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Englishisation of Algerian Higher Education through EMI: Expectations versus Reality

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# Englishisation of Algerian Higher Education through EMI: Expectations versus Reality

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## L'anglicisation de l'enseignement supérieur algérien à travers l'EMI: Entre attentes et réalité

KAMILA GHOUALI AND FAIZA HADDAM BOUABDALLAH  
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### Introduction

Algeria has experienced what can be described as a complex history. With 132 years of French colonialism dating back to 1830, the French linguistic legacy and cultural dominance are deeply rooted in the country. Before the French invasion, Arabic and Islamic studies were fostered through traditional Quranic schools (Mizab, 2024; Miliani, 2012; Chami, 2009). However, the French administration sought to “Frenchify” various educational and cultural aspects of Algerian society to eradicate its Islamic and Arabic identity (Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023; Mizab, 2024; Rezig, 2011). The French authorities replaced traditional Quranic schools with French educational institutions, denying Algerian pupils access to their heritage-based education and imposing French as the primary language of instruction (Mizab, 2024). This policy aimed to “foreignize” the native language and culture, effectively substituting it with French.

After Algeria gained its independence in 1962, policymakers initiated an Arabization process to restore the national and Islamic identity by replacing French with Arabic in education and administration (Miliani, 2012; Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023; Mizab, 2024; Habri & Hamzaoui, 2024; Mostari, 2004). This initiative brought in Arab teachers, mostly from Egypt, to teach Arabic to Algerians. However, the implementation faced several challenges due to the inadequate preparation and lack of qualified Arabic instructors (Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023; Benhamlaoui & Benzadri, 2024; Rezig, 2011; Miliani, 2012). Furthermore, the exclusive use of Arabic in education created significant obstacles in scientific fields due to the scarcity of scientific resources written in Arabic (Hamzaoui, 2021; Habri & Hamzaoui, 2024). The Arabization policy did not align with the linguistic reality of Algeria, which continued to be dominated by the French language (Belmihoub, 2018a; Rezig, 2011; Hamzaoui, 2021). Eliminating a linguistic influence of over 132 years and reestablishing an Arabic cultural identity proved to be a challenging process (Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023; Benhamlaoui & Benzadri, 2024).

At that time, French was considered prestigious among the Algerian elite and was extensively used in administration, media, business, and especially in higher education (Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023; Benhamlaoui & Benzadri, 2024; Touahmia & Bakar, 2024; Belmihoub, 2018a; Dendane, 2015). However, recent decades have witnessed a gradual shift towards English, driven by its growing global importance and the need for a language that can facilitate scientific and technological development.

The linguistic landscape of Algeria is currently undergoing significant changes, with English increasingly viewed as a potential replacement for French in various domains. This shift raises several questions: What are the driving factors behind this transition? How does this change reflect the evolving socio-political and educational priorities in Algeria? What are the implications for the future of language policy in the country?

This paper aims to explore the complex linguistic and pedagogical situation in Algeria by addressing the following objectives:

- To analyze the historical impact of French colonialism on the linguistic landscape of Algeria.
- To examine the challenges and outcomes of the Arabization process in the post-independence period.
- To investigate the current shift towards English and its potential implications for education, science, and business in Algeria.

The study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing historical analysis and review of existing literature to understand the evolution of language policy in Algeria. It will draw on sociolinguistic studies, policy analysis, and case studies from educational institutions to assess the effectiveness of Arabization and the emerging role of English.

To better understand the linguistic shifts in Algeria, this paper provides a detailed overview of the historical context, the challenges of the Arabization process, and the ongoing transition towards English. The analysis highlights the complexities of implementing language policies in a multilingual society shaped by deep-rooted colonial legacies and evolving global dynamics.

This study aims to contribute to the broader discussion on language policy and identity in post-colonial contexts, offering insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by Algeria as it navigates its linguistic future.

