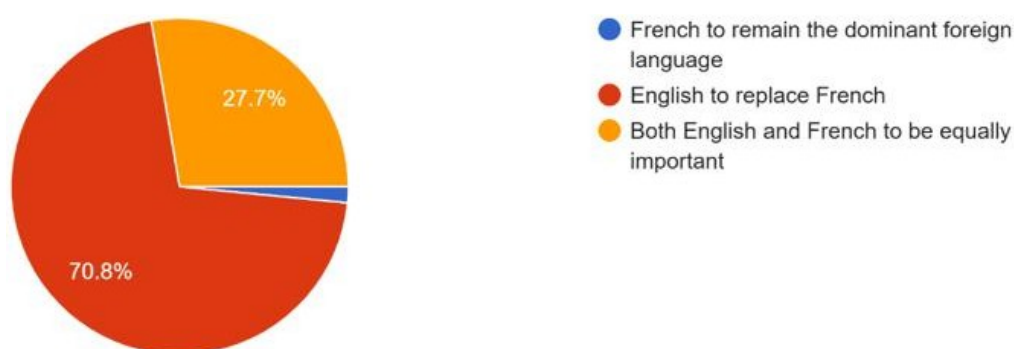


Figure 4. Participants' Views on the Role of French and English

As seen in the graph above, the majority of respondents (70.8%) want English to replace French as the main foreign language, showing a strong preference for English. This may be due to the fact that, in this study, the respondents belong to the younger generation, who are heavily influenced by English through social media and, consequently, are aware of the many opportunities that English provides in a globalized world. On the flip side, 27.7% believe both languages should be equally important, suggesting that many still see value in keeping French alongside English. Very few chose to keep French as the dominant foreign language, indicating that its influence is decreasing. Since most of the respondents are young, their views may not reflect those of older generations or professionals who still rely on French in their work. This difference stems from a distinct mindset. Despite the fact that there is clear support for English, making this change will take time, as it requires new policies, teacher training, and updates in education.

When asked, *"How do you think learning English will impact your career or education?"* The participants were mostly positive about the role of English in their future. The results display that the majority of them believe that being able to communicate in English will help them in their academic and professional endeavors. As one participant put it, *"English is the language of the world. If I want to study abroad or work for an international company, I need it."* Another one mentioned the importance of English in research and academic field and noted,

*“Almost everything in my field is published in English. If I don’t learn it well, I will always be behind”*. The overwhelming majority of the respondents seem to agree with the idea that English is a language that many people use for international communication and for accessing knowledge. They are quite aware that the majority of scholarly literature, research articles, and professional training materials are in English. Other participants expressed their need to English because they hope to work in the tourism industry, one of them explained, *“More tourists speak English than French. If I want to succeed in this job, I have to adapt it.”* However, while the majority support the transition, a few respondents voiced concerns about the challenges of shifting from French to English. Worries were voiced about whether the education system is fully prepared for this change. One of the comments was, *“Many teachers still teach us in French at university. Even those who teach us in English switch to French from time to time. How will we switch to English when even our professors aren’t ready?”* Few admitted that it is not easy for them to learn a new language, as one respondent shared, *“I’ve studied French all my life. Switching to English feels difficult, but I know it’s necessary.”* Despite these concerns, most respondents remain optimistic about the benefits of shifting to English, and view it as a positive step for both career and personal development.

In response to the following question: *“Do you support the introduction of English in primary schools?”*, The results show that most respondents support this decision and view it as a positive change. Many recognize the importance of English in education and the many opportunities it provides in all fields, believing that learning it from an early age will give students an advantage. One participant shared, *“Kids learn fast. If they start English early, they will speak it better when they grow up.”* Another respondent added, *“English is the future. The earlier they start, the easier it will be for them later.”*

However, some respondents are uncertain, probably because they are unsure how it might affect other subjects. A smaller group opposes the change, expressing their worries about the early introduction of a foreign language at a young age, especially that primary school learners will have two foreign languages; English and French. Overall, the strong support indicates a general belief that learning English early is beneficial for students.

