

LANGUAGE POLICY IN ALGERIA: HISTORICAL LEGACIES AND LOCAL PERCEPTIONS IN SAIDA

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ABSTRACT: Algeria's language policy has developed through ongoing tension between postcolonial nation-building and socially embedded multilingualism. Modern Standard Arabic, Algerian Arabic, Tamazight in its regional varieties, French, and increasingly English occupy unequal and partly overlapping functions in education, administration, the economy, scientific communication, and everyday interaction. This article analyses the historical and ideological development of Algerian language policy since independence and examines the gap between official language management and lived linguistic practices. It adopts a framework that distinguishes language management, language beliefs, and language practices, and complements the historical analysis with an exploratory questionnaire survey of 80 residents of the municipality of Saida. The survey documents reported linguistic repertoires, experiences of multilingual interaction, attitudes towards linguistic coexistence, and preferences concerning foreign-language and science education. The findings show a strong attachment to Arabic, continued value assigned to French, and substantial self-reported competence in English within a comparatively young and educated local sample. Multilingual coexistence is widely perceived as beneficial, although respondents also identify communication barriers and unequal educational access. Preferences for the language of science reveal a layered rather than exclusive hierarchy: Modern Standard Arabic retains symbolic legitimacy, English is increasingly associated with scientific and international mobility, and French continues to occupy established academic and professional domains. Because the survey is local, cross-sectional, and based on self-report, the results are interpreted as exploratory rather than nationally representative. The article argues for an additive multilingual policy that connects constitutional recognition, educational continuity, and actual language use.

KEYWORDS: Algeria; Arabisation; English; French; language policy; multilingualism; Saida; Tamazight.

1. Introduction

Algeria's sociolinguistic configuration cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between Arabic and French. Modern Standard Arabic has constitutional and institutional authority; Algerian Arabic is central to everyday interaction; Tamazight is both a national and official language expressed through several regional varieties; French retains extensive functions in higher education, professional communication, and knowledge circulation; and English has gained institutional visibility in education and scientific policy. These languages do not occupy equivalent positions, yet they coexist within the repertoires of individuals and institutions (Abid-Houcine, 2007; Benrabah, 1999; Dourari, 2012).

The language question is consequently political as well as linguistic. Decisions concerning the language of schooling, administration, scientific instruction, and public communication distribute access to knowledge and social participation. Since independence in 1962, language management has also served as an instrument of decolonization and national legitimation. Arabisation sought to restore a language marginalized under colonial rule, but its implementation unfolded in a society whose linguistic practices remained plural and whose institutions continued to rely on French in several domains (Benrabah, 1999; Leperlier, 2012; Morsly, 2007).

A substantial body of scholarship has examined the ideological foundations of Arabisation, the enduring position of French, and the constitutional recognition of Tamazight. Less attention is often given to the way these macro-level processes are perceived within particular local settings. A local survey cannot represent the entire country, but it can show how national language hierarchies are interpreted and negotiated by individuals in a specific sociolinguistic environment.

The article therefore pursues two connected objectives. First, it offers a critical diachronic account of Algerian language policy, focusing on the relationship between official decisions and actual language practices. Second, it examines an exploratory survey conducted in the municipality of Saida. Three research questions guide the empirical component: (1) What linguistic repertoires and levels of proficiency do respondents report? (2) How do they evaluate multilingual coexistence and its associated difficulties? (3) What attitudes do they express towards foreign-language teaching and the language of scientific instruction?

The contribution of the article lies in the articulation of historical policy analysis with local perception data. Rather than treating Arabic, Tamazight, French, and English as mutually exclusive alternatives, the analysis considers their differentiated functions and the possibility of an additive multilingual policy.

