

## Investigating the Algerian Attitudes towards the Status of French Language in Algeria

**BOUARFA Fatima Zahra\***

Tahri Mohamed University of Bechar  
(Algeria)

Email: [bouarfafatimaz@gmail.com](mailto:bouarfafatimaz@gmail.com)

**Dr. BENKETAF Hafid**

Tahri Mohamed University of Bechar  
(Algeria)

Email: [benketaf.hafid@univ-bechar.dz](mailto:benketaf.hafid@univ-bechar.dz)  
تاريخ الاستلام: 2022/05/24 تاريخ النشر: 2022/05/13  
القبول: 2022/04/15

### Abstract:

Language is an instrumental component of the culture of a community through which the individual expresses his vision of the world. The aim of this article is to study the linguistic situation in Algeria today because several languages coexist within the framework of a linguistic policy capable of taking into account all linguistic diversities. Among these languages, there is French. Algeria is one of the largest countries in the world that speaks French. It is used almost everywhere, in the street, administration, media, school and even in political and some official meetings. The research methodology in this article employs qualitative and quantitative approach including two questionnaires directed to students of English and the administrative workers of Belhadj Bouchaib University in Ain Temouchent in addition to an interview with teachers of English to gather data on their perceptions on the status of French in Algeria. The case study includes 100 students of English who are chosen randomly, 60 administrative workers in the university and about 40 teachers of English. The case study reveals that although the Algerian authorities have implemented the policy of Arabisation in almost all fields by imposing the Arabic language, French is still used in many domains and in people's life in general. This implies that despite its equivocal status in Algeria, its use expanded significantly after independence. Even though it represents a foreign language, it continues to be a professional communication tool in many sectors.

**Key Words:** Language- Culture-Linguistic Diversity-French -Linguistic Conflict

\* Corresponding author

## 1. Introduction

The Algerian Struggle for independence from the French colonisation lasted for more than seven years until it gained its sovereignty in 1962 with a heavy toll in lives and material. However, Algeria did not get liberated totally from French hegemony since linguistically it remained dependent to French that was used in most key sectors mainly education and administration. It was considered by some Algerian intellectuals as spoils gained from the liberation war and a means to the development and the civilisation of the country. On the other hand, others considered that the country's independence could not be achieved unless it was liberated from the domination of the occupier's language and reviving the national language, Arabic.

The reality of the dominance of French in Algeria constitutes one of the obstacles that hinder the nation from achieving what it aspires to in the field of freedom from intellectual and cultural dependence. The situation raises two questions: What is the reason for the dominance of French on most sectors in Algeria? How can Arabic be revived in Algeria in order to replace French? To answer these questions a case study was held at the BelhadjBouchaib University, Ain Temouchent, and Tahri Mohamed University, Bechar, with the use of two different research tools: two structured questionnaires directed to the administrative employees of the university and students of English. The second is an interview directed to all teachers of English at the department of English.

## 2. History of French Language in Algeria

Algeria is a country that testifies to the existence of several languages or linguistic varieties. Each of them occupies a place or a specific status, whether at the local level of a region such as Berber, Chaoui, or at the national level such as standard Arabic, dialectal Arabic, and very particularly the French language. The history of French in Algeria begins with colonization, the objective of the French army was not only to violate the Algerians' land and their property but it had extended until their culture and their language. To achieve the expansionist objectives of the Third Republic, it was necessary to definitively disaggregate the foundations of the Arabic Algerian society and to practice a little intensive war in the Arab culture and language (Derradji 2002).

