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Perception on EMI amidst medical university students: A bane or a boon?

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ABSTRACT

Recently, the Algerian government has been struggling to refine higher education outcomes and to enhance scientific research crop. A key-measure to reaching this objective is showing interest to foreign languages notably English. This paper investigates medical students' perception towards a conceivable implementation of English as a medium of instruction rather than French at Tlemcen University after a governmental decision accompanied with concrete measures in other scientific and technical streams. By using an online qualitative survey with 150 participants, the findings revealed that the learners confess the significance of English alongside its utility. However, they are still reluctant on the adoption of English as a medium of instruction and prefer to continue their studies in French. Some reasons behind this proclivity cover lack of sources in English, lack of ill-trained teachers and fear of academic failure. Another interesting result is the students' discontent with the way the initiative has been implemented, for they are ill-trained for such a sudden linguistic swap. In the aftermath, the paper ends with some implications.

Keywords: Algeria, higher education, English as a medium of instruction, medical students, perception

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INTRODUCTION

English as a medium of instruction (EMI for short) is almost fresh in Algeria, and its fulfilment is an entrenched practice at universities all over the globe and a necessary asset since it is no more a trend, but a highly needed coin to march with the wagon of rampant globalization. Recently, the Algerian government has been struggling to refine higher education outcomes and to enhance scientific research crop. A key-measure to reaching this objective is showing interest to foreign languages notably English. However, this measure is, actually, accompanied by various challenges and different opinions towards its implementation since this measure should typically have considered the viewpoints of educators and learners; otherwise, its aim will not be accomplished.

This study aims to scrutinize the perceptions of medical students towards a potential adoption of EMI instead of French. In order to reach this aim, a qualitative online survey was employed to detect the learners' perceptions on an envisageable adoption of EMI in their field of study. The online survey was administered to a scale of medical students including 150 participants. The present study relies on the following research questions:

1. How do medical students discern English with regard to French?

2. How would learners discern EMI if implemented?
3. Which type of challenges medical students may encounter if EMI is implemented?

To provide answer to these research questions, the subsequent hypotheses are put forward, as follows:

1. Medical students hold English in high esteem but they still lean on French.
2. Students feel that the government has made 'the right call' when deciding to implement EMI. However, medical students are linguistically ill- prepared for EMI.
3. Students disclosed plenty of challenges regarding EMI. They involve, lack of proficiency in English, lack of medical sources in English, and lack of well-trained instructors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Talking about EMI and English in Algeria

As an ex-French colony and against all objections, Algeria is still attempting to disconnect itself from French and hold rather English as a means for development and growth. Albeit English does not relish the history of French within the Algerian socio-linguistic scene, it is picking up speed in the educational sector alongside the controversies

about the language policy directions of the nation. With the growth of internationalization, English has been pervasive in all facets of life and Algeria is no exception.

The Algerian foreign language landscape is characterized by a competition between French, and English. Proof of this is that "English as a first foreign language is believed to have the potential to help raise the quality of education in Algeria and promote social progress since English was recognized as the language of science and technology" (Belmihoub, 2018, p. 4). However, French still holds the status of first foreign language in the Algerian linguistic scene. English is the second foreign language in Algeria, after French; its role took an arduous way starting from 2000, where policy makers settled the educational reform highly boosted by the United States of America (Hamzaoui, 2021).

In the Algerian education sector, there is an odd policy where scientific subjects are taught at primary, middle and high school, in Arabic and then, at university, it swaps to French. In their recent trials and efforts to improve and internationalize the nation's educational sector, policy makers have become aware of the significance of English mastery and the advantages of teaching scientific subjects in this language (Ouarniki, 2023). In this line of thought, the adoption of EMI is a means of enhancing the quality of education and yielding positive academic outcomes. Pecorari and Malmström (2018) acknowledge four aspects of an EMI framework: First, the English language is used for educational aims. Second, English does not represent the subject being taught. Third, the principal expected outcome is not language development, and finally, for most participants, English is a second language (p. 499). Following the fourth aspect, it is worth mentioning that, in Algeria, English is the second foreign language after French.

Actually, teaching English starts from the third year of primary school instead of first-year of middle school. With the new government decision, English is present in technical and scientific streams at university. However, medical students continue to be taught in French.

