

The Politics of Language Policy: English-Medium Instruction in Algerian Higher Education

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Abstract:

English has become the lingua franca worldwide and is used in various domains. As a result, many non-native English-speaking countries have adopted English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in higher education, including Algeria. While this shift aims to enhance academic development and international engagement, many teachers face linguistic and pedagogical challenges in implementing EMI. This study explores chemistry teachers' attitudes and the difficulties they encounter in an Algerian university context. A questionnaire was administered to 30 teachers at USTHB. The findings indicate generally positive attitudes toward EMI, particularly regarding improved language skills and greater access to international conferences and research opportunities. At the same time, teachers report difficulties due to insufficient linguistic preparation and lack of prior training in EMI. The study underscores the gap between policy decisions and institutional readiness and recommends targeted language and pedagogical training to support effective EMI implementation.

Keywords:

Language policy; English-Medium Instruction (EMI); higher education reform; teacher attitudes; linguistic identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

English is the most widely spoken language in the world, including its use as a first language, as well as a second or foreign language. In this respect, Kachru divided English language users into three main circles: the Inner Circle, which includes native speakers of English from countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Ireland; the Outer Circle, which consists of those who speak English as a second language, such as in India, Nigeria, and Pakistan; and the Expanding Circle, which refers to people who learn English primarily for advancement in multiple domains, such as business, technology, and education¹.

Factors like political, economic, and social ones favored its use as a lingua franca from the outer and expanding circles. Hence, certain countries started encouraging the use of English not only in communication but also as a language of instruction of different fields at universities, which is the case in Algeria. In 2023, the minister of higher education "Tayab Bouzid" decided to promote the use of English as a language of instruction in the Algerian universities². This decision raised serious debates about the feasibility to apply it in an EFL context without previous trainings. However, it's undeniable for the majority of them that English as a global language will contribute in the development of many fields.

Although many teachers acknowledged the importance and benefits of using EMI in tertiary level, it raised their concerns in terms of linguistic and pedagogical issues³. Hence, it's important to explore the main constraints of using English as a medium of instruction to find out practical solutions that would foster its applicability. This study aims to shed light on teachers' attitudes and the challenges they face regarding the implementation of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in the EFL context, using the case of chemistry teachers at USTHB University in Algeria.

2. Literature Review

2.1 English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

A lingua franca is the international language that is selected to be spoken by different nations that have distinct mother tongues to facilitate communication, especially for trade. In this respect, Nolan added that "the original and eponymous Lingua Franca was a trading language, used among and between Europeans and Arabs across the Mediterranean."⁴.

However, the traditional lingua franca is different from the original form of English today, since this language has the role of a lingua franca but doesn't share the same features. This idea was explained by Jenkins and Baker who claimed that

in the origins of a lingua franca the language created to communicate had simple vocabulary and syntax and was a mixture of several languages which is not the case of English Lingua Franca; which is one language with a complex structure, and it has native speakers⁵. Therefore, this nomination of English was due to its function as a global language facilitating both written and spoken communication all over the world. This role pushed many nations into using it in education as a medium of instruction.

2.2 English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) in the EFL Context

The spread of English happened in two major waves. The migration, and colonization. The first wave involved the migration of a significant number of native speakers of English to other countries. The second one includes the colonization of the Asian and African territories. These nations spread the use of English by adding their own cultural and sociolinguistic influence, “although these contemporary Englishes have much in common, they are also unique in their grammatical innovations and tolerances, lexis, pronunciations, idioms, and discourse.”⁶.

From these waves, the term “World Englishes” emerged. It is defined as “...an umbrella term covering all varieties of English worldwide and the different approaches used to describe and analyze them”⁷. This term was introduced to demonstrate that the language belongs to the whole world, rather than solely to the Inner Circle, in other words, the native speakers.

The following table demonstrates the usage of English in different domains in the three circles.

Table 1: Functional Domains of English across the Three Circles⁶

<i>Functions</i>	<i>Inner Circle</i>	<i>Outer Circle</i>	<i>Expanding Circle</i>
Access code	+	+	+
Advertising	+	+/-	+/-
Corporate trade	+	+	+
Development	+	+/-	+/-
Government	+	+/-	-
Linguistic impact	+	+/-	+
Literary creativity	+	+/-	+/-
Literary renaissance	+	+	+
News broadcasting	+	+/-	+/-
Newspapers	+	+/-	+/-
Scientific higher education	+	+	+/-
Scientific research	+	+	+/-
Social interaction	+	+/-	+/-

[NB: The above table shows the presence and co-existence of World Englishes with other languages in various functions in bilingual or multilingual contexts. The depth of presence in each function varies from region to region and country to country. The '+' indicates an exclusive use of English in the domain, the '+/-' indicates co-existence of other local languages along with English, and the '-' signals the absence of English in the domain.]

