

Parents' Attitudes Towards Exposing Their Children to English in Algerian Primary Education

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Abstract

Along with the internationalisation of English, many parents demanded teaching English at the level of primary education in Algeria. The latter is commonly known as the second largest Francophone country where French is set as the first foreign language in education and given priority over the international language which is deemed a second foreign language. English has no clear status and is not given importance as French at the institutional and political level. The present study aims at identifying the attitudes of parents in South, West, East and North of Algeria towards exposing their children to English at the primary school level in the future. It also centers on specifying the reason why these parents want to expose their children to English at an early age. Qualitative and quantitative data were obtained through the use of questionnaires administered to 275 parents. The results revealed that positive attitudes were expressed by the parents from different areas of Algeria towards exposing their children to English as the language fosters their education and career and keep them abreast of the world developments. The current study represents an impetus for promoting English in Algeria and directing more attention and importance to it.

Keywords: Algeria, children, English, internationalisation, parents, primary education.

1. Introduction

Algeria is commonly known as the second Francophone country after France. Algerians do include some French loan words and expressions in their daily life conversations which might be the result of some historical factors in relation to the past colonial era (French colonisation). Algeria set French as a main language after its national language, Arabic, and afforded it the status of a first foreign language across the country giving it more priority and importance in education and other arenas over English though the latter acquired an international status and cross-cultural use. Exposure to English is very limited compared to French where Algerians tend to use it at home or outdoor, and the former is bounded by an academic use at school and university only. Withal, English witnessed some recent growing interest since Algerians use social media and become more open to the world as they are exposed to different technological gadgets that make use of English.

1.1 Status of English in Algeria

English has no clear status in the official Constitution of Algeria. It is set as the second foreign language institutionally, while French is the first foreign language due to historical and sociolinguistic reasons. Garton and Graves (2014) emphasise that there is a limited and rare exposure to English in Algeria. Setting English as an important language in Algeria and giving a higher status than French implies inducing a competition between the two languages and represents an attempt to reduce the status of French which was planted due to the French colonisation. In this issue, Berger (2002) asserts that setting English as a second language implies demoting the status of French in Algeria. While Benrabah (2013) claims that a competition between English and French takes place in Algeria in different planning forms as status, corpus and acquisition. The popularity of French in Algeria was alluded to by many researchers as its constant use by Algerians in their daily life. For instance, Murray and Street (1873) illustrate that French is used in arenas as business and hotel management which makes it used at a wide level in Algeria. Similarly, Nashashibi *et al.* (1998) assert that the use of Arabic along with French promoted bilingualism in Algeria; however, it is noticed that business practices are still done using French though English is increasingly used as well.

The past effects of colonisation and enduring retention of their language (French) made Algeria a Francophone country where the daily conversations of its citizens encompass some French expressions mixed with their native language labelled Algerian Arabic. However, English is receiving a kind of prestige and is set as a foreign language in Algeria (Baker & Jones, 1998). Due to the technological advances and effect of social media and networking, a considerable status is received by English in Algeria. Tucker and Corson (1997) allude to the fact that an instrumental value is gained by English. This language is taught as a second foreign language and dominated various sectors as computing, scientific references, technological fields and oil industry (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2007).

Stone (1997) affirms that understanding contemporary Algeria should be linked to the relationship between Algeria and France. Despite the efforts made by the Algerian government, the majority of the Algerians do not speak any other foreign language other than French. The French left Algeria after 132 years of colonisation inculcating their language, French, in the minds of Algerians. In addition to this, many cultural and artistic manifestations are still noticed in different areas in Algeria, especially those presented in architectural elements and prestigious manners along with the inclusion of some French in Algerians' talk. The latter was claimed by Strazny (2005) who noticed that Algerians borrow many words and expressions from French. These are modified according to the Arabic pronunciation and grammatical patterns of Arabic as in the example of *nvote* (means 'I vote' in English) which is basically borrowed from the French word *voter* (to vote). The profound effect of the French colonisers made French of a great importance in Algeria that lasted for long though Arabic is the official national language in Algeria. In this way, English was given a lower status than French.

1.2 Teaching English in Algeria

The status of French was threatened as English was taught in the nineties in a choice with French at Grade 4 at some pilot Algerian primary schools. The latter did not last for long as it was eliminated declaring its failure after considerable years of implementation. Majumdar and Saad (2005) claim that the decision of implementation came in parallel with the Arabisation process in Algeria. However, English is now set as the second foreign language after French in Algeria and is taught at middle school and on, which makes it a total of 7 years (4 years at middle school and 3 years at secondary school). Seven years of learning English should be received by all Algerian students. A boost use of English is observed as it is required for job market (Oxford Business Group, 2010). Notwithstanding, English is restricted to only formal contexts as schools, whilst it is not used outdoor or included in the daily life of Algerians as in their conversations. This language is taught using the Competency-based Approach which relates a variety of learning activities to the daily life context, making it a learner-based approach with some guidance from the teacher. The approach was officially applied in Algerian education under the program of Early Language Teaching in 2003 as an educational reform with a new textbook design that promotes multicultural aspects (Lachkar, 2012).