## **1. Algeria: A Complex Linguistic and Pedagogical Situation**

The complex linguistic landscape of Algeria is a product of its rich and tumultuous history, shaped by multiple waves of colonization and cultural exchanges (Touahmia & Bakar, 2024; Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023; Mizab,

2024; Rezig, 2011; Benabdallah, 2023; Boubekeur, 2021; Dendane, 2015). Despite the challenges, this historical diversity has created a linguistically and culturally enriched environment (Benhamlaoui & Benzadri, 2024; Hamzaoui, 2021; Belmihoub, 2018b; Dendane, 2015). Today, this multilingualism is evident through the coexistence of two official national languages: Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Tamazight (Berber). However, in everyday communication, MSA gives way to Algerian Arabic (Darja), a colloquial dialect where code-switching with French is prevalent (Alalou, 2023; Maraf, 2024). Regional variations of Tamazight, such as Kabyle, Chaoui, Mozabite, and Tuareg, are primarily spoken by Berber communities (Belmihoub, 2018a; Benhamlaoui & Benzadri, 2024).

Historically, Algeria's indigenous Berber population underwent a significant cultural transformation during the Arabo-Islamic conquest, leading to a gradual Arabization process. As a result, linguistic divisions emerged: while many Berbers adopted Arabic, Arabic speakers largely did not learn Berber languages (Chami, 2009; Belmihoub, 2018b). This historical context laid the groundwork for a complex sociolinguistic environment, further complicated by French colonization in the 19th and 20th centuries, which introduced French as a dominant language of administration and education.

### **1.1. Evolution of Language Policy in the Education System**

Post-independence, the Algerian government embarked on a rigorous Arabization policy aimed at reasserting national identity and reducing the influence of French. Consequently, Arabic became the primary medium of instruction in both primary and secondary education, even in scientific disciplines (Dendane, 2015; Rezig, 2011; Rouabah, 2022). French, though still influential, was introduced as a second language from the third year of primary school, while English was added at the start of middle school (Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023; Hamzaoui, 2021). This sequence reflects a hierarchical language policy where Arabic was prioritized to foster linguistic unity, while French maintained its position due to its historical significance and prevalence in the scientific and technological fields at the university level.

However, the late introduction of English, beginning at age twelve, has been a point of contention among linguists and educators. According to Boubekeur (2021), this delayed exposure limits students' proficiency, especially compared to their earlier exposure to French. In response, a significant policy shift occurred in 2022, with the government deciding to introduce English alongside French from the third year of primary school (Hamzaoui, 2024).

This policy aims to enhance early bilingualism and increase competitiveness in the global job market, where English holds a dominant role.

Upon transitioning to higher education, a clear linguistic divide emerges. Students in social sciences and humanities continue their studies predominantly in Arabic, while those in scientific and technological disciplines encounter French as the main language of instruction (Rezig, 2011; Benabdallah, 2023; Habri & Hamzaoui, 2024). English, in this context, is limited to specialized courses or academic research, which hinders its integration into broader educational practices (Benabdallah, 2023).

## **1.2. Impact and Challenges of the Current Linguistic Policies**

The evolution from French to Arabic in the post-colonial period, and the recent shift towards English, reflect a complex interplay of political, ideological, and economic factors aimed at redefining Algeria's linguistic identity. The Arabization process, despite its intentions of fostering national cohesion, has led to inconsistencies in educational language practices. Students often face challenges in transitioning from Arabic-medium instruction in primary and secondary education to French-dominated instruction at the university level (Rezig, 2011; Habri & Hamzaoui, 2024). This linguistic discontinuity contributes to low proficiency in French among many students, creating barriers to academic success and reducing employability in a job market that values multilingualism (Rezig, 2011; Miliani, 2012).

The adaptation difficulties are especially pronounced among Arabophone students, who generally have limited exposure to French outside formal education. Conversely, Francophone students, often influenced by French language and culture, navigate the educational system with relative ease. This disparity exacerbates social inequalities and limits job prospects for Arabophones, particularly in sectors requiring strong French and English skills (Rezig, 2011).