During the colonial period, France sought to make the Algerians assimilate the French culture and to eradicate their society from its foundations. The young Algerians were targeted at first through their education in French schools that teach the languages and all cultural aspects of the French Civilisation. The purpose was that they would become useful and mediating elements between the colonizer and the rest of the indigenous population (Turin, 1971). Indeed, the comprehensive Francization policy that the occupation has followed in education for the Algerians is not limited to the field of education in its various stages, including curricula, systems, books, language of teaching, educational administration and general guidance only, but also it covered all

areas of social, cultural and administrative life in the country (Turki,1981). A French official report stated in 1849 that:

“We do not forget that our language is the ruling language, because our civil, penal and punitive judiciary issues rulings on Arabs who stand in its yard with this language. In this language, all official communications must be issued as quickly as possible in French, all contracts must be written, we do not have to waive the rights of our language. The most important thing that must be taken care of above all is to strive to make the French language common and general among Algerians”. (Al-Basayer Newspaper Editor, 1954, p.1). (Translation is mine)

After the independence, Algeria needed to rebuild up as an Arab-Muslim nation. This presented a huge number of difficulties. In the first place, while Arabisation of the French education system was generally accepted as being necessary, there was also a clear need to retain French, at least for some time as the medium of instruction in a certain fields of education and as a means of access to modern scientific progress. As a result, the use of the Arabic and French languages (bilingualism) in education and administration emerged as an unavoidable task for the Algerian government to avoid any social or pedagogical problems. However, such an option would not overcome the language problem unless a clear policy was adopted regarding the role of the Arabic language in independent Algeria (Djabri, 1981).

A debate emerged between the Arab-speaking and Francophone advocates. The former consisted of Algerian cadres who studied in the Quranic schools and intellectuals from Arab universities, often with religious or literary training, and keen to find their own place in a largely French-speaking environment. Upon his release from the French custody in the spring of 1962, Ahmed ben Bella, who was the first Algerian President (1962-1965), declared his adherence to Arab nationalism in French: "*Nous sommes des Arabs!*" (We are Arabs!). Arabisation was presented as a means to fight the imperialist and colonialist French language (Goumeziane, 1994). However, French was taught as a subject and as the first mandatory foreign language from the second grade of the elementary course from the 1970s, this made it difficult to Arabise the key sectors like the administration.

Indeed, the Arabisation of the administrations did not have tangible results as it was expected. In Algeria, where the administration was entirely functioning in French after the independence in 1962, the task was announced more arduous. Especially since the educational system hardly produced Arabised Algerians. It was then thought that Arabising the administration would be achieved by Arabising its officials through night schools to learn classical Arabic (Moatassime, 1992).

Despite the government's efforts to impose the Arabic language and suppress French, especially through an educational method, the two languages are still present in

Algeria today, just as French colonialism failed to eliminate the Arabic language. In post-colonial Algeria, modern Standard Arabic is defined as the national and official language, while French is officially considered as a foreign language active in Algeria (Queffélec, 2002). While both languages have their own institutional status, they are still cohabitating linguistically. For example, a presidential decree of 1969 requires that all state institutions translate into Arabic all official texts and administrative documents that have been developed in the French language, and there are laws that state that all official texts and documents should use only the Arabic language.<sup>1</sup> This is still observed in the issuing of administrative directives in key industries such as Sonatrach or Sonelgaz. In addition, passports and proper names are in both languages, and stamps and money are only printed in Arabic.<sup>2</sup> In fact, France has never been in need to struggle to maintain its language in Algeria since it was effectively preserved by the Algerians themselves.

The paradoxical linguistic situation in Algeria has given rise to massive "cultural struggles" over the choice of language or languages of instruction in Algeria because even before Algerian independence, changes in attitudes toward the national language, local dialects, became apparent. It was noted that the growth of the reformist and nationalist movements was that there were some Algerians with an Islamic educational background showed great interest in the French education for their children, and many Algerians with French educational background, especially politicians like President Houari Boumedienne, remained loyal to Arabic language and Algerian cultural identity (Djabri, 1981).