Different language skills are taught in the Algerian curriculum of English at middle and secondary school. The basics of the language are learnt at middle school moving gradually to further aspects as lexis, phonology and grammar till secondary school. Messekher asserts that teachers rely on textbooks to teach English and its cultural aspects (as cited in Garton & Graves, 2014). The limited exposure to English induced some educational problems as students are not well acquainted with the language and encounter problems, such as understanding materials written in English when proceeding to higher studies or travelling abroad. Compared to French, English is given a lower value in educational contexts due to the sociolinguistic as well as linguistic reasons that promote the use of French in education, administration and many other fields. Though Arabic is the language of instruction for all subjects at the level of primary, middle and secondary schools, French is used to teach some subjects in tertiary education (university) and scientific terms are introduced in French rather than English. However, higher studies are followed up using the English language as for the Doctorate ones. The latter was emphasised by Ager (2001) who alludes that English is referred to in certain scientific subjects at the level of Algerian higher education as the language represents a useful tool for conducting studies cross-culturally. However, this language is not officially dominant in different Algerian contexts. The latter might be due to the reason that setting English as a second foreign language was seen as an attempt to reduce the status of French in Algeria (Khanna, 2008).

1.3 Parents Demands for Teaching English at Primary School

Many demands for setting English as a first foreign language in Algeria were raised as around 6 thousand people asserted its implementation compared to 255 who opposed it on the basis of a public vote declared by the online website of CNN Arabic. The claims alluded to the necessity of English and elimination of French which is the first foreign language in Algerian education. They also centered on making some educational reforms where

French should be replaced by English and given more importance by virtue of its status as an international language (Ninety Five Percent Demand, 2016).

The national organisation of the pupils' parents launched a campaign for replacing French by English and setting English as the first foreign language in Algeria. The campaign was posted on Facebook and aimed at collecting signatures of parents across Algeria to realise these demands. The signatures were collected and sent to the Ministry of National Education under the title of '*I am the parent of primary school pupils. I demand from the government teaching English to my children instead of French as the latter is no longer the language of science, trade or tourism*'. Although more than 1000 signatures were collected, the Ministry of National Education provided no response asserting indirectly that these demands would not be realised (Daoudi, 2015).

The generalisation of English and its setting as a first foreign language were the basic demands maintained by the parents. Their argument was based on the fact that English is the language of science and technology and is the international language. The idea was first limited to parents but then expanded to encompass former political figures in Algeria, such as BEN BITTOUR Ahmed, BELKHADEM Abdelaziz, GHERMOUL Abdelaziz and MSITFA Bachir. Along with it, some figures enrolled in cultural and artistic fields also emphasised the necessity of English and elimination of French (Ismael, 2016). "There have been other calls that English should be adopted as a more widely used international language of science" (Algeria's Identity, 2016, p.1). Due to the rise of technological developments and growing use of social media websites, an awareness of the importance of English increased in the midst of the Algerian society. English becomes a priority and necessity in different fields and an interest in its learning is receiving a turnout by Algerians of different age categories.

2. Method

2.1 Research Questions

The present study is grounded on the following research questions:

- a. What are the Algerian parents' attitudes towards exposing their children to English in primary education?
- b. Why do the Algerian parents want their children learn English at an early age?

2.2 Research Hypotheses

It is stipulated that:

- a. Positive attitudes are held by the Algerian parents towards exposing their children to English in primary education.
- b. The Algerian parents want their children learn English at an early age as it can foster their education and keep them abreast of the world changes.

2.3 Participants

The current study involved 275 parents from different areas in Algeria (*viz.*, South, West, East and North). These participants were selected from one province at the level of each cardinal point in Algeria. The majority of them are literate and the bread winner of their families. The dominant gender category referred to the male participants (N = 114) compared to the female ones (N = 131). The majority of the parents belonged to the age average ranging between 35 to 40. These participants were selected randomly from different areas in Algeria.