## **1.3. Recent Policy Shifts: Embracing English as a Medium of Instruction**

Recognizing these challenges, the Algerian government initiated a significant policy shift in 2023 by replacing French with English as the medium of instruction in various university programs. This change aligns with global trends in English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), where non-English-speaking countries adopt English for academic purposes to enhance their integration into the global academic and economic landscape (Macaro et al., 2018; Touhami & Bakar, 2024). The adoption of English, a language spoken

by approximately 1.5 billion people worldwide (Statista, 2024), is intended to address the linguistic shortcomings of previous policies and better prepare Algerian students for international opportunities.

In conclusion, Algeria's linguistic policy has undergone a dynamic transformation from colonization to the present day. The initial focus on Arabization has gradually shifted towards a more inclusive multilingual strategy that recognizes the importance of global languages like English. However, the success of this recent shift will depend on the effective implementation of English in the educational system and the ability to create a seamless linguistic continuum from primary to tertiary education. This evolving policy framework reflects the ongoing effort to balance national identity with the demands of a globalized world, striving to equip future generations with the linguistic tools necessary for success in an increasingly interconnected environment.

## **2. The Rising Role of English in Algerian Higher Education**

For several years, English has been taught in Algerian universities, either in dedicated departments with modules like grammar, oral and written expression, reading, linguistics, phonetics, literature, civilization, and didactics, to name a few. These modules equip learners to master English accurately and fluently (Benabdallah, 2023; Hamzaoui, 2021). Additionally, English is taught as a compulsory English for Specific Purposes (ESP) module in many Algerian faculties, across both scientific and non-scientific fields (Benhamlaoui & Benzadri, 2024; Benabdallah, 2023; Hamzaoui, 2021). However, its popularity as an instructional tool at Algerian universities only began to rise in 2019, when the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR), led by then-Minister Bouzid Tayeb, administered a survey on his official Facebook page to gauge Algerians' views on using English instead of French as an instructional language. The survey findings revealed that 94% of participants supported the idea. Following these results, the headers of all official documents started being replaced with English instead of French (Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023; Mizab, 2024; Rezig, 2011). However, in 2023, the current Minister, Kamel Badari, decided to replace French with English as the primary instructional language across all Algerian universities, excluding language departments.

Though the implementation of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) in Algeria was late compared to the global trend, its popularity among Algerian stakeholders has significantly increased (Hamane, 2023). This decision

is driven by several political, scientific, and economic motives. The main reason was to gain linguistic independence from French influence (Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023). Moreover, English, as a global lingua franca (Maraf, 2024; Benhamlaoui & Benzadri, 2024), is associated with quality education and advancement, thus potentially enhancing scientific research in Algeria (Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023; Touahmia & Bakar, 2024; Hamzaoui, 2021). English, being the language of scientific publications (Saidoun & Bensemmane, 2024; Maraf, 2024; Benabdallah, 2023), would boost the visibility of Algerian researchers' publications internationally. It would also help elevate the status and ranking of Algerian universities, fostering international collaborations, interactions, and opportunities for academic mobility.

Furthermore, as the language of technology (Benhamlaoui & Benzadri, 2024; Hamzaoui, 2021), business (Maraf, 2024; Hamzaoui, 2024), and the economy (Saidoun & Bensemmane, 2024; Belmihoub, 2018a; Hamzaoui, 2024), English enhances students' career prospects by linguistically preparing them for the global job market (Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023; Touahmia & Bakar, 2024; Hamane, 2023). English has also become popular on social media (Maraf, 2024), especially among Algerian youth who are influenced by Western culture and associate English with entertainment. English has thus become a new linguistic trend that symbolizes openness and a sense of belonging to a select group (Belmihoub, 2018b). Additionally, English proficiency is linked to travel and scholarships, which increases the interest and motivation of Algerian students to learn it. Overall, the numerous advantages of English can be realized by improving one's proficiency (Hamane, 2023).