### 3. Case Study

The research was carried out at Belhadj Bouchaib University in Ain Temouchent which situated in the Northern-West of the country. The University opened its doors in 2009 as a University Center, but attained the status of a university on November 22, 2020. The department of Letters and Foreign Languages started to work with the opening of the University Center including Arabic letters and French. The English department, on other hand, was not founded until 2012. The available specialties of English in Masters Studies are linguistics, literature, and civilization. During the academic year 2020/2021, Didactics and Applied linguistics replaced the specialty of Linguistics. The section of English became recently an independent department. The English department contains 24 permanent teachers and 684 students. The case study was chosen because it is appropriate to have a thorough investigation of a specific situation or a specific phenomenon and to outline recommendations for future

---

improvement of the concerned case. The aim behind this choice is to provide an in-depth understanding of the dominance of French language over Arabic in Algeria.

#### **4. Target Population**

Informants are university students, teachers, and administrative staff in Ain Temouchent who were targeted to respond to the research instruments. However, from this larger population, we have drawn a sample of 100 students of English to represent the whole population. The sample population in this research was selected randomly without specifying their academic level to participate in this research work. The study also involves 40 Algerian teachers of English aged between thirty and fifty years old. Their experience in teaching English ranges from 4 to 20 years and all of them hold the doctorate degree. In addition, sixty administrative employees from different departments were invited to participate in the research.

#### **5. Research Tools**

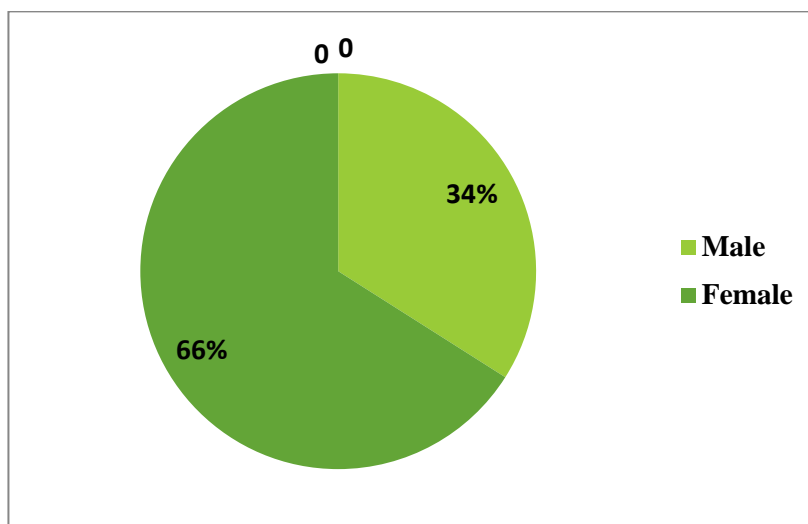
The research employs a mixed approach using together qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure reliability and generalisability of the findings through two structured questionnaires. The first was addressed to 100 students of English that have carried primary and secondary studies in Arabic are confronted to French whether at the university or in their daily activities. The language they studied as a foreign language in the primary and secondary levels becomes the language of instruction and recommendations at the university. A structured interview of 40 teachers of English was undertaken. The choice of these teachers stems from the fact that foreign language teachers resort to the use of French instead of Arabic either with their colleagues or with the administration employees. The second questionnaire was addressed to the university administrative employees who were chosen to be a part of this study because not all the administrations of the country are Arabised to study current situation of the French dominance in the Algerian administration.

#### **6. Results of the Students' Questionnaire**

The questionnaire is composed of nineteen close ended questions and three open ended questions and it was handed to students of English to gain insight into their perception of Arabisation and the status of French language in Algeria.