2. Conceptual and Analytical Framework

Language policy is understood here as more than formal legislation. Spolsky (2004) distinguishes among language practices, language beliefs or ideologies, and explicit language management. This distinction is particularly useful in Algeria, where constitutional provisions and educational directives do not always coincide with the languages used in universities, workplaces, households, and public interaction. Cooper's (1989) account of language planning similarly directs attention to who attempts to influence which linguistic behaviors, for which populations, and for what purposes. The analysis is organized around four dimensions. The first is status planning: the legal and institutional recognition assigned to Arabic and Tamazight and the de facto position of French and English. The second is acquisition planning: the languages introduced through schooling and higher education. The third is language ideology: the association of Arabic with national authenticity, French with colonial history and social mobility, Tamazight with indigenous identity and cultural rights, and English with global scientific access. The fourth is lived practice: multilingual repertoires, code-switching, and domain-specific language choice. This framework avoids interpreting policy success solely through official declarations. A language may possess constitutional recognition without equivalent institutional use; conversely, a language officially classified as foreign may remain deeply embedded in education, administration, and professional life. The central analytical question is therefore the relationship between de jure status and de facto practice.

3. Historical Trajectories of Language Policy

3.1. Colonial Legacy and Post-Independence Reconstruction

French colonial rule profoundly reorganized the linguistic distribution of institutional power. French became the principal language of administration, formal education, and cultural production, while Arabic and Amazigh varieties were excluded from many high-status domains. This history gave language a central place in post-independence reconstruction: restoring Arabic was understood not simply as a pedagogical choice but as a recovery of sovereignty and cultural dignity (Benrabah, 1999; Morsly, 2007). The 1963 Constitution designated Arabic as the national and official language of the state. The choice reflected the anti-colonial legitimacy of the new political order and the close symbolic relationship among Arabic, Islam, and the national movement. Yet the state inherited an administration and educational system in which French-trained personnel, technical documentation, and institutional routines remained indispensable. The result was an enduring tension between the desired language of national unification and the languages already embedded in state and professional practice.

3.2. Arabisation as Decolonization and State-Building

Arabisation was intended to expand Arabic across education, administration, culture, and public communication. In ideological terms, it represented both decolonization and the construction of a unified Arab-Islamic national identity. It also sought to reduce dependence on the former colonial language and to establish a common institutional medium. The policy therefore combined symbolic restoration, political legitimation, and practical language planning (Dourari, 2012; Leperlier, 2012).

Implementation, however, was uneven. Rapid curricular transformation was not always accompanied by adequate teacher preparation, terminology development, or scientific resources. Moreover, the project encountered a multilingual society in which Algerian Arabic and Amazigh varieties were the principal home languages for many citizens, whereas French retained strong institutional functions. Arabisation thus transformed the education system without eliminating the functional distribution of languages inherited from earlier periods (Abid-Houcine, 2007; Ammouden, 2024). These developments also illustrate the complexity of language planning in a multilingual context. Arabic was promoted as a unifying language, while Algerian Arabic and Amazigh varieties continued to serve important everyday communicative functions. The subsequent constitutional recognition of Tamazight marked a further stage in the evolution of Algeria's linguistic framework.

3.3. From Monolingual Aspiration to Institutional Pluralization

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, formal language policy had become more visibly plural. Tamazight was recognized as a national language in 2002 and as a national and official language in the 2016 constitutional revision; the 2020 Constitution maintained this status. These changes represented a major legal shift, even though constitutional recognition did not automatically produce equal use in administration, education, or public services (Bektache, 2018; People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria, 2016, 2020; Tabti, 2022).

Educational policy also moved away from an exclusively monolingual ideal. Ammouden (2024) notes that the 2008 orientation law explicitly valued multilingualism and access to foreign languages, even though classroom materials and practices have not always fully realized those objectives. Contemporary policy is therefore characterized less by a completed transition from one language to another than by the coexistence of multiple, sometimes competing, planning priorities.