### **2.1. EMI in Today's Algerian Higher Education**

To prepare non-English language teachers from Francophone/Arabic backgrounds for EMI, the Ministry established an online mandatory training program on the national platform Dual\_Edx, supervised by the Commission Nationale de l'Enseignement A Distance (CNEAD) in September 2023. This platform, developed in collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, follows international standards for MOOCs and standardized testing. Initially, 3,000 instructors and part-time doctoral students participated in this training (Ben-Yelles, 2024). The training begins with an assessment of teachers' proficiency in the four language skills according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Subsequently, instructors engage in lectures and tests tailored to their proficiency level. Upon completing a level, they may advance to a higher one. This training is also provided to



new university students starting in 2023, who will be taught in English from their first year.

Locally, the MHESR instructed university Rectors to enhance English proficiency among teachers and students, aiming for B2/C1 levels (Ben-Yelles, 2024). Consequently, intensive onsite training is offered at the Centre d'Enseignement Intensif des Langues (CEIL) with support from ESP teachers (Benhamlaoui & Benzadri, 2024; Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023). Many content teachers from various fields have shown a growing interest in obtaining a Bachelor's degree in English to better prepare for EMI. For instance, at Abou Bekr Belkaid University-Tlemcen, teachers from diverse backgrounds have opted to pursue English studies to improve their EMI practices. The university also launched an online Bachelor's degree program in English Studies in 2023, attracting both EFL students and faculty members from different disciplines.

The enthusiasm for EMI is not limited to teachers; it has also spread to students, as demonstrated by a significant increase in first-year student enrolment in the Department of English at Tlemcen University in the 2023-2024 academic year. This surge in interest may be attributed to the official introduction of English in Algerian primary schools in 2022, creating a demand for English teachers. As a result, the Ministry of National Education organized a recruitment contest for graduates with degrees in English. However, empirical research is needed to understand the factors motivating students to pursue English studies.

## **2.2. Previous Studies on EMI in Algeria**

Benabdallah (2023) explored content teachers' acceptance of the new EMI reform and the challenges they encountered by surveying 66 teachers and conducting in-depth interviews with four administrative staff members. The results indicated that most respondents were enthusiastic about the English language and, more specifically, about teaching in English. They acknowledged the potential benefits of English instruction for the scientific future of higher education, associating the language with improved teaching quality, scientific advancement, and enhanced international exchange. Notably, younger teachers, including novice and part-time instructors, showed a greater interest in EMI.

Among the group of teachers resistant to the idea, insufficient English language skills were the primary reason for their reluctance. This issue was more pronounced in the humanities and social sciences faculties, where

Arabic is predominantly used for instruction and publication. In contrast, faculties like economics and technology, where instructors often publish in English and participate in international conferences, showed a more favorable attitude towards EMI. The study revealed that although the majority of teachers had a positive outlook on English, only half felt adequately prepared to teach exclusively in English. They emphasized the need for comprehensive training, preferring online platforms or ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses with a focus on developing productive language skills (Benabdallah, 2023). The emphasis on productive skills was also noted by Ben-Yelles (2024), who reported similar challenges faced by both teachers and students in English learning at CEIL centers.

Abdaoui and Aggoune (2023) analyzed the difficulties faced by 24 economics teachers at Guelma University in adopting EMI. Teachers expressed concerns about their readiness to teach in English, citing a negative attitude towards the shift due to low proficiency levels. Although training sessions were provided, many teachers felt these were inadequate to significantly enhance their language skills, especially in speaking. They highlighted the need for additional training but noted that heavy teaching loads limited their ability to participate. Furthermore, they pointed out that students had low proficiency in Arabic, the current medium of instruction, which already hindered comprehension. Switching to English could exacerbate these difficulties, potentially impairing students' understanding and performance.

Khenioui and Boulkroun's (2023) study participants similarly criticized the training provided for EMI teachers, describing it as rushed, insufficient, and lacking in appropriate resources like textbooks. Respondents highlighted the low English proficiency of both teachers and students as a significant barrier to the successful implementation of EMI. The older generation of teachers, with a strong emotional attachment to French due to their educational background, exhibited resistance to adopting English, as they seldom use it in their daily practice.