**Question 01:** This question intends to identify the gender of students since opinions and attitudes differ from males and females

It was noticed that the number of female students is superior to the number of male students. This difference in the number of students in terms of gender is represented in the following Figure:



**Figure 01:** Students' Gender

**Question 09:** this question aims to show in what language students prefer to read literary novels.

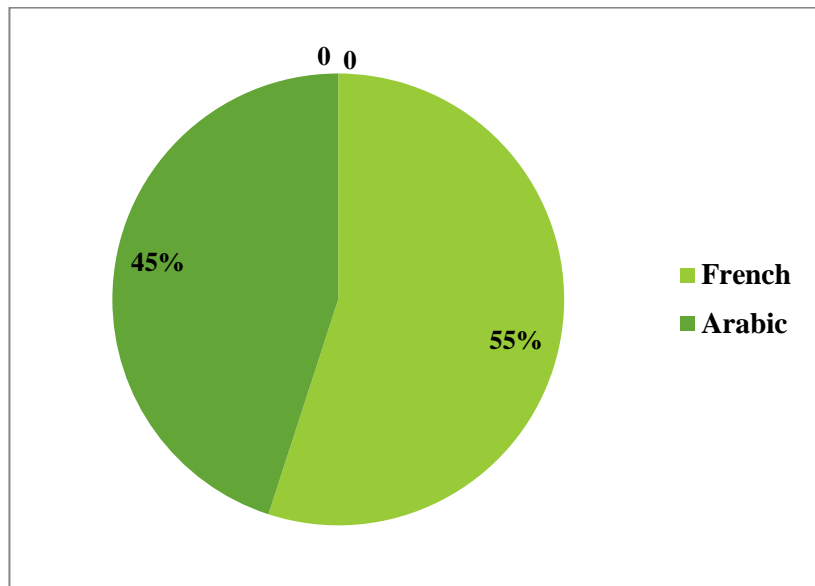
The students expressed their eagerness to read in different languages. Forty nine percent (49 %) of them stated that they read Arabic novels because Arabic is their mother tongue; however, 51% claimed that they read French novels because it helps them to enrich their French speaking skills.

	Number of Students	Percentage
Arabic Novels	49	49%
French Novels	51	51%
Total	100	100%

**Table 01:** Students' Preferred Language in Reading Novels

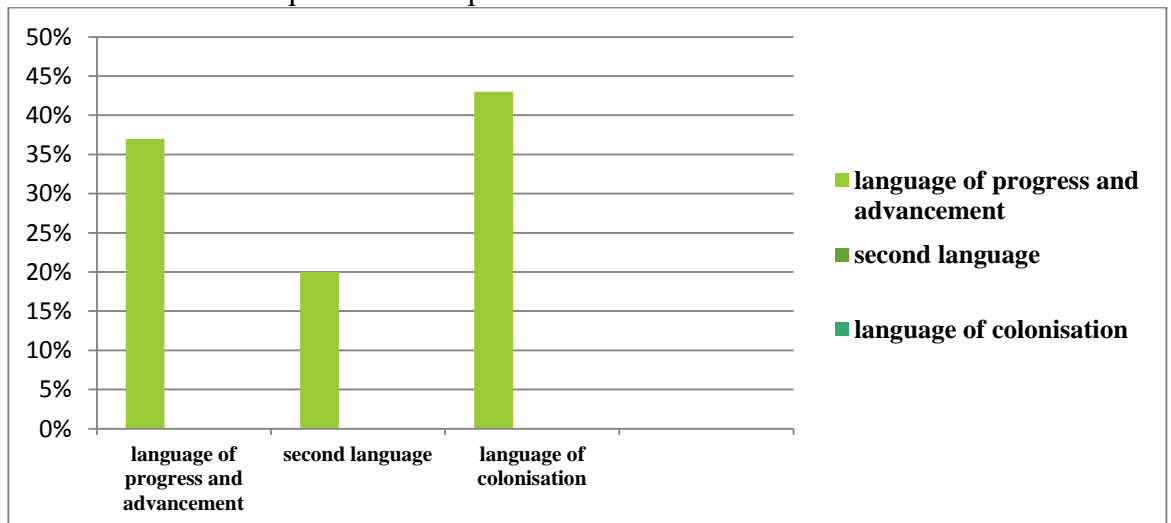
**Question 15:** The question sought to figure out the language that students prefer to speak with either at the university or outside the academic sphere. The results summarized in the following pie chart reveal that 55% of the students prefer to speak in French either at the university or in public places. This shows that French is used in various situations of daily life communication. On the other

hand, 45% of the students prefer speaking in dialectal Arabic because they do not master French to communicate with.