The data presented in the table highlights that countries within the Expanding Circle are increasingly adopting English in higher education, research, and scientific domains. This shows how important English has become in these areas, similar to its role in the Inner and Outer Circles. In this respect, Mauranen mentioned that “English has been welcomed as a vehicle of efficiency in for example business and science, or as a new means of communication for globally emergent localities in a variety of non-mainstream subcultures”¹

In the field of education, English has been used as a language of instruction to teach EFL students different subjects. It was defined as, “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”⁸. In other ways, it’s about the insertion of English in teaching non-natives in different academic fields.

There are many reasons that pushed governments to include EMI in higher education. The main reason is that the implementation of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is believed to enhance not only learners' proficiency in English but also their understanding of the subject matter delivered in English. This supports the development of both general language competence and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) knowledge for both teachers and students⁹.

From a political perspective in Academia, policy makers of myriad governments are implementing EMI to prepare their students for the global job markets since English has become the dominant lingua franca⁵. Therefore, many countries, including North African ones are encouraging the use of EMI in tertiary education.

2.3 EMI Implementation in Algerian Higher Education

The massive growth of English use rushed many nations that were not ready to implement English as a medium of instruction, mainly in higher education. This was the case of the North African countries, including Algeria. The government of this last believed that it is necessary to start teaching in English for the benefit of their educational system and international ranking of their universities and academic journals¹⁰.

It was problematic to implement EMI in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco since Arabic and French were dominating their educational system which pushed them to be multilinguals instead of adopting only English. This was different in Egypt who had British colonies, thus, adopting English was easier for the majority of them. Therefore, the non-existence of the language in a country makes it more difficult to include EMI in certain contexts¹¹.

It's undeniable that the implementation of EMI is a good decision made by the Algerian ministry of higher education, however, it's lack of readiness may add more complexity to the current situation and create chaotic results in the educational sector¹².

2.4 Factors Influencing Non-Native Teachers' Attitudes Toward EMI

Implementing English in EFL contexts pushed many researchers to investigate the main issues of EMI. Many studies reported that the main factor that hinders the teachers' and students' use of EMI is their struggle to understand some complex vocabulary, especially the new concepts of the course⁹. They also reported that their L1 hindered their proficiency in mastering the four skills of English: speaking, listening, reading, writing¹¹. Hence, teachers found themselves obliged to learn the new terminologies in English before delivering the lesson and sometimes they need to explain it in L1 to transmit the message to their learners.

Other issues were revealed by teachers; for instance, physics or mathematics instructors often find themselves needing to explain aspects related to the English language rather than the subject content itself. This occurs because they are teaching in an EFL context, where students may raise questions about the language. As a result, these teachers tend to reject the idea of giving language-related explanations,

as if they were language teachers, especially since the majority of them may have limited proficiency in English¹³.

These situations raise pedagogical concerns, namely, who should teach what (language or content), and how it may affect their professional roles within the university. Ducker stated, “These options may even create a set of teacher relationship tensions and issues such as, who is the senior teacher—the language expert or the content expert? Does the language expert have sufficient content knowledge to help learners?”¹⁴.

In the same breath, a study added that these teachers need to plan their courses differently by searching for new vocabulary and teaching materials in English, adopting new strategies and teaching methods, and incorporating new examples and illustrations during class. This requires extra effort in pedagogical preparation and has raised concerns among many teachers¹⁵.

Teachers’ national identity in EMI is also affected. An Algerian study reported that the adoption of EMI might marginalize their native or local languages, which they consider ideologically inappropriate, even though they acknowledge the importance of English in academia¹⁶.

Psychological challenges can also arise in EMI teaching. A study conducted in Pakistan found that teachers experienced embitterment, feeling that being forced to teach in English without prior training was unfair and negatively affected their professional careers. They also reported experiencing serious anxiety and burnout due to their lack of English proficiency. Furthermore, they felt professionally insecure in front of their students, as they were unable to deliver content lessons in fully correct English¹⁷. Therefore, whether the challenges are linguistic, pedagogical, or psychological, the lack of professional training or adequate preparation remains the main constraint affecting EFL teachers’ attitudes toward EMI at the tertiary level.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data through the administration of a questionnaire. The instrument included a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions, allowing for both well-defined and deeper answers.