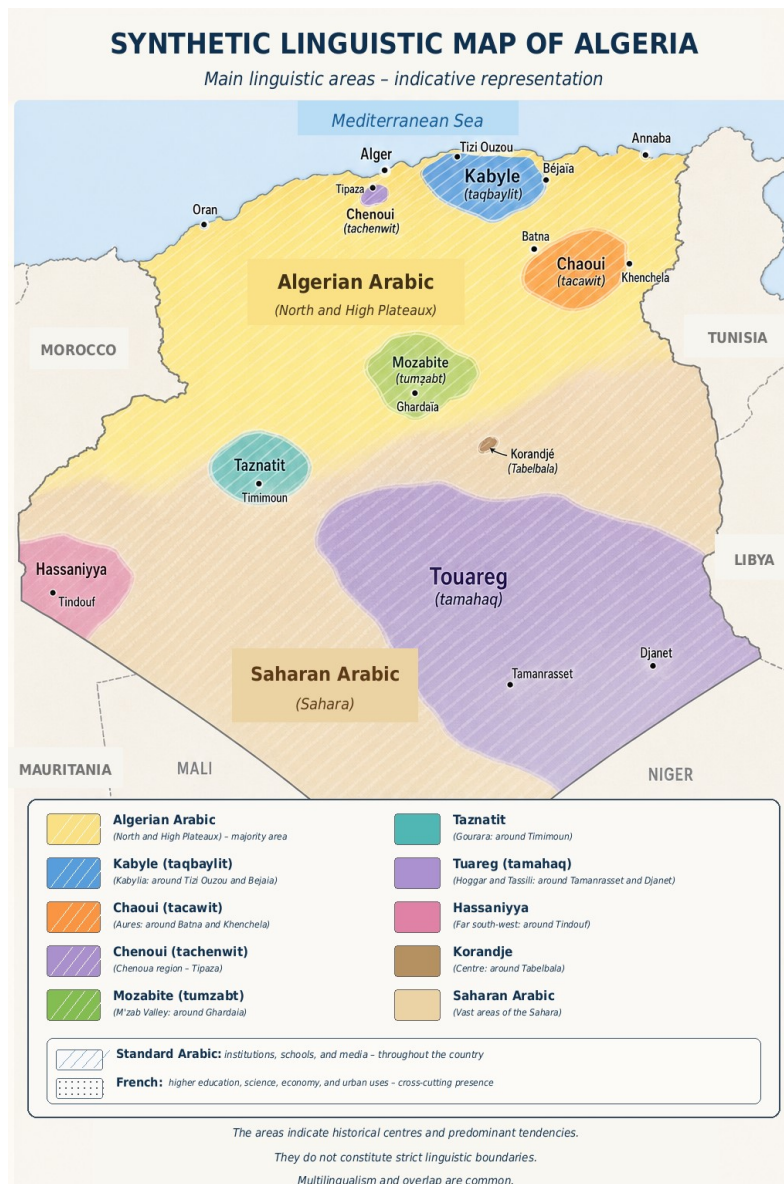


Figure 1. Indicative representation of Algeria’s multilingual landscape

Note. The map is indicative and does not delimit closed or homogeneous linguistic territories. Internal mobility, urbanization, code-switching, and multilingual repertoires produce extensive zones of contact and overlap. Source: authors’ compilation.

4. The Contemporary Sociolinguistic Configuration

4.1. Arabic: Official Authority and Internal Differentiation

Modern Standard Arabic holds the principal position in legislation, state institutions, national education, and much of the formal media. Its status is inseparable from national sovereignty and the symbolic reconstruction that followed independence. Algerian Arabic, by contrast, is the dominant medium of everyday interaction for a large part of the population, but it has limited formal recognition. The relationship between the two is not simply one of formal and informal registers: it also involves differences in acquisition, literacy, institutional prestige, and communicative function. Treating Arabic as a single homogeneous category can therefore obscure the sociolinguistic distance between the language of formal schooling and the varieties acquired in the home. This distinction is relevant to educational outcomes, classroom interaction, and debates concerning the legitimacy of locally rooted linguistic practices.

