

Teachers’ Challenges with the English-blended Instruction: The Case of Teachers from Tlemcen and Biskra University

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Abstract: *The present study discusses the problems challenging the success of the English-blended instruction program in Algeria. The study focuses on the problems related to student-teachers' abstention from attending the English training program at the CEIL centers in Tlemcen and Biskra universities. To address this problem, the study follows a qualitative research method design that relies on the contribution of six student teachers through semi-structured interviews and unstructured interviews with three teachers of the program to collect data on the number of program attendees. The study concludes that student teachers abstain from attending English language classes due to three main reasons: 1) the inconvenience of planning and scheduling the language classes; 2) the proficiency level of the student teachers and their placement in language classes; and 3) the negative attitudes of student teachers toward the training program and the EMI reform. The findings of the study imply that there would be jeopardy to the success of English-blended instruction in Algerian universities.*

Keywords: *English-blended instruction, English as a medium of instruction (EMI), proficiency levels, Algeria, planning and scheduling.*

1. Introduction

Education in Algeria is an enterprise that has always encountered ebb and flow due to the numerous reforms that shaped its nature. The reforms mostly addressed areas of the year count devoted to each educational system (primary, middle, high school, and tertiary systems), the content to be taught, and the national and foreign languages in education. Due to the scope of the present paper, the focus is on the latter area (i.e., foreign languages in education) which was and still is an area of both political and public practices. The first reform in this area is the one that urged the implementation of the English language in primary schools starting from the fourth year of the latter in 1995 (Miliani, 2000) and it was the first attempt of the government to include the public in decision making through a bottom-up approach. In other words, the government gave freedom of choice to Algerian pupils and parents to select between two foreign languages (French and English) to study in the fourth year of primary school. A lot of criticism targeted the reform due to the neglect of considering the sociolinguistic reality of Algeria in the 1990s (Miliani, 2000). After the failure of the implementation of the English language reform, the Ministry of Education introduced a new reform related to the situation of English teaching in the 2000s (Chelli, 2011). This reform was mostly related to language teaching methods and curriculum development of the English language in Algerian schools. After the application of this reform, English was inaugurated in the first year of middle school which enabled learners to encounter the language for seven years in total; amongst are four in middle school and three in high school (Chelli, 2011). Amid the English inauguration, the Ministry of Higher Education decided to implement the Competency-Based Approach (CBA) as an approach to teaching English (Benadla, 2012). The CBA approach was viewed as an effective method by many (e.g., Benadla, 2012; Chelli, 2011) and criticized by others (e.g., Mirza, 2016) because of the logistic and demographic criteria of the Algerian classroom.

Most recently, after the hirak protests in 2019 (also known as the Smile Revolution), the Algerian government opted for a more inclusive approach where the Algerians were involved in the decision-making through surveys of students and the academic family (Maraf and Osam, 2022). The first survey of students was answered by 90 thousand participants, amongst 94.4% voted for the need to enhance the use of English in higher education on the 5th of July 2019 while the second survey targeted academicians to understand the competencies English language instructors in Algeria's higher education need to have. After collecting data from bottom-up parties, the Algerian government decided to announce new reforms that aim to teach English in primary schools starting from the third year of primary education instead of the first year of middle school (Elbilad.net, 2022) and introducing a program of teaching English to university teachers (Journal el Bilad, 2023). The current paper focuses on the program of teaching English to teachers of the scientific and technical departments as a new reform was initiated in February 2023. The Algerian government urged universities to launch this program to prepare teachers to use English by the academic year 2023-2024. The present study addresses the challenges facing the program of teaching student-teachers that were reflected by teachers and student-teachers of the program. Therefore, the study aims to reveal the nature of the challenges of the program so that measures can be undertaken to avoid jeopardizing the success of English as a medium of instruction reform.