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants, based on the researcher’s prior teaching experience at the university. The participants were 30 Chemistry teachers from the University of Science and Technology Houari Boumediene (USTHB) in Algeria, all of whom were English as a Foreign Language

(EFL) users. Importantly, these teachers were already employing English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in their chemistry classes.

The primary aim of the questionnaire is to explore the teachers' perceptions towards the use of EMI and the second part tackles the challenges they encounter when using EMI to teach chemistry at the university level.

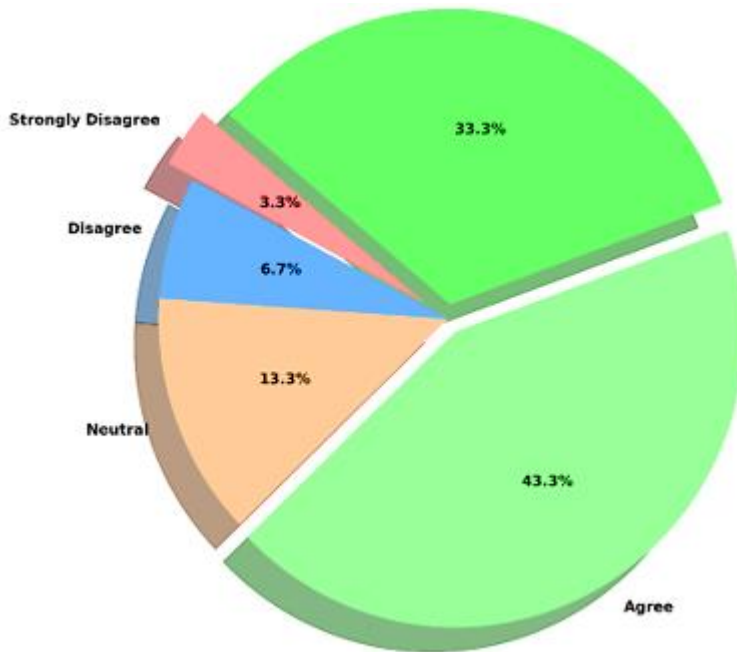
4. Results and Analysis of the Questionnaire

Part One: Teachers' Attitudes towards Using EMI in Chemistry Classes

Question 1: EMI has improved my English language proficiency (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, fluency).

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neutral ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

Figure 1: Teachers' Responses to EMI Improving English Proficiency

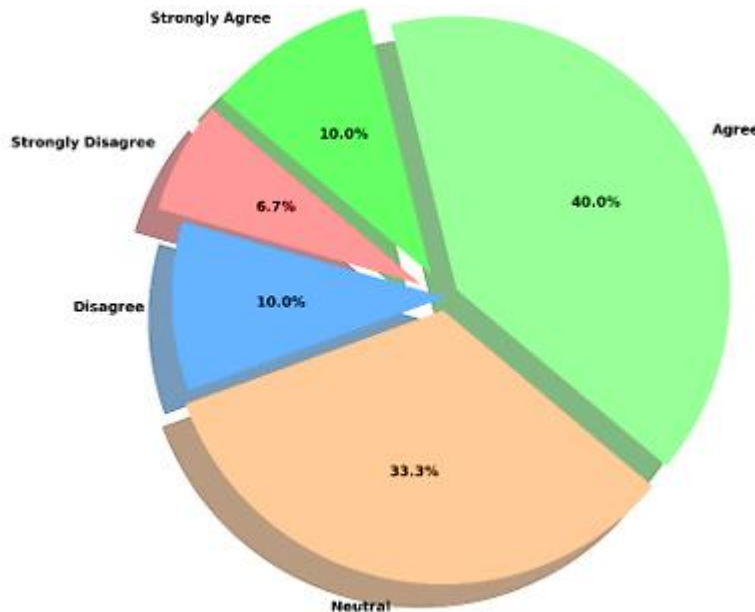


The chart below illustrates teachers' attitudes toward the use of EMI in relation to their English language proficiency. The majority of responses were 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree,' indicating that teachers attained an improvement in various English language skills and sub-skills.

Question 2: EMI has helped me access more academic resources for my content modules.