Students' Perceptions of EMI

Fifteen years ago, Atik (2010) investigated on the relationship between the perceptions of Turkish university students towards EMI and their English efficiency. Based on the results obtained, Atik (2010) reported that students who have a high proficiency in English hold EMI in high esteem when learning their subjects, and they are more brilliant in comparison to those who held EMI in low esteem. He also stresses the importance of providing efficient language learning environments for learners during the preliminary year.

In recent years, scrutinizing the perception of students and teachers towards EMI adoption continues to be a topic of hot debate where the main research on students' perception focuses on their attitudes towards EMI, the resistance to EMI, the satisfaction and motivations with catering content employing EMI (Lei & Hu, 2022).

Tanjung et al. (2021) explored learners' perceptions towards EMI use at the international class of the economic development study program of the faculty of economic and business–University of Bengkulu, results revealed that the majority of the students are positive with the EMI program in their class either in terms of perceiver, target, and situation. However, more than half of the students were not confident in terms of communicating with English in the learning process. Besides, the implementation was still partial in most courses.

Benassou and Bourenane (2022) scrutinized teachers' and students' perceptions on using EMI in biology stream at Guelma University.

They aptly stated that most participants perceived EMI positively since they underscored the importance of English as the world language and the language of knowledge, technology and science. They added that the English language aids them have access to plenty updated references.

Doiz and Lasagabaster (2018) scrutinized on Spanish learners at the University of Basque concerned with EMI. These researchers stressed the significance of EMI for management where the literature alongside terminology are mainly in the English language. They deduced that the learning involvement of EMI is favorable, and that the learners were pleasant and glad with their English lectures to such a point that they requested for more subjects to be taught over English. In another study conducted by Badwan (2019), he affirmed that Tunisian learners are ready to raise their level and reach better fluency in EMI courses only if their instructors switch to English. Eighty-five students reported that EMI as the best strategy to render their university degrees more acknowledged all over the world.

Orfan and Seraj (2022) dealt with Afghan students who displayed a positive perception towards EMI. More than 70% of the respondents linked English to merit and honor. They also reported that Afghanistan prioritizes people who study in EMI programs. Moreover, over 80% of the respondents held English (and EMI) in high esteem. Another crucial result was that more than 70% of the respondents revealed that notwithstanding they obtain low grades, courses delivered in English will certainly remain significant.

Challenges with EMI Use

To answer the question of this study, it is suggested that EMI is both a bane and a boon since it can entail advantages as well as disadvantages for 'non-Anglophone' students. This specific category of learners worldwide reported an array of challenges that they encounter while studying their subjects in English. In their review of the related literature about content-teacher and learner pitfalls, Lei and Hu (2022) identified the following: language problems, many assignments, additional time required to prepare lectures in English, and supplementary time required for studying.

Yang et al. (2019) conducted a study on the threats facing learners and teachers in an EMI medical academic program in China. They identified four discrepant threats: The first threat related to inadequate and insufficient teaching materials. The second threat lay in mediocre teaching. The third threat represented inappropriate class discussions, and the last one was inadequacy to teach medical humanities. To deal with these four threats, they opined that teachers and learners used some flexible techniques, such as self-learning skills, the use of alternative textbooks along with their mother tongue.

Al Zumor (2019) scrutinized the threats of using English as a medium instruction in learning and teaching scientific streams in Saudi Arabia. The major results inflicted the following threats:

1. Using EMI for streams has a strong negative effect on the scientific assessment and content understanding of most learners.
2. Using EMI and assessment triggers emotional threats like fear, anxiety, tension, frustration and, eventually, meagre academic results.
3. EMI strips the learners of their essential rights to efficient comprehension, interaction, examination and dialogue.

Al Zumor (2019), subsequently, suggests assuring quality English instruction in the common core accounting for the option of 'additive bilingual instruction'. In Algeria, there seems to be a dearth of research regarding EMI challenges in scientific and technical streams. The present study highlights medical students' perception on a potential adoption of EMI.

METHODOLOGY

In the present study, the collection and analysis of data relied on a qualitative research methodology. An online survey was used to gather the necessary data. The respondents were asked to reflect on their perceptions on the implementation of EMI in medical sciences. The online survey sets out to discover the students' perception of EMI, and the likely challenges they may encounter if officially adopted.

Sampling

The study sample consisted of 150 students including males and females who came from different study levels (first year – fifth year). They were enrolled in the faculty of medicine, Tlemcen University during the data collection period.