When asked about *the challenges Algeria might face in adopting English as the main foreign language*, the respondents referred to many obstacles. They all pointed to **education**, mentioning that it is difficult to switch from French to English. They justified that French has been deeply rooted in the education system for decades, and switching to English will require significant adjustments in curricula, teaching materials, and teacher training.

A second obstacle a great number of respondents referred to is **opposition and pushback from French-speaking opponents**. They argue that political, academic, and social groups who are used to French for so many years may not accept the change easily. This resistance could slow down the transition or cause conflicts in different parts of society.

Another challenge relates to qualified ESP (English for specific purposes) teachers. The participants voiced their concern regarding the lack of subject-matter or content experts who are also proficient in English. This is mainly because Algerian content teachers have received their graduate and postgraduate education in French. That is why, they believe that even if

they teach their specialized field in English, they may not be fully competent in the English language. A few respondents, however, believe that there *would be no major challenges*, indicating optimism about the transition. They seem to think that if the government has made such a significant decision, it means Algeria is well-prepared to successfully undergo the transition.

Overall, although some key challenges are cited, the responses reveal a clear preference for English over French.

Finally, and in order to gather suggestions for a smoother transition to English, the participants were asked the following question: “*What do you think the government should do to improve the transition to English?*”

Out of 132 participants, only 93 responded to this question. The collected responses highlight potential solutions for improving the transition to English in Algeria.

One of the most frequently mentioned recommendations is the need for *teacher training*. The participants suggest that there should be investment in training programs to help content teachers develop and improve their English and teaching skills. The respondents affirm that without good training, it will be very hard to switch to English. In addition, many respondents emphasize the importance of updating the English curriculum to align with the new educational demands.

Another major suggestion is to increase exposure to English through various media platforms. A number of participants suggest that more English-language programming be shown on radio and television, as well as on digital platforms, to help language learners become more familiar with the language. For instance, English-language television shows could be a useful tool for introducing young language learners to the language in a fun and engaging way. Several respondents also recommend establishing free English language clubs and schools to ensure that all residents have access to opportunities for learning the language. Others recommend cooperation with English-speaking nations and student exchange programs to expose students to the real world and teach them how to use the language.

A significant number of participants advocate for gradually reducing the use of French in official settings. Many believe that replacing French with English in government documents, administration, and educational institutions is a necessary step toward making English more dominant in Algeria. Some go even further, suggesting that French should be entirely banned from schools and universities. Nonetheless, they acknowledge that this kind of transition needs to be thoughtfully planned and gradually executed to prevent confusion and pushback.

Finally, participants emphasized the importance of raising awareness among students and the public about the benefits of embracing English. They believe that offering incentives—like scholarships and job opportunities—would play a key role in encouraging English learning and accelerating the transition.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that most respondents are in favor of transitioning to English, emphasizing the need for a gradual approach backed by thorough planning. They

frequently suggest initiatives such as training teachers, revising the curriculum, enhancing exposure to English, creating additional learning opportunities, and minimizing the use of French in official contexts. By implementing these measures, the government can facilitate a smoother and more effective transition to English in Algeria.

#### 4. Discussion

The analysis of the participants' data has revealed four key themes, namely: reducing French influence, English as a language of research, youth and their future hopes, and political dimensions.

The participants support the transition because they want to minimize French linguistic influence. This idea aligns with Phillipson (1992), who, in his book, discussed the desire of former colonies to free themselves from linguistic imperialism. Phillipson gave the example of Tanzania under Julius Nyerere, which resisted the dominance of English and promoted Swahili as the national and official language. This is confirmed by Kamwangamalu (2013) who asserts that not only Tanzania but even in Rwanda the linguistic shift from French to English was seen as a means of distancing from colonial heritage and fostering national unity. The findings of the present study reinforce this perspective, as many participants view the move as a step toward sovereignty and the decolonization of Algeria's linguistic profile.