4.2. French: A Foreign Language with Enduring Institutional Functions

French is officially a foreign language, but its social and institutional functions exceed that label. It remains prominent in scientific and technical higher education, professional communication, business, and several administrative practices. Its continued use reflects historical continuity, access to specialized knowledge, and established professional networks rather than formal constitutional status (Chariet, 2020; Cherfaoui, 2021; Morsly, 2007). This position generates ambivalent representations. French may be perceived as a colonial inheritance and a reminder of linguistic domination, while also functioning as a resource for academic success, employment, and international mobility (This was prior to the reform of the education system, which was based on language-policy orientations aimed at broadening students' exposure—and, more generally, that of Algerian society—to non-Francophone linguistic and cultural spheres). In professional settings, language choice is often domain-specific and complementary rather than exclusive. Cherfaoui's (2021) study of Sonatrach, for example, describes multilingual workplace practices in which languages are selected according to task, interlocutor, and communicative situation. The persistence of French illustrates the difference between official policy and linguistic practice. Its continuing presence is supported by established institutional practices and the professional opportunities associated with its mastery.

4.3. Tamazight: Constitutional Recognition and Implementation Challenges

Tamazight occupies a distinctive position because it combines indigenous historical legitimacy, regional linguistic diversity, and relatively recent constitutional recognition. The national-language status granted in 2002 was expanded to national and official status in 2016 and maintained in the 2020 Constitution. This legal development followed decades of mobilization, including the Berber Spring of 1980 and later movements demanding linguistic and cultural recognition (Bektache, 2018; Tabti, 2022).

The principal issue is now the translation of recognition into sustained institutional practice. Regional variation complicates standardization, curriculum design, teacher preparation, and the production of administrative terminology. Yet standardization should not erase the legitimacy of Kabyle, Chaoui, Mozabite, Tamahaq, Chenoui, and other varieties. A workable policy must balance shared resources with respect for regional linguistic forms. The contrast between constitutional status and uneven implementation makes Tamazight a clear example of the difference between symbolic recognition and operational language planning.

4.4. English and the Reconfiguration of Foreign-Language Policy

English has acquired growing institutional visibility in Algeria, particularly in education, science, and international academic communication. Its introduction into the third year of primary education from the 2022–2023 school year marked a significant change in acquisition planning (Ministry of National Education, 2023). In higher education, national policy has progressively expanded English-medium modules and programs, especially in scientific and technological fields.

The graduation of the first English-taught cohorts at the University of Algiers 3 in July 2026 illustrates the movement from language-support initiatives towards degree-level instruction in English across several disciplines (Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, 2026). This development should not automatically be interpreted as the disappearance of French. The more plausible short-term configuration is an increasingly complex distribution in which English expands in

selected academic domains while French continues to benefit from established institutional and professional networks. A zero-sum opposition between French and English would reproduce the limitations of earlier monolingual approaches. The policy question is not only which foreign language should dominate, but how learners can acquire usable competence without weakening Arabic, Tamazight, or continuity across educational stages.

5. Education, Domain Discontinuities, and Globalization

5.1. Discontinuity between Schooling and Higher Education

One of the most persistent educational issues is the transition between predominantly Arabic-medium schooling and university programs that have historically relied on French in scientific, technical, and medical fields. Students may therefore enter higher education with disciplinary knowledge acquired in Arabic but encounter specialized terminology, textbooks, and assessment practices in another language. This transition can transform language proficiency into an unequal condition of access to academic knowledge (Abid-Houcine, 2007; Ammouden, 2024). The expansion of English adds a further layer. It may improve access to international research, but it also creates new requirements for teacher training, terminology development, and student support. Changing the language of instruction without building transitional programs risks transferring the same discontinuity from French to English. A multilingual policy should therefore be accompanied by discipline-specific language support and coordinated progression from primary school to university.

5.2. Digitalization and Unequal Linguistic Resources

Digital platforms can increase the visibility of Arabic and Tamazight, support multilingual content production, and widen access to language-learning materials. They also strengthen the practical value of English and French through access to international academic resources. However, technological availability is uneven across languages. Differences in terminology, software localization, digital corpora, teacher preparation, and connectivity may reproduce existing linguistic inequalities rather than remove them. Technology should therefore be treated as part of language planning rather than as a neutral solution. Investment in digital dictionaries, corpora, educational platforms, and accessible learning resources is particularly important for Tamazight varieties and for Arabic-medium scientific education.