On a larger scale, Hamane (2023) surveyed 327 teachers to assess their views on the transition from Arabic or French to English, focusing on its benefits, challenges, and possible solutions. The findings showed a generally positive attitude towards EMI's potential benefits, such as improved English language skills, enhanced access to international academic resources, career development, and increased global job opportunities. However, teachers expressed concerns about students' limited English proficiency, which could

hinder their understanding of complex concepts and negatively impact their academic performance. Additionally, teachers themselves faced challenges in adapting to English instruction, including inadequate preparation, lack of pedagogical support, and psychological barriers like reduced motivation and confidence.

In a comparative study by Benhamlaoui and Benzadri (2024), preferences for Arabic, French, and English as mediums of instruction were examined among 55 teachers and 79 students across various Algerian universities. Statistical analysis revealed that teachers preferred Arabic and French due to familiarity, while students favored English, influenced by its prevalence in global media. Students perceived English as having simpler grammar, greater flexibility, and a more appealing aesthetic compared to French (Touahmia & Bakar, 2024). Similarly, in a study by Hamzaoui (2021), 42 master's students in telecommunications and civil engineering preferred English over French, citing its utility for professional and international communication.

Despite the promising potential of EMI, linguistic diversity in Algeria has created a political and educational dilemma (Mizab, 2024). Students often lack proficiency in both Arabic and French, let alone English (Benhamlaoui & Benzadri, 2024). The adoption of EMI might reduce this linguistic diversity, potentially marginalizing Arabic and French, which are deeply embedded in Algerian cultural identity (Touahmia & Bakar, 2024). This issue has sparked debate among policymakers, with some advocating for modernization through EMI, while others stress the importance of preserving linguistic heritage. Maraf (2024) warned of the risk of linguistic imperialism, viewing EMI as a byproduct of globalization and capitalist influences.

## **Conclusion**

As Algeria integrates more into the global economy, the government's strategy has increasingly emphasized the importance of English in higher education (Khenioui & Boulkroun, 2023). While the shift towards EMI in Algerian universities seems inevitable, many instructors consider the transition abrupt (Abdaoui & Aggoune, 2023). Replacing Arabic and French, languages with deep historical roots in Algerian education, is a significant challenge. The effectiveness of EMI remains uncertain, as its implementation is still in the pilot phase. Comprehensive empirical studies comparing student performance before and after the adoption of EMI would be invaluable. Such research could guide the Ministry of Higher Education in making evidence-based decisions for ongoing adjustments. To ensure the success of EMI, both

teachers and students need robust linguistic and pedagogical support. This includes flexible training programs, collaboration between language and content teachers, and possibly a preparatory year, as suggested by Abdaoui and Aggoune (2023).

In addition to that, Interviews with educators, policymakers, and linguistic experts will also be conducted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current trends and future prospects in Algeria's linguistic landscape. The path to full integration of English in higher education is long but achievable with the concerted efforts of students, educators, and policymakers.

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## Abstract

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Algeria's long and varied history, marked by the influence of numerous civilizations, has resulted in a complex linguistic landscape. Today, Arabic and Tamazight are the official languages, while French and English serve as foreign languages. French, in particular, left a significant imprint due to its 132-year dominance, permeating daily conversations, administration, media, business, and scientific research in universities. However, recent shifts in political, economic, and scientific priorities have led Algerian policymakers to advocate for the increased use of English, particularly in education. This shift began in 2022 with the introduction of English in third-year primary schools and continued in 2023 with its adoption as a medium of instruction at the tertiary level, replacing French or Arabic in some disciplines. This paper provides an overview of the linguistic and educational landscape in Algeria, focusing on the implementation of English as a teaching language in higher education and the motivations behind this policy change. It also reviews existing studies on the subject, emphasizing the perceptions of English Medium Instruction (EMI) teachers. Findings indicate that while instructors generally recognize the growing importance of English in a globalized world, significant challenges remain. Despite the training efforts by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, many instructors report limited proficiency in English, which may hinder effective content delivery and student comprehension.