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neutral ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

Figure 2: Teachers' Responses to EMI Helping Access Academic Resources

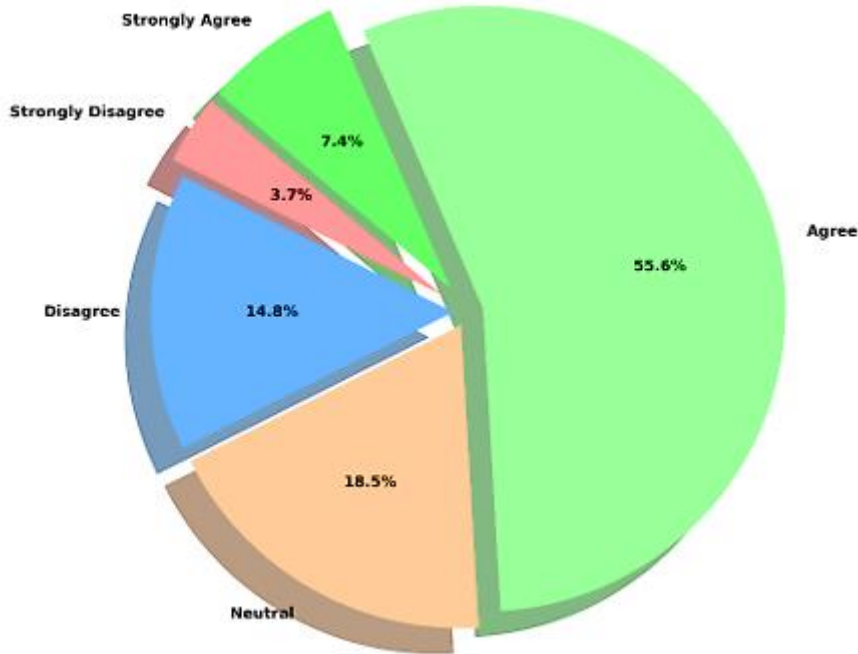


The second chart also reflects teachers' perceptions of EMI and its impact on their English language proficiency. However, this question focuses specifically on access to academic resources, which is an important aspect of higher education. The majority of responses were positive.

Question 3: EMI has prepared me to participate in international conferences or academic events in my field.

☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neutral ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree

Figure 3: EMI and Teachers' Readiness for International Academic Participation



In the same breath of EMI contribution to the improvement of English, this pie chart summarized the main findings that concerns the participation of teachers in academic conferences after delivering EMI classes. The results are positive since the majority agreed that after teaching their content modules in English, they were able to participate using the language in different academic events.

Question 4: In what ways has EMI contributed to or limited your understanding of your course content?

In this question, the majority of teachers reported that EMI motivated them to make more efforts and conduct additional research related to their course. They explained that, since the language of instruction differs from their own, the content needed to be adapted to their level of English and translated terminology, which in turn enhanced their content knowledge. However, some participants explicitly complained, stating that teaching a subject they originally learned in French using another language was confusing and limited their ability to effectively deliver the lessons of their content module.

Question 5: How has EMI influenced your academic or professional goals?

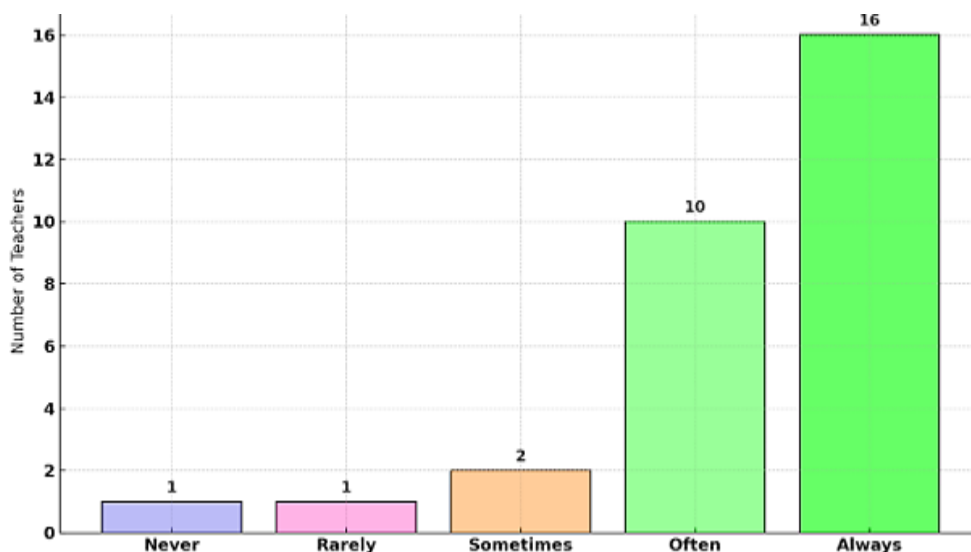
This question brought out many positive responses from the participants. They expressed enthusiasm about how improving their English proficiency would facilitate future research, particularly in accessing sources and conducting studies within their field, as the majority of academic books and articles are written in English. Consequently, they consider EMI a valuable opportunity to integrate the use of English more effectively into their professional domain.