The second recurring theme in the responses is the recognition of English as the leading world language that is needed globally and across all domains. The study's respondents appear to concur with Graddol (2006), who claims that English is the lingua franca of the world and that it is the language of the technological revolution. The same perception is shared by Hamel (2007), who notes that because English has become a very important language, many governments in Latin America have implemented it in early education. Likewise, based on existing literature and observation, Al-Issa and Dahan (2011) observed that English in the UAE and the Middle Eastern context has had a positive impact on economic growth and global integration.

Another important point in the responses is the role of young people in Algeria's language shift. The participants stated that the younger generations, influenced by social media and the internet, are pushing for more use of English. This is in agreement with Kachru (1990) who explains that English is now widely used online, even in countries where it is not the main language. Similarly, Crystal (2003) also shows that social media and technology help people learn and use English faster, especially among young people. A similar trend was seen in Tunisia (Daoud, 2011), where exposure to English online has made many prefer it over French.

Regarding the political dimension of the shift, respondents see it as a smart way for Algeria to establish stronger ties with English-speaking countries and rely less on French-speaking ones. This is in line with studies by Spolsky (2004) and Shohamy (2006), who argue that language policy decisions are often deeply intertwined with political agendas. In a comparable case, Rwanda made the same decision and switched from French to English because it adopted the Anglophone diplomatic and economic reorientation (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010).

Likewise, Algeria's shift is a way to move beyond the influence of French-speaking countries and build international partnerships. Additionally, core challenges were identified despite strong support for English. For instance, the lack of qualified English teachers, opposition from Francophone elites, and the necessity for curriculum revisions. These challenges are consistent with Bamgbose (2000) who says that changing a country's language policy is often difficult because people are used to their language, and some groups benefit from keeping things the same. In the Algerian context, these concerns are similar to what Benrabah (2013) explains. He says that French is still widely used in universities and government, which makes switching fully to English difficult.

The findings also revealed that despite the fact that the majority of the participants are in favor of the transition, some participants still advocate for bilingualism, preferring both English and French to be equally important. It should be noted that this is seen in Morocco, where French is still used alongside English in many areas, even though more people are learning English (Ennaji, 2005). In the same vein, Cenoz and Gorter (2013) conducted studies on bilingualism and found that knowing multiple languages can be beneficial for a country's culture and economy.

Finally, the participants suggested some initiatives to benefit from the shift and overcome its challenges, such as prioritizing teacher education, increasing exposure to English through media, and implementing a gradual language transition. The respondents seem to be impacted by countries that have successfully transitioned to English as a primary foreign language, such as South Korea and Japan. They also seem to agree with Nunan (2003) who highlighted the importance of well-structured teacher training programs and curriculum development.

A thorough examination reveals that this study's findings align with broader research on language policy shifts after colonialism and globalization. Literature indicates that Algeria's transition to English shares similarities with cases like Rwanda, and the UAE. The strong desire for English among young people suggests this change might speed up soon, but it is important to tackle the challenges identified for a smooth and successful transition.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings of this study indicate that the shift from French to English in Algeria is greatly welcomed. Most participants expressed their satisfaction but at the same time voiced significant challenges that may constitute a barrier to its success. They argue the necessity of this transition for cross-border integration and Career growth, but at the same time pointed out the need for a well-planned transition. Key concerns include the lack of qualified teachers, insufficient curriculum adaptation, and the continued dominance of French in various sectors.

To make the transition easier, the study warns against a hasty replacement of French and instead suggests a gradual phasing out. It emphasizes the importance of increasing exposure to English, pointing out that the success of this language shift is a collective decision. Now is the time for everyone, both those in favor and those against the change, to adopt a forward-thinking attitude and ensure our children and students receive the support they need to adapt smoothly and succeed in an English-dominant world.



It is important to note that the findings of this study cannot be generalized, as it is a small-scale study conducted with participants who are primarily students. This sample does not represent the entire Algerian population. Nonetheless, the results reflect the perspectives of the new generation, which may indicate future directions.

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