2.4 Research Instruments

Questionnaires were administered in two languages (Arabic and French) allowing the parents to choose the language they can easily use. An Arabic version of the questionnaire was designed for Arabophone parents as Arabic is the native language of Algeria, while a French one was written since some parents might be Francophones and would not be able to write in Arabic well. The questionnaire included a variety of close and open-ended questions, as well as questions based on the Likert scale. The aim of the questionnaire was to identify the Algerian parents' attitudes from different areas towards exposing their children to English at an early age and specify the reasons behind their claim for teaching English in primary education.

3. Analysis

Validity of the questionnaire was ensured as they were piloted prior to the main investigation on a smaller scale (around 20% of the total number of the parents) of similar targeted participants. The latter was also increased as the questionnaires were revised by subject-matter experts. Comprehensibility and clarity of the questions were pretested and face validity was checked prior to administration. The questionnaires were self-administered on the basis of a consent letter signed by each participant to conduct the study. Statistical and textual analysis were applied on the questionnaires where a commonly known software program (SPSS) was used to analyse data.

Consistency which is a critical element of reliability of the research tool was tested through the administration of the questionnaires on a larger scale of participants in different areas in Algeria (South, West, East and North). Questions intended to measure attitudes through famous scales, as Likert, were posed in the questionnaires which also helps promoting reliability.

Table 1. Parents' attitudes towards exposing their children to English

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
110	123	14	18	8

Note. Data presented above show the degree of agreement and disagreement of the parents towards exposing their children to English in primary education.

As listed in Table 1, the highest frequencies were attributed to the parents who strongly agreed (N = 110) with respect to exposing their children to English at an early age along with those who agreed (N = 123) and supported the same view. Only 14 parents expressed a neutral standpoint as they neither agreed nor disagreed about it. Minorities declared their disagreement including 18 parents who disagreed and 8 who strongly disagreed in relation to early exposure to English in primary education. This makes the majority of the parents support the early exposure to English by their children at primary school. The latter might be due to the internationalisation and global status of English which becomes a necessity and priority in different fields. Parents may want their children learn English as the latter represents the language of cross-cultural communication and a tool of educational and professional development.

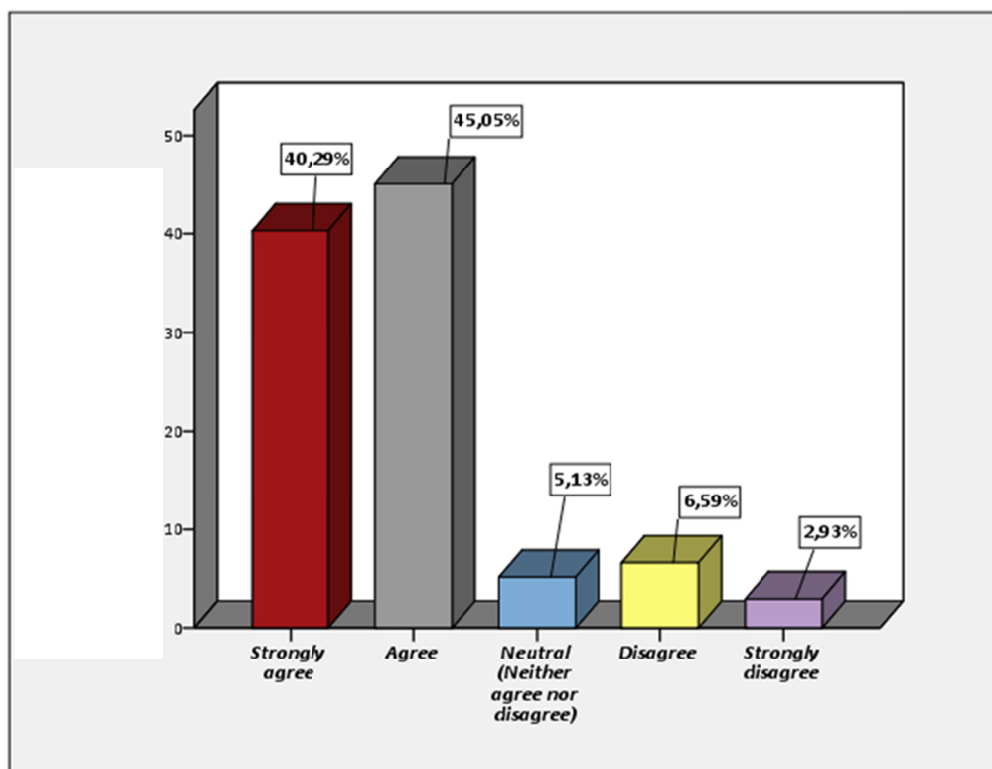


Figure 1. Degree of agreement and disagreement representing the parents' attitudes

Note. The bar graph depicts the percentages for agreement and disagreement expressed by the parents towards exposing their children to English in primary education.