2. Review of literature

The program of teaching English to university teachers in Algerian universities is the preparation phase for inaugurating the reform of English as the medium of instruction. Therefore, the success of the reform depends on the success of the preparation phase. The initiation of the preparation phase indicates that Algerian universities attribute attention to professional development which has been discussed as one of the main challenges to teaching using EMI (O'Dowd, 2018). Universities organize language support courses that aim to prepare teachers with English skills. There are specific competencies that teachers who teach using EMI need to possess during the preparation phase. Broggin and Costa (2017) consider proficiency in English as one of the main concerns to the success of the use of English as the medium of instruction because most EMI teachers are nonnative teachers so their proficiency and the variety of levels within the same university is always a question of concern since they may affect content learning. However, language support courses in the EFL context mainly focus on teachers' general language proficiency (GLP). In other words, GLP is tested by institutions and cannot guarantee teachers' success in their classroom teaching (Freeman, Katz, Gomez & Burns, 2015). As stated by Wang (2021), language proficiency is a nucleus point in language training programs, however, this proficiency is general and its practice cannot identify EMI teachers' needs.

Another challenge is the attitudes of teachers toward the EMI program (Dearden & Macaro, 2016) which can risk the outcomes of EMI if the teachers think negatively of the program itself. English as a medium of instruction program implies "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English" (Dearden & Macaro, 20, p. 445). Therefore, it is crucial for university teachers to have certain skills that would guarantee success in using a language other than the local or other languages to teach. Kyeyune (2010) studied the Ugandan context and explained that teachers need skills in questioning and explaining to help students overcome language-related barriers that they might encounter during EMI instruction. Similarly, William Dharna Raja & Selvi (2011) confirm that most teachers experience great difficulty in helping students understand the learning content because English is generally their second language or even second foreign language as in the case of Algeria.

In addition to the challenges teachers encounter, there are other challenges related to the organizational phase of introducing EMI as a reform. Madhavan and McDonald (2014) explain that institutions usually lack clear policy statements about the teaching and assessment of EMI after implementing the program. Likewise, the Algerian policymakers have indeed urged the implementation of EMI in the academic year 2023-2024; however, there are no clear policies [yet] on the way it is going to be taught or the language(s) that would be used for assessment after EMI. In fact, EMI in higher education aims to internationalize universities (Wilkinson, 2013), ease access to knowledge from international literature, and eventually lead the country's scientific, economic, and social development (Hu, 2007). However, these aims cannot be attained unless all challenges are addressed and all policies are set to pave the way for the successful execution of reforms. Hereafter, Algerian policymakers are called to look into the challenges facing the preparation phase of the reform to avoid jeopardizing its success.

Also, they are beseeched to set policies regarding the teaching methodologies teachers are advised to undertake during EMI and the assessment guidelines they are entitled to follow.

3. Methodology

The study followed a qualitative research method design due to the interest in understanding a human problem and the context of the participants, and in collecting information from the participants directly (Creswell, 2014). The research data were collected through semi-structured and unstructured interviews. The former (the semi-structured interviews) was designed to collect data from teacher-students to allow the researchers to develop a keen understanding of the topic (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006) while the latter (unstructured interviews) addressed the English program teachers because of the aim was to have an informal conversation with the participants (Patton, 2002) to query the number of students they have in their classes.

3.1. Participants

The participants were six student teachers (i.e., trainees) and three English program teachers (i.e., trainers). The trainees, 3 males and 3 females, were aged between 31 and 58 while the trainers were three females, aged between 33 and 45. All the trainers were affiliated with Tlemcen University whilst there were five trainees from Tlemcen University and one trainee from Biskra University. All the trainee participants are affiliated with the science, engineering, and economy departments. Table 1 below provides more details of the trainee participants.

TABLE I: Detailed information about the trainee participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Affiliation
Trainee 1	Female	45	Biology Department/Tlemcen University
Trainee 2	Female	36	Biology Department/Tlemcen University
Trainee 3	Male	58	Biology Department/Tlemcen University
Trainee 4	Male	33	Civil Engineering Department/Biskra University
Trainee 5	Female	31	Economy Department/Tlemcen University
Trainee 6	Male	32	Electric and Electronic Engineering Department/Tlemcen University

The semi-structured interviews with the trainees were conducted using an audio-call application (WhatsApp) and were recorded and transcribed afterward. On the other hand, the unstructured interviews with the trainers were conducted using WhatsApp audio recordings by the second author of this paper.