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## Keywords

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Algerian Higher Education, English Medium Instruction (EMI), Teachers' Training, Course Content

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## مستخلص

شهدت الجزائر على مر التاريخ تأثير العديد من الحضارات، مما نتج عنه وضع لغوي معقد يتمثل في اعتماد العربية والأمازيغية كلغتين رسميتين. بينما تعد الفرنسية والإنجليزية لغتين أجنبيتين. أثرت الفرنسية بشكل كبير بسبب فترة الاستعمار التي استمرت 132 عامًا، حيث اندمجت في الثقافة الجزائرية وأصبحت مستخدمة في الحياة اليومية والإدارة والإعلام والأعمال وأيضًا في المجالات العلمية بالجامعات. ومع ذلك، شهدت الفترة الأخيرة تغييرات في الرؤية السياسية والاقتصادية والعلمية لصنّاع القرار الجزائريين، حيث تم التركيز على تعزيز

اللغة الإنجليزية في مختلف القطاعات، بدءًا من القطاع التعليمي. ونتيجة لذلك، بدأ تدريس الإنجليزية في السنة الثالثة من المرحلة الابتدائية في عام 2022 وتم اعتمادها كلفة تدريس على مستوى الجامعات في عام 2023. لتحل محل الفرنسية أو العربية في بعض التخصصات يستعرض هذا البحث الوضع اللغوي والتعليمي في الجزائر، مع التركيز على عملية إدخال اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة تدريس في التعليم العالي والدوافع الكامنة وراء هذا التغيير السياسي. كما يقدم جردًا للدراسات التي تناولت هذا الموضوع، مع التركيز بشكل أساسي على تصورات الأساتذة حول تدريس المواد باللغة الإنجليزية. تشير نتائج الدراسات إلى أن الأساتذة يدركون عمومًا أهمية اللغة الإنجليزية في عالم اليوم المعولم؛ ومع ذلك، وعلى الرغم من جهود وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي في تدريب الأساتذة، لا تزال هناك تحديات كبيرة. حيث أشار العديد من الأساتذة إلى ضعف مستواهم في اللغة الإنجليزية، مما قد يعيق عملية تقديم المحتوى وفهم الطلاب.

### كلمات مفتاحية

التعليم العالي في الجزائر، تدريس المواد باللغة الإنجليزية (EMI)، تدريب الأساتذة، محتوى المناهج

### Résumé

L'histoire de l'Algérie, marquée par l'influence de nombreuses civilisations, a engendré une situation linguistique complexe avec l'arabe et le tamazight comme langues officielles, et le français et l'anglais comme langues étrangères. Le français, en particulier, a laissé une empreinte significative en raison de sa domination de 132 ans, s'intégrant dans les conversations quotidiennes, l'administration, les médias, le commerce et les sciences à l'université. Cependant, des changements récents dans les priorités politiques, économiques et scientifiques ont poussé les décideurs algériens à promouvoir l'utilisation accrue de l'anglais, en particulier dans l'éducation. Ce changement a commencé en 2022 avec l'introduction de l'anglais en troisième année de primaire et s'est poursuivi en 2023 par son adoption comme langue d'enseignement dans l'enseignement supérieur, remplaçant le français ou l'arabe dans certaines disciplines. Cet article propose une vue d'ensemble de la situation linguistique et éducative en Algérie, en se concentrant sur l'implémentation de l'anglais comme langue d'enseignement dans l'enseignement supérieur et les raisons qui ont motivé ce changement politique. Il passe également en revue les études existantes sur le sujet, en mettant l'accent sur les perceptions des enseignants de l'enseignement en anglais (EMI). Les résultats indiquent que, bien que les enseignants reconnaissent généralement l'importance croissante de l'anglais dans un monde globalisé, des défis significatifs demeurent. Malgré les efforts de formation du Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche Scientifique, beaucoup d'enseignants signalent une maîtrise limitée de l'anglais, ce qui

pourrait entraver la transmission du contenu des cours et la compréhension des étudiants.

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**Mots-clés**

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Enseignement supérieur algérien, Enseignement en anglais (EMI), Formation des enseignants, Contenu des cours