Part 2: Teachers' Challenges of Using EMI in Chemistry Classes

Question 6: Do you experience psychological pressure when teaching Chemistry in English?

☐ Never ☐ Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

Figure 4: Psychological Pressure when Teaching Chemistry in English

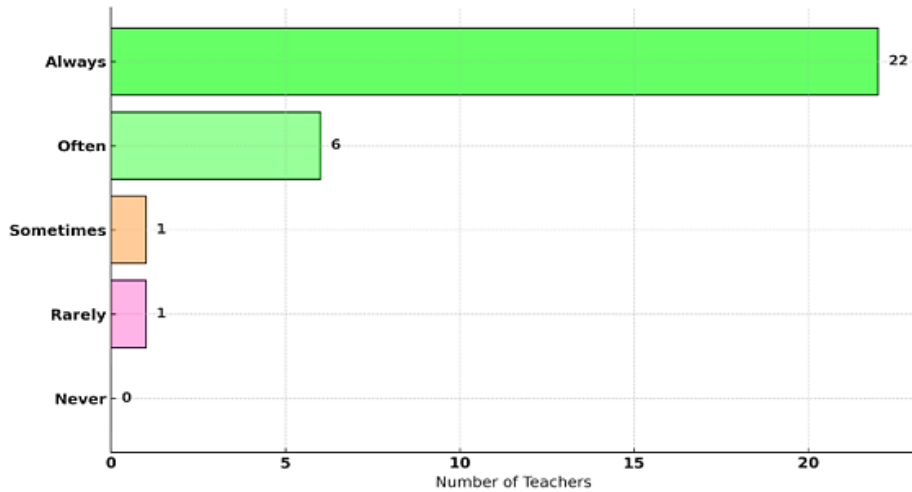


This bar chart indicated that there is a significant pressure on EMI teachers, as the majority of the responses reported 'always' and 'often'. Hence, they consider teaching with EMI in the EFL context both challenging and overwhelming.

Question 7: Do you find it challenging to explain complex Chemistry concepts due to limited English vocabulary?

☐ Never ☐ Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

Figure 5: Challenges Explaining Chemistry Concepts Due to Limited



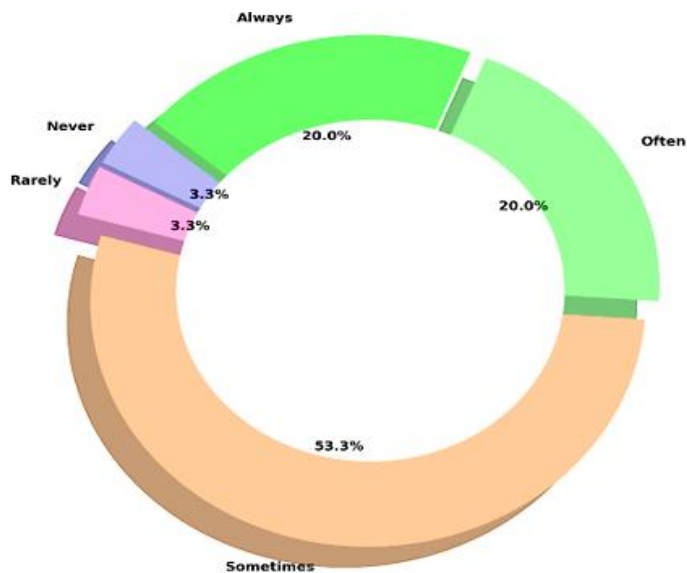
English Vocabulary

The chart below shows that the majority of teachers find it ‘always’ or ‘often’ too demanding to teach new terminologies in English since they were not originally taught using the same language.

Question 3: Have you ever felt uncomfortable or insecure because some of your students had a better command of English than you?

☐ Never ☐ Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

Figure 6: Discomfort Due to Students’ Superior English Proficiency



Few teachers reported that they ‘never’ or ‘rarely’ felt insecure in front of their students, as many of today’s learners have a strong command of English, which can place EMI teachers in an uncomfortable situation.