3.2. Ethical considerations

With regard to the ethical considerations related to the trainees, all the participant trainees signed a consent form prior to conducting the interviews. However, the trainers gave their verbal consent to publish their responses to our unstructured interview questions. The identity of all participants was kept anonymous in this study and was presented using the word trainer or trainee with a corresponding participant number (e.g. trainee 1; trainer 1).

3.3. Data collection and analysis

The trainees' interviews of 8-10 min dealt with the following areas: 1) background information; and 2) questions related to the English training program. The questions of the second area were as follows: Have you heard of the English national program? Have you participated in the language test? Did you join any classes in the training program? Yes? How? How many times? If not, why not? Do you think this program would be beneficial for you? Do you plan on using English as a medium of instruction next year? Why? Why not?.

Unlike the trainees' interviews, the trainers' interviews were only 2-3 min long and mainly focused on responding to the questions: how many trainees do you have in your class? How many of these attended regularly?

The interviews were conducted in English but translation into Arabic was a common practice because of the proficiency levels of the participants. The interviews were clustered into themes to fulfill the aims of the current study. The themes are, but are not exclusive to the following: pre-training proficiency test challenges, proficiency levels' challenges, and planning and scheduling challenges.

4. Results

The findings of the present paper are divided into the following sub-findings: awareness about the existence of a national English training program, pre-training proficiency test challenges, challenges of the English training program, and the future of EMI in Algeria.

4.1. Awareness about the Existence of a National English Training Program

In order to ensure participation in any program, stakeholders are asked to confirm that all the participants are aware that there is a program. However, two out of six participants confirmed that they had no prior knowledge of the existence of a national English training program until it was already in practice as appears in Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 1

No, I could know late that there would be a national program (Trainee 2, age: 36)

On the other hand, the majority of the trainees acknowledged knowing the channels used to spread information about the program and the reasons behind initiating the program as Excerpt 2 and Excerpt 3 demonstrate respectively.

Excerpt 2

Of course, I have heard of the program. I received emails and they explained to us. (Trainee 5, age: 31)

Excerpt 3

Yes, I know there is a program. As you know, the president wants to turn to English for multiple reasons, so he said teachers of scientific and technical departments need to teach students in English. (Trainee 4, age: 33)

Despite the findings that show that the majority of trainees acknowledged knowing of the program through different communication channels, it remains perilous to know that some trainees did not hear of the program only after it was being practiced because such unawareness risks the success of the preparatory program and the English-blended instruction reform.

4.2. Pre-Training Proficiency Test Challenges

Algerian universities launched a test prior to the inauguration of the national training program. The test aimed to assess the proficiency levels of the trainees so there would be appropriate placement of trainees within their level groups.

The findings show that there are trainees who did not participate in the test, trainees who questioned the usefulness of the test, and trainees who participated in the test.

Excerpt 1

There was a test yes but because of the few numbers of teachers who are teaching, they mixed all levels in the same group, so the test was useless. (Trainee 4, age: 33)

Trainee 4 in Excerpt 1 is affiliated with Biskra University. His response shows that there is a problem related to the usefulness of the test in light of the few number of teachers assigned as trainers. This situation of wrongful level placement, however, is not observed in the responses of the trainees from Tlemcen University which shows a lack of a unified system of practice among all Algerian universities.

4.3. Challenges of the English Training Program

In addition to the challenges that preceded the actual start of the training program, there are currently other challenges that threaten the success of the program. Scheduling and planning of the training sessions, for instance, is one of the challenges reported by the trainees of the participants.

Excerpt 1

No, It's a matter of time, it clashes with my teaching days, and I have to go back home, then go back to study at 4 pm. After, I did not care about time or anything related to this program. (Trainee 1, age: 45)

Excerpt 2

I haven't joined any classes though I was excited, however, when they sent the schedule, it didn't arrange my timetable. It clashed with exam time, so I canceled my plan of going. (Trainee 5, age: 31)

It must be highlighted that the program at Tlemcen University was planned at 4:00 p.m. so that it does not clash with the teachers' teaching schedule. However, only one trainee (Trainee 3) attended four weeks of the program while all the other trainees from this university confirmed that they could not attend because their official teaching classes end early and they cannot go back to university or their training hours clash with other teaching duties such as exams.