**Figure 02:** Preferred Language in Speaking

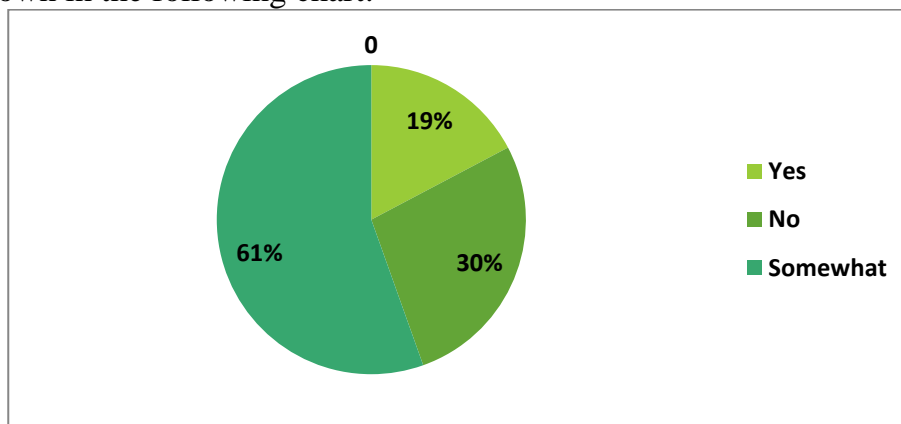
**Question 16:** For the sake of eliciting data on how students of English view French, the results of the sixtieth question are represented in the chart below:



**Figure 03:** Meaning of French to the Students

As figure 03 shows, 37% of the students believe that French is the language of progress and advancement and the sole way to keep pace with repercussions of the developed world. While 20 % of them consider French as a second language, it is worthy to learn it to add it on their languages list; however, 43% view French as the language of the bloody colonist who violated their homeland for many years.

**Question Seventeen:** This question is designed to identify students' views on whether the Arabisation policy succeeded in Algeria or not. The results are shown in the following chart:



The results clearly showed that the majority of students (61%) believe that Arabisation was relatively successful; it worked well in some sectors while failed in others. While 30% of them stated that this policy was a total failure, this is due to the efforts of the frenchified elite in Algeria, which contributed to the dominance of French in most sectors. The 19% remaining view that it succeeded in Algeria through a gradual process but it was fruitful since it produced a generation that masters and understand Arabic

#### 6.1. Results of Administrators' Questionnaire

A second questionnaire was designed for collecting information from the university administrative employees in order to examine their perceptions about the use and the dominance of French in the Algerian administration. The results gathered were analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

#### Question 01: Employees gender

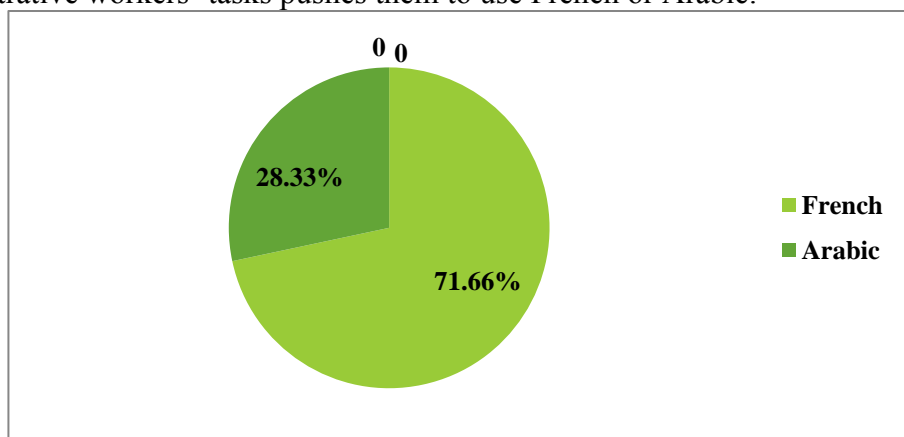
The results reveal that the majority of the employees in the university administration are females as shown in the table:



	Number	Percentage
Male	12	20%
Female	48	80%
Total	60	100%

**Table 02:** Employees' Gender

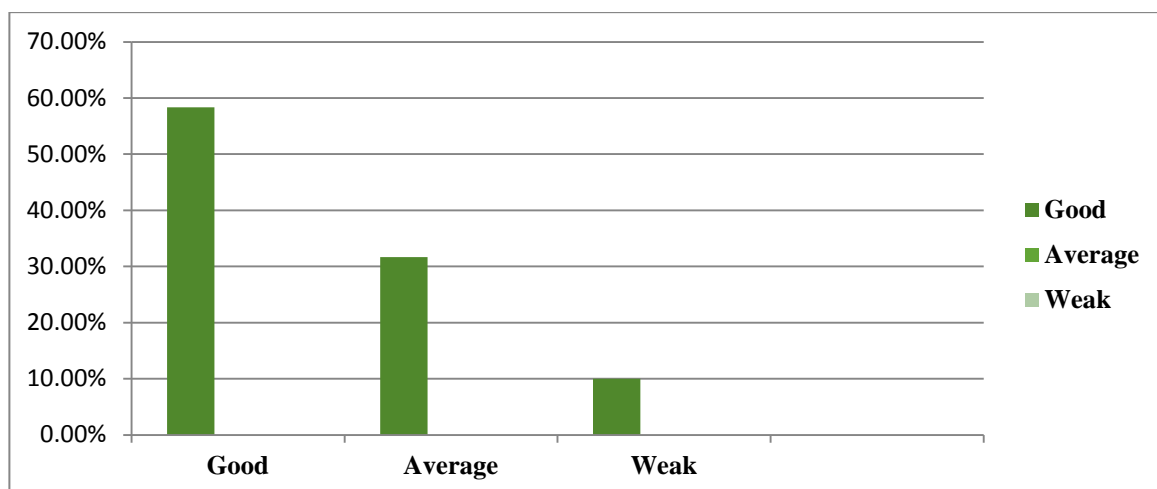
**Question 04:** The aim behind asking this question is to know whether the nature of the administrative workers' tasks pushes them to use French or Arabic.



**Figure 04:** The Language Used by the Administration Employees

The results reveal that only 17 workers (28.33%) use Arabic because the nature of their work requires its use, especially the employees who work in the Department of Human Sciences, Law, and Arabic Literature. On the other hand, the majority of the employees (71.66%) frequently utilise French especially those who work in the Department of letters and Foreign Languages, Sciences, Technology and the Department of Economics, Business and Management Sciences.

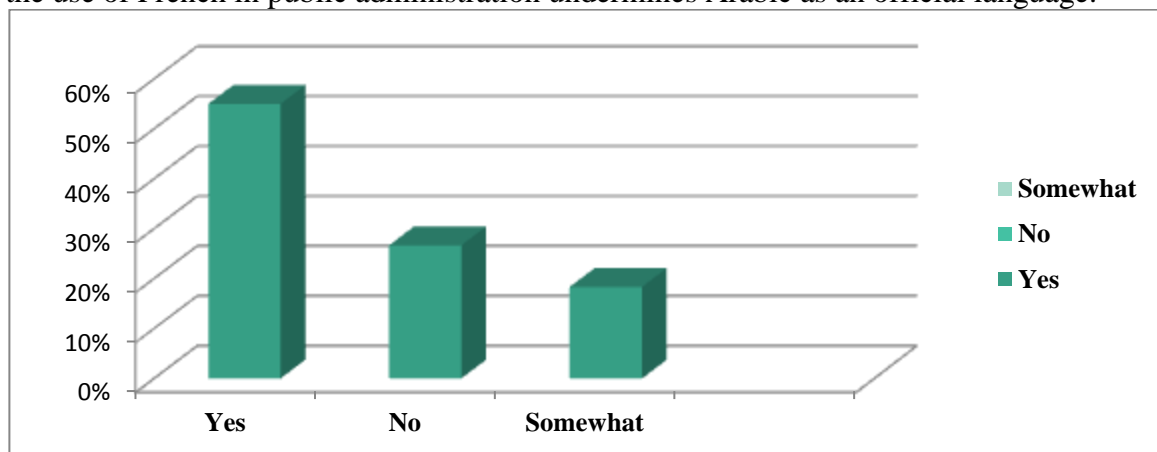
**Question 09:** To have an idea about the employees' French level, this question was formulated and the results are shown in the following figure:



