

A shift to English in Algerian education

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In September, Algeria will change the language used in higher education from French to English (1). If successful, the new policy could facilitate access to English literature and promote international exchange and collaboration. However, Algeria's plan to implement the change immediately will undermine its benefits.

In Algeria, primary and secondary education are taught in Arabic with some linguistic courses in French and English (2). Historically and culturally, Algeria has been more closely tied to France than to any English-speaking country (3). As a result, French fluency is common (4), whereas English proficiency is limited. In 2022, Education First ranked Algeria 78 out of 111 countries in English proficiency (5).

Switching to English will likely decrease the quality of teaching, evaluation, and learning (6), reducing the efficiency of graduated students in the workforce. Students will experience more frustration and anxiety (7) and will require more time to finish writing assignments, including theses (8). Professors may find learning English challenging and look for other jobs as a result.

The change will also disrupt established programs. The demography of international students, who have typically come from French-speaking African countries, will change, affecting historical strategic partnerships. Updating libraries with English versions of the French and Arabic textbooks that have been accumulated over decades will require substantial financial, logistical, and staff resources, which could otherwise be directed toward research or equipment.

Intensive English training for professors (9) started in December 2022, but less than a year of language courses will likely be insufficient to ensure effective teaching when the policy takes effect. No training will be provided to students. As a result, private English training will likely increase, deepening the gap between students from low- and high-income families (10).

Before full implementation of the language policy change at the national level, pilot studies should be conducted. For example, select universities could implement a gradual shift to English coursework. Institutions could continue to teach undergraduate courses in French or Arabic, and intense mandatory training in English could be added to the requirements. After

at least 2 years of English study, students could switch to a partial or a full course load in English. Throughout the process, evaluations could determine the effects of the program on students, professors, and staff, as well as the resources needed to provide materials and support.

Shifting higher education to English could have benefits in the long term. However, the change should be informed by both pilot studies and the experiences of other countries. Rwanda made a similar language transition 15 years ago (11) and both teachers and students in Rwanda's universities continue to face challenges (12). Algeria should implement the language shift gradually to minimize disruption to its education system.

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