Unlike the trainees from Tlemcen University who had no classes that clash with their official teaching hours, the trainee from Biskra University explains that the training sessions clash with his official teaching hours as appears in Excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3

The program started in February and finished in May, 3 hours a week but they combined all the hours in one session because there are no teachers. My class was on Sunday from 8 to 11 and I normally teach a lecture on this day from 8 to 9:30 so I can't attend all the sessions. (Trainee 4, age: 33)

The trainers' responses go hand in hand with the trainees' feedback since the three trainers explain that there are very few numbers of attendees in the program due to their workload. Table 2 below summarizes the trainers' responses on the number of attendees in their teaching sessions.

TABLE II: Number of attendees in the English training program

Trainers	Training span	Total number of trainees	Total number of attendees during the training span	Attendees in percentages
Trainer 1	Phase 1: September 2022 to March 2023	120	22 to 30	18.33% to 25%
	Phase 2: May 2023 to July 2023	48	20 to 25	41.66% to 52.08%
Trainer 2	February 2023 to May 2023	110	10 to 15	09.09% to 13.64%
Trainer 3	February 2023 to May 2023	47	30 to 40	63.83% to 85.11%

The trainers explain the absence of their trainees by referring to the unsuitability of the training sessions with their teaching program. Another reason is the medical trainees who work shifts in the hospital and cannot attend training sessions as explained by Trainer 2.

Planning and scheduling are not the only challenges to the success of the training program. The attitudes of trainees towards the program are another challenge that threatens the success of the program. All the trainees that were interviewed confirmed that the program would not be beneficial for them because of the lack of clear pedagogy by the trainers and the irrelevance of the content taught to their needs.

Excerpt 4

There is no clear pedagogy, everyone is teaching the way he knows. Our teacher was using Newheadway, which is really not beneficial for the teachers who are going to teach in English, plus there was a lack of technical English. For example, one student asks what is the meaning of the word 'complain' which I think is easy, but because there are other students from lower levels in the class, time is wasted on explaining small things like this. (Trainee 4, age: 33)

The freedom attributed to trainers to use the material they find suitably developed concerns and negative attitudes from the trainees' side. The majority of the trainees believe they are learning content that would not benefit them in their teaching using English as the medium of instruction.

Excerpt 5

As far as I heard from those who attended, the program was not helpful, teachers instead of learning about how to use English in their teaching class, they learned through these classes about how to make an order in a restaurant, and other conversations alike. (Trainee 6, age: 32)

As Excerpt 5 demonstrates, Trainee 6 reflects on the irrelevance of the taught content. It must be highlighted that the Ministry of Higher Education did not set policies regarding the teaching content of this training program, it rather gave the trainers freedom to design their own teaching curriculum.

4.4. The Future of EMI Reform in Algeria

To understand the future of the EMI reform in Algeria, it is crucial to address the intentions of using English in their teaching in the next academic year 2023-2024. The majority of trainees in the present study confirm that they are not going to use English as a means of instruction. For instance, Trainee 1 in Excerpt 1 clarifies that teachers have already had negative attitudes toward the EMI reform because of the proficiency level of Algerian university teachers and Algerian students.

Excerpt 1

To use or not, this time we answered a survey at the level of my department. They asked us if we are able to teach in English. All of us answer 'not able' even those who are stronger, she supervised someone in English, and she answered 'cannot'. She said 'It's not overnight' to teach English. Second, if I make an effort and develop my English, will students understand me? Sometimes they cannot understand French which is a second language in Algeria. This year, the ministry said will train new baccalaureate students online, this is nonsense. It cannot be implemented in two days. This is not how to work, this is rumbling. Speaking for myself, I will always teach in French, or I will shift to French and not to English. I met people at conferences (Iraqi people and others) who speak in English, but they talk in Arabic sometimes. (Trainee 1, age: 45)

Similar to Trainee 1, Trainee 6 in Excerpt 2 referred to the use of the French language instead of English in the next academic year. This finding shows that the native language (i.e., Arabic) and the first foreign language (i.e., French) challenge the presence of English in Algeria due to students' lack of proficiency in English.