**Figure 05:** Administrators' French Level

The figures show that the majority of the informants declare to master French to a certain extent. All the four skills seem to be mastered by 58.33% of the informants. This group represents the educated people with a high level of instruction; however, 31.66% of them state that their level is average. While the rest of them represent small group because they were not educated in French.

**Question 13:** the purpose of this question is to know if the working staffs believe that the use of French in public administration undermines Arabic as an official language.



**Figure 06:** Views of the Administration Employees on the Restriction of French to Arabic in Algerian Administration

Regarding the fact that French in Algerian administrations undermines Arabic as an official language, opinions differ among administrative workers on this matter. 55% of the participants believe that the frequent use of French in the administration

marginalizes Arabic and limits its effectiveness. Most public administration is forced to use French, since most of the documents they use are in French. While 26.66% perceives that the frequent use of French does not affect the status of Arabic and does not degrade its value. Rather, French is just a means imposed by the administration. The rest of them stated that the influence of French on the administration is not great and it is not a serious matter.

**Question 15:** The present question was asked in order to know the opinions of the working staff on the reasons that led to the dominance of French over Arabic in the Algerian administration.

Most of the informants stated that during the French occupation, the French language was the language of administration, the economy, the judiciary, and all life matters. The administration developed in that period with the language of the colonizer. It is difficult to translate all those administrative terms into Arabic and establish them in the minds of the Algerians. In addition, some of the terms do not have Arabic equivalents. The rest of the workers believe that French represents the colonial legacy and it is hard to give up. Some workers even deliberately speak French believing that it is a sign of being civilised to speak a prestigious language. People have a great deal of respect to the person who speaks French.

## 6.2. Results of the Teachers' Interview

A structured interview with 40 university teachers of English was carried out to explore their perceptions and views about the use of French in their daily communication. The answers of teachers of English were of great importance due to the fact that they teach a foreign language in the faculty of letters and foreign languages and due to the belief that they resort to use French more than Arabic if they want to code-switch.

**Question 01:** The way teachers of English learned French

Most of the teachers stated that they learned French at school but mainly from reading, French TV channels, radio stations, magazines and newspapers. While some of them revealed that they learned it in school only, the rest acquired the language due to their parents and the surrounding environment.

**Question 02:** Teachers' opinions on improving the level of French

Most of teachers believe that it is good to improve people's French because it might someday be very helpful to satisfy their needs in our modern world. It is good to learn more languages and to master them. However, few of them believe that their level is fair enough, they feel they have no irreversible gaps in this language. While the rest of them believe that French is a useless and a dead language, they do not need to learn it.

**Question 03:** Importance of French in education

Most teachers perceive that language learning is a major factor in personal, educational, cultural, and academic development, which makes it possible to acquire unlimited knowledge and to know the other so that it helps to deepen their knowledge in different fields. Among them, there are teachers who believe that French is the key language in scientific and technical streams in Algeria. While few of them stated that French is important because the Algerian educational system highly depends on it and it is imposed on the Algerians just to please the French.