Data Collection Tools

The present study relies on an online survey designed thanks to Google Forms and then displayed on the university e-learning website called Moodle after obtaining definite approval from the e-learning rectorship. All students in the university are required to access Moodle regularly since there are some subjects taught online. The survey link has been on Moodle for two months. 63 out of 150 participants entered the survey and responded to the questions. 87 students were rejected because they did not finalize the whole questionnaire. Similar to Badwan (2019), this study targets students with 'imagined acquaintance' in EMI programs since they had no acquaintance with EMI. This study hypothesizes about the potential use and expected threats of EMI in medical sciences. The survey was designed in a trilingual way showing in Arabic, French, and English to assure the comprehension of the survey statements.

Data Analysis

Most survey answers were provided in French and just a few replies were given in Arabic. It is worth mentioning that there were no replies in English. The first section of the survey tackled how the respondents perceive EMI in relation to French. We received diverse answers where some did not relate to our study aim, and others were similar. That is why, we have selected the answers that fit our study solely. All the collected data are analyzed qualitatively.

Section one: How do you discern English with regard to French?

The students' selected replies are mentioned below:

"English is actually the language of science and technology. It is also the most widely used language to communicate with the external world."

"English opens doors for job opportunities and studies abroad, but I cannot imagine myself studying medicine through this language."

"English threatens French without forgetting that France has great concerns in Algeria."

"English is spreading despite the competition between French and English."

"We consider ourselves as Internet dwellers since we grew up with video games and social media in English. However, when it comes to our studies, we cannot do without French."

"I view French negatively because of the long-term French colony."

"Algerian universities should switch to EMI in technical streams only."

The second main question addressed to medical students was linked to their perception towards the implementation of EMI.

Section two: How do you discern EMI if implemented?

The students' responses that relate to this section's question are listed, as follows:

"I prefer studying in French."

"As I am feeble in this language, I falter to study medicine in English."

"I feel positive and optimistic as to the upcoming generations who will not find difficulties studying medicine in English as they are studying this language at primary level."

"Content teachers instill negative attitudes towards EMI since they undertook all their medical studies in French."

"I am bad in English."

"It is a long-term initiative. It cannot be applied overnight. It requires wisdom and slow implementation from the part of the government."

"This implementation fits students of technology rather."

"I struggle to understand the concepts in French and cannot see myself struggling to learn them in English."

"I admit that I participate and engage in lectures delivered in French rather than English."

"I think the government should revise this decision and its implementation requires a thorough reflection and years of preparation."

"I am sure I will fail in my studies if EMI is immediately adopted."

"Studying through EMI may not improve our academic level. On the contrary, it will worsen it."

Section three: Which type of challenges medical students may encounter if EMI is implemented?

This important question seeks to identify the various challenges in EMI programs, if any, from the perspectives of students. A multifold list of probable challenges was provided.

"I have a low proficiency in English."

"I will have difficulty in understanding scientific content in English."

"Most medical books and sources are available in French."

"Students will find it hard to understand medical books in English."

"It will be arduous to structure and think in English since I am acquainted with French rather."

"All instructors of medicine received their education in French and they complete trainings in France'. They are weak in English."

"A sudden shift to English will have negative repercussions on our studies and future career."

"English is not my cup of tea. I cannot imagine myself talking in English with my patients."

"We do not have enough qualified teachers to teach medicine in English as most Algerian doctors undertook their studies in French."

"In the meantime, the use of English in medical sciences won't improve the quality of student education."

DISCUSSION

When asked about students' perceptions towards English, a number of replies were provided. Most respondents revealed their consciousness of the status of English; they also claimed its importance and its linguistic capital as the lingua Franca of science. The respondents' replies were in favor of English. Statements such as 'English is actually the language of science and technology. It is also the most widely used to communicate with the external world'; 'English opens doors for job opportunities and studies abroad'; 'English threatens French without forgetting that France has great concerns in Algeria' clearly show that learners hold the English language in high esteem. However, some of them felt it hard or even impossible to carry on their studies in English as they actually receive a French medium instruction.

No one denies the increase demand of EMI in Algerian universities, especially in scientific and technology streams. However, to my surprise, most students of medical sciences prefer continuing their studies in the language of the ex-colonizer and felt hesitant or even insecure as to the adoption of EMI in their studies. It seems that they feel more comfortable and more acquainted with French rather than English. But, despite this, they reported about their optimism with regard to the future generations, mainly those learners who have already started studying English at primary school.