Excerpt 2

I'm not planning to use it, as students' level in engineering is weak, and teachers will find themselves using English, explaining in French as they are used to it, and will also add Arabic if they find students staring at them. (Trainee 5, age: 31)

Even the teachers who have good levels of English expressed discontent with the content they are learning at the English training program as it lacks the aspect of accommodating English to their purposes as Trainee 4 explains in Excerpt 3. This shows that the training progress affects the outcome of the EMI reform.

Excerpt 3

To be honest, I can do it easily because I can speak English without attending those courses, but I wanted to attend to learn more technical English words and that was not available.

Some trainees manifested negative attitudes toward the EMI reform and criticized its inauguration because they believed that the current time was not the right time to move forward with this policy. Excerpt 4 below is an example of those beliefs.

Excerpt 4

I think it's not the right time for this policy, in this time only African students coming from Anglophonic countries will be able to understand and communicate with teachers, however, our students not. (Trainee 6, age: 32)

All in all, the trainees deliberately expressed their negative views toward the use of the English language as the medium of instruction which indicates that the EMI reform is challenged by these views as it is by other practices in the program, such as planning and scheduling, proficiency, and the negative attitudes toward the training program.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The present paper discusses the challenges jeopardizing the success of the English training program and the EMI reform in Algerian universities. The study addresses the challenges from the perspective of student-teachers (i.e., trainees) without focusing on the details related to the teaching content of the training program as it is not in the scope of the current paper.

The findings show that the challenges are divided into three categories: 1) pre-training challenges; 2) training program challenges; and 3) post-training challenges. The first category of challenges (i.e., pre-training challenges) involves the unawareness of some trainees about the existence of an English training program and the uselessness of the proficiency test that preceded the training program because its results were not considered in the level placement in Biskra University and it was challenging for trainees at Tlemcen University.

The second category (i.e., training program challenges), however, indicates that the training program suffers from the uninterest of the trainees which is expressed through the low numbers of attendees in the training classes that was explained by the deficiency in planning and scheduling. Another challenge that faces the training program is the lack of clear policies regarding the content taught by the teachers of the training program as it lacks clear pedagogy and focus on the technicality of using English as a medium of instruction.

The last category of challenges (i.e., post-training challenges) is the category that sends signals of an imminent threat to the EMI reform. The reason behind that is the negative attitudes of the trainees toward the reform itself because of the students' and teachers' levels of proficiency and toward the doubted benefits of the training program, as it does not target their areas of interest, that is to use English as a medium of instruction.

The findings indicate that Algeria is nowadays implementing professional development (in the form of an English training program) which is usually considered one of the main concerns of using EMI (O'Dowd, 2018). However, the issue of proficiency, whether it is students' or teachers' proficiency, is still a disturbing challenge to the success of the reform and the training program. Proficiency problems are common in academic contexts where teachers and students are nonnatives as explained by Brogginini and Costa (2017), but measures should be undertaken to limit its impact on the teaching using EMI.

One of the biggest challenges of successfully executing the EMI reform, we believe, is the negative attitudes of the university teachers towards the training program and the English-blended instruction. Dearden and Macaro (2016) referred to the problem of attitudes and explained that teachers should be comfortable teaching in another language other than their mother tongue, otherwise, the teaching channels and the content would be at risk.

The level of Algerian students in English raises concerns among Algerian teachers. Therefore, teachers need to be trained in questioning and explaining skills as explained by Kyeyune (2010) and William Dharna Raja & Selvi (2011) to help their students overcome the language barrier. More importantly, Algerian policymakers need to pay more attention to the policy regarding the procedural steps and details of executing the EMI reform. In fact, Madhavan and McDonald (2014) discussed the importance of having clear policy statements about the teaching and assessment of EMI. The area of lacking policies caused ambiguity and arbitrariness among the trainers and trainees and resulted in unclear pedagogies and practices that the trainees found controversial in Algeria.

All in all, the use of EMI in universities aims to internationalize universities (Wilkinson, 2013) and to ease access to knowledge and development (Hu, 2007). However, the negative attitudes of trainees toward the EMI reform indicate an unawareness of these aims, and Algerian stakeholders are invited to raise awareness and build stronger communication channels to alter these attitudes. Finally, we call for further research to study and report on the practices of the policymakers and academicians' execution of the EMI reform during the academic year 2023-2024.

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