As delineated in Figure1, the highest percentage (45.05%) represented the parents who expressed their agreement towards exposing their children to English at the primary school level. A close percentage (40.29%) also maintained the same view by expressing their strong agreement. Compared to these percentages, very low

percentages were recorded for the parents who disagreed (6.59%) and strongly disagreed (2.93%) with early exposure to English. The majority of the parents emphasised the need for English to be learnt by their children at primary school as it is the language of science and technology that is required in many fields, especially higher studies.

Table 2. Degree of approval/disapproval on the role of English in fostering education

Definitely yes	Yes	Undecided	No	Definitely no
157	103	7	3	3

Note. Statistics shown above represent the degree of approval and disapproval expressed by the parents towards the need of English to foster children's education.

The highest frequency (N = 157) was calculated for the parents who asserted that exposing their children to English at an early age would foster their education. An additional high frequency (N = 103) of the parents emphasised the same idea. Those who opposed and denied the role of English in fostering their children's education by choosing 'No' (N = 3) or 'Definitely no' (N = 3) represented minorities compared to the beforehand mentioned frequencies. The majority of the parents support teaching English at an early age because the language can foster their children's educational level as it is the international language that is required in many fields and becomes a requirement for job and educational career. Proceeding to further studies abroad requires mastering English, for that, the majority of the parents may assert the importance of English for their children's education for future career development.

Table 3. Degree of agreement/disagreement with English and keeping up to date

Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
138	119	9	4	3

Note. The table lists the frequencies for the degree of agreement and disagreement expressed by the parents on the role of English in keeping their children up to date and abreast of the world changes.

A maximal frequency (N = 138) involved the parents who strongly agreed that early exposure to English would help their children know what is happening around the world and keep them abreast of the different developments. The standpoint was also supported by 119 parents, whilst an opposing view (N = 4 Disagree; N = 3 Strongly disagree) was expressed by the parents who claimed that English would not contribute to keeping their children up to date. English is the international language which is used for cross cultural communication and mastering such a language would keep people abreast of the world issues and developments.

Table 4. Final comments, feedback and suggestions provided by the parents

Planning and materials	English instead of French in Algeria	Teaching English at primary school and reducing the program	Setting English as a second language
37	84	100	17

Note. The table lists the frequencies for the different comments and suggestions provided by the parents on the usefulness of English and its necessity to be taught at an early age to their children.

Out of the total frequencies, the highest number of the parents (N = 100) emphasised that English should be taught at primary school with a condition of reducing the primary school program as many subjects are taught to little children which induced a stressful environment for learning and lack of apprehension. Prior to the implementation of the language, parents (N = 37) recommended for future policy designers that the program of primary school including that of English should be planned carefully and materials should be based on technology use. Out of them, 84 parents asserted that French should be eliminated and replaced by English as the latter is the language of global communication, science and technology. English should be set as a second language after the first national language (Arabic) in Algeria (N = 17). It can be alluded to the fact that teaching English is strongly desired by the majority of the parents in different areas of Algeria who complained the crowded program which tired their children and affected their learning outcomes.

4. Discussion and Results

The results revealed that a high majority of the Algerian parents support early exposure to English by their children and promote its learning at the primary school level as they expressed their strong agreement towards it. These parents believe that exposing their children to English would promote their educational career and keep them abreast of the world events and developments as English is the international language used for cross cultural communication and scientific exchanges. Their strong approval alludes to the fact that the parents are wary of the importance that English is gaining, especially for their children's educational and professional career. Replacing French by English and setting the latter as the second language after the national language in Algeria are strongly desired by a high number of the parents. Considering the primary school program was strongly emphasised as many subjects are taught to primary school pupils. Henceforth, some subjects can be eliminated to be taught at later stages of education as middle or secondary ones. The early learning of English at primary school in Algeria is promoted by a high majority of the parents as the language intruded various domains and becomes a priority in different fields as communication, trade, tourism and education.

5. Conclusion

The present study aimed at identifying the attitudes of Algerian parents towards exposing their children to English and specifying the reasons behind their standpoint. The study was a written support for the demands rose by the parents in 2015/2016 to teach their children English in primary education and set this language as a first foreign language instead of French in Algeria. Attention, priority and importance should be directed to English as it becomes required for the country's development in different arenas as education. An urge need for English is expressed by parents as they represent one of the main stakeholders in educational contexts. The Algerian government and ministerial bodies as the Ministry of National Education should think about exposing primary school pupils to English at an early age, and educational curricula in Algeria should be directed towards devoting more attention and importance to English.

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