This is clearly highlighted in their responses where various concerns have been raised such as

- (1) 'I prefer studying in French';
- (2) 'As I am feeble in this language, I falter to study medicine in English';
- (3) 'I feel positive and optimistic as to the upcoming generations who will not find difficulties studying medicine in English as they are studying this language at primary level;
- (4) 'Content teachers instill negative attitudes towards EMI since they undertook all their medical studies in French';
- (5) I am weak in English';
- (6) 'It's a long-term initiative; and

- (7) I am sure I will fail in my studies if EMI is immediately adopted'.

It cannot be applied overnight. This initiative requires wisdom and slow implementation from the government'.

In fact, despite the students perceive EMI unfavorably, they are aware of its utility. Although the respondents preferred English at the onset, they felt unsure about the success of its implementation, and the negative impact it can have on their academic success. That is why, the transition to English should be at first slow. Badwan (2019) correctly pointed out that swapping to English abruptly would be a hard 'linguistic skip' for medical students to cope with. Badwan (2019), therefore, called for a slow transition by proffering some EMI programs while at the same time and at the beginning of the academic year, proffering a shift period of accentuated English courses. This seems to be a rational deed since Algerian learners already have this linguistic skip where the teaching of scientific subjects unexpectedly switches from Arabic at secondary school to French at university, and more recently to English.

When asked to highlight the diverse challenges they may encounter if EMI will be adopted in medical sciences, it is not surprising from non-Anglophones that the challenges consist in, for example, having low proficiency in English, having difficulty in understanding scientific content in English, fear of failure, difficulty in organizing ideas and thoughts in English or even not imagining oneself studying in English in the medical stream.

It seems that the students hold positive perceptions towards English in terms of perceiver, target, and context, and also in terms of being the language of science and technology (Benassou & Bourenane, 2022; Tanjung et al., 2021). However, most, if not all learners were insecure as to their ability to communicate in English while learning. This goes hand in hand with Al Zumor's (2019) investigation where he detected that EMI adoption triggers some affective factors such as tension, fear, embarrassment and anxiety, which leads to poor academic achievement. This seems true with the medical students who showed a kind of hesitation and frustration with EMI adoption.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

EMI is a trend in research at tertiary level in Algeria. The present study has investigated medical students' perception of a likely EMI implementation alongside the challenges they may encounter following its adoption. This study yielded interesting results regarding this sensitive issue. First, the majority respondents held in high esteem English and recognized its utility since it contributes to future nations' development.

However, these respondents did not deny their low linguistic competence in English. They prefer to continue their studies in French because of the availability of competent teachers and sources (books, articles, and so on) in this language. They also envisaged different challenges that may hinder their academic performance, which relates to the level of accomplishment that they are supposed to demonstrate in their educational pursuits. Considering the possible challenges the respondents may encounter if EMI is hastily implemented in their field of study, one can, actually, envisage a big issue and a low academic performance since students feel at ease with French rather. As such, a wise and step-by-step government decision as to the implementation of EMI in medical sciences is highly recommended.

To cope with the shortages, which stem from the envisageable threats yielded in this paper, the next pedagogical inferences and education policy prerequisites might be in place. The study's implications entail raising medical students' awareness about the importance of EMI, which is actually, a needed asset not only in Algerian universities, but in universities worldwide. There is also a need in creating a synergy involving subject matter instructors, English language teachers, policy makers and language planning experts to prepare a comprehensive plan that will help enhance EMI in higher education, and more particularly in medical sciences.

Interestingly enough, university teachers should receive appropriate training abroad to, subsequently, be able to create a motivating academic atmosphere for medical students who use EMI because, after all, it is the citizen's health, which is at play. This may also help students feel much more confident and display positive attitudes towards EMI.

However, this requires a smooth transition from French to English with an effective use of English. The limitations of the present study lie in the limited number of participants and responses provided. Another limitation relates to a lack of a quantitative study where statistics may provide more reliable data. This prevents the author from generalizing and drawing conclusions for the current study. We let the door open for further research where the issue can be tackled from different angles and conducted with students from all levels and from different universities all over the country.

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Declaration of interest: The author declares no competing interest.

Data availability: Data generated or analyzed during this study are available from the author on request.

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