**Question04:** Teachers' perceptions about the Arabisation policy implemented in Algeria

Most teachers believe that the Arabisation policy has a long way to go. It was successful till the secondary level and in some human and social specialities at university. They keep a lot of hope for in-depth work, which they must entrust to specialists, who will have to work in close collaboration with all those who want to give Arabic its real place in education and in all other fields (administrations, economy ...). On the other hand, the rest of them believe that Arabisation policy was a total failure after 59 years from the independence. Few of them stated that this policy despises minorities and undermines the rights of the other communities like the Tamazight.

**Question 05:** Teachers' opinions on French as an element of the Algerian cultural identity

Most of the teachers believe that French is an element of the Algerian history and not a heritage to be preserved. If it is preserved, it will always be part of the Algerian cultural identity and this is unfair to the mother tongue. Others said that French would remain in the Algerian linguistic scene since it has its roots from the colonisation period and because of the francophone Algerian elite that have its powerful place in high political and economic spheres.

## 7. Research Findings

The case study reveals that although the Algerian authorities have implemented the policy of Arabisation in almost all fields by imposing the Arabic language, French is still used in many domains and in people's life in general. French is still dominant, and some Algerians insist on making it part of the Algerian culture, while it is a cultural heritage that should not affect the identity of the Algerian society. French is of paramount importance in Algeria since it is a means of knowledge and communication and most sectors rely on its use to facilitate their transactions (industry, trade, administration...). It actually has a complex status in the country. According to some Algerians, French is prestigious and civilised language and it leads to modernity and development. They find in the linguistic diversity a boon for the Algerian society

because it contributes to the enrichment of its cultural heritage, whereas others believe that French confined independent Algeria to a narrow space.

The existence of French and its privileged status prevented Algeria from opening up to the world, especially to the Anglophone world, which has become the torch of the modern world. French does not deserve all that interest because it has not a prestigious scientific position nowadays. Learning another language, and being open to the cultures of others is good, but it must be within a sovereign framework that puts the language of the nation in its true position.

## 8. Conclusion

The colonial period has left a deeper wound in Algeria. The negative impact of the desperate attempts of colonialism in order to obliterate the Algerian Arabic and Islamic identity still haunts the Algerian society and puts it in a real linguistic problem. French culture provoked a kind of linguistic paralysis and ambivalence in Algeria. It overshadowed the life of the indigenous population to such an extent that to this day. Despite the enormous and intense efforts of Arabisation, the Algerian population is still influenced by the French language as the Algerians now speak a hybrid language, a mixture of French and different Algerian dialects, and this is what makes it difficult for them to use Arabic in their daily life and communicate with the other Arabs.

## Bibliographic References:

### Books:

1. Derradji.Y, Queffélec.A, Smaali.D, Debov.V (2002). *Le Français en Algérie*. France: Editions Duculot..
2. Goumeziane, S. (1994). *Le Mal Algérien : Economie Politique d'une Transition Inachevée 1962–1994*. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard..
3. Moatassime, A (1992). *Arabisation et la Langue Française au Maghreb*. France: Presses Universitaire de France.
4. Turin, Y (1971). *Affrontement Culturels dans l'Algérie Coloniale, Ecoles, Médecine, Religion*. Paris, François Maspero.
5. Turki .R (1981). *National Education and the Algerian Personality*. Algiers: National Company for Publishing and Distribution (Translated)

### Articles/Thesis/ Newspapers:

1. Al-Basayer Newspaper (1954). Sixth Year .Issue 270.May 7, (Translated)

2. Djabri, A (1981). *Language in Algeria: The Continuing Problem*. United Kingdom: University of Wales. Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of M. Ed.
3. Miliani, M (2000). *Teaching English in a Multilingual Context: The Algerian Case*. In: *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies*. Vol: 1. PP. 13-29
4. Rebai Maamar, M (2009). *The Syndrome of the French Language in Algeria*. In: *International Journal of Arts and Sciences*. University of Algiers. PP. 77-89.