Question 4: Can you describe a moment when language limitations affected your ability to teach a Chemistry concept effectively in English?

In this question, the responses fell into two main categories. The first group of teachers described their first experience using EMI to teach their content module. For instance, one teacher stated, ‘I felt like I had never taught before.’ The second group shared that they frequently switched to French during lessons, unintentionally, due to their limited proficiency in English, and they were also used to teach in French.

Question 5: In your opinion, what types of support would help you feel more confident teaching Chemistry through EMI?

The majority of teachers agreed that training in both pedagogy and language is the most effective solution to overcome the challenges they face when using EMI. Additionally, two participants suggested ideas such as collaboration and international teacher exchange programs.

5. Discussion

The findings of the questionnaire contributed in revealing different insights about both the teachers’ attitudes towards the use of EMI and the common challenges they encounter while using it in the Department of Chemistry at USTHB University.

In the first part of the questionnaire, almost all the teachers confirmed that teaching through EMI has enhanced their overall English language proficiency. This improvement also enabled them to access academic resources and participate in scholarly events, which are generally in English. Regarding their subject content, they explained that EMI required them to put in more effort and conduct additional research on terminology, as the language differs from the one they were originally taught in. This can be seen as a positive outcome and aligns with findings from other studies, which suggest that EMI supports both language proficiency and English for Specific Purposes¹⁶. However, some teachers viewed this as a constraint and found it challenging. Although a minority of teachers expressed positive attitudes toward EMI implementation in higher education, the majority admitted that it has impacted their academic careers, as many reporting in the final question that it has paved the way for their future research.

The second part of the questionnaire dealt with identifying the challenges that EFL teachers face while teaching their content modules through EMI. On one hand,

the results revealed that the lack of English proficiency among EFL teachers caused psychological issues such as insecurity and pressure in front of their students. This finding is consistent with previous studies that reported how limited language skills and vocabulary negatively impact teachers' psychological well-being and self-esteem during EMI classes¹⁷. On the other hand, the questionnaire findings also highlighted a significant challenge concerning how their limited English level affects the delivery of the content module. In other words, although they hold a positive attitude towards EMI and recognize its role in developing their research skills and future professional growth, it still impacts the way they teach their subject matter, particularly in terms of vocabulary.

The most effective solution proposed by the participants was a well-structured training program specifically designed for EMI teachers with limited English proficiency. This is essential because they need to plan their lessons differently when teaching in a language that is neither their own nor that of their students. In the same respect, it was suggested that EMI courses that are delivered in a foreign context should be adopted to new teaching materials and techniques to assist both teachers' and students lack of English proficiency and help them understand the content module in English¹⁵. Hence, EMI training combined with the necessary pedagogical preparation may help teachers overcome linguistic challenges, boost their confidence, and better manage the psychological barriers they encounter.

7. CONCLUSION

This study aimed at investigating the use of EMI in EFL contexts by taking the case study of chemistry teachers at USTHB University in Algeria. The results of the questionnaire administered to 30 teachers revealed that the majority of them realized how EMI can be fruitful for improving their chances of participating in academic occasions at an international level and conducting deeper research than before, since English is the language of science and many resources are available in English, which was previously a constraint for them. However, they reported that teaching in a language they do not master well has affected their proficiency in delivering the content of their module. Moreover, it caused them psychological problems by lowering their self-esteem and making them feel under constant pressure.

Educational policymakers and education sector authorities can work to develop a well-structured training program for EMI teachers that includes specific pedagogical materials designed to support them in delivering EMI classes, distinguishing these sessions from their usual teaching in French or Arabic. This

would help teachers transfer their content knowledge using new strategies and techniques suited to a new language of instruction. They could also benefit from specialized language classes aimed at improving their English proficiency, which would, in turn, boost their motivation and confidence in front of their learners. Enhancing both syllabus design and linguistic skills would allow teachers to gain more from EMI classes in terms of both content delivery and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) abilities.

Nonetheless, in North African countries, even training programs may fail, as some teachers believe that teaching exclusively in English could threaten their linguistic identity, as they have witnessed during colonialism in the past, which is something they are unwilling to relive. Therefore, further research should take into account teachers' linguistic and cultural identity in the program of EMI trainings in non-native English-speaking countries. This would help prepare professionals mentally and emotionally to adopt EMI and recognize it as a vital step toward participating in the international academic and work environment.

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