6. Field Study in the Municipality of Saida

6.1. Research Design and Instrument

The empirical component used an exploratory, cross-sectional survey conducted between March and May 2026 among adult residents of the municipality of Saida. Participants were recruited through non-probability convenience sampling using local university and community networks, with an effort to include different age and occupational groups. This strategy is appropriate for a local exploratory study, but it does not permit population-level inference.

The instrument was a self-administered paper questionnaire presented in parallel Arabic and French versions. Participants used the version with which they felt most comfortable. It contained nineteen closed and semi-closed items organized into four areas: demographic characteristics; experience of multilingual environments; attitudes towards the teaching of French and English; and general perceptions of linguistic coexistence. The wording and response categories were kept identical across the two language versions. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Before completing the questionnaire, respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, the use of aggregated results, and their right to decline or discontinue without consequence. No names, contact details, or other direct identifiers were collected; completion and return of the questionnaire constituted informed consent.

Responses were coded and checked manually before descriptive analysis. All eighty questionnaires were sufficiently complete to be retained. No statistical imputation was performed. Unless otherwise indicated, frequencies and percentages are calculated against the full sample (N = 80). The items concerning the number of languages encountered and the principal difficulty associated with multilingual communication were analyzed as independent single-choice questions rather than as conditional follow-ups. For the final open-ended proposal item, twenty-five responses that did not correspond to the three named categories were retained as “other measure or no specific proposal” instead of being discarded. The study is intended to illustrate local perceptions rather than to generate

nationally representative estimates. The sample is comparatively young and educated, with students accounting for half of the participants. Language proficiency is self-reported and was not measured through a standardized test; these characteristics are considered throughout the interpretation.

6.2. Participant Profile

The sample comprised 48 men and 32 women. Participants aged 18–25 formed the largest age group, while students represented 50% of the sample. The profile supports an exploratory analysis of a population likely to encounter multiple languages in education and digital communication, but it also limits generalization to older and less formally educated groups.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents (N = 80)

Criterion	Category	n	%
Age	18–25 years	24	30.00
	26–35 years	20	25.00
	36–45 years	20	25.00
	46 years and above	16	20.00
Sex	Men	48	60.00
	Women	32	40.00
Occupation	Students	40	50.00
	Employed participants	20	25.00
	Teachers	15	18.75
	Retired participants	5	6.25

7. Results

7.1. Reported Linguistic Repertoires and Proficiency

Algerian Arabic was identified as the first language by 97.5% of respondents, while 2.5% reported Tamazight. This distribution reflects the local sample and should not be extrapolated to the national population. In the single-choice item concerning the foreign language spoken most fluently, 56.25% selected English and 43.75% selected French.

The proficiency scale reveals a clear difference between the two languages. French was most frequently rated as advanced (50%), followed by intermediate (37.5%), while 6.25% of respondents reported a near-native level and 6.25% a beginner level. By contrast, English was most frequently rated as intermediate (50%), followed by advanced (37.5%) and beginner (12.5%); none of the respondents reported near-native proficiency. Overall, the distribution indicates higher self-reported proficiency in French than in English within the surveyed sample. However, because the study is cross-sectional and provides no earlier comparison group, these findings cannot be interpreted as evidence of a historical increase in English proficiency.

Table 2. Reported first language

First language	n	%
Algerian Arabic	78	97.50
Tamazight	2	2.50

Table 3. Foreign language reported as spoken fluently

Foreign language	n	%
English	45	56.25
French	35	43.75

Note. Participants selected one language in this item; the percentages are therefore calculated against N = 80 and sum to 100%.

Table 4. Self-reported proficiency in French and English

Reported level	French n (%)	English n (%)
Beginner	5 (6.25)	10 (12.50)
Intermediate	30 (37.50)	40 (50.00)
Advanced	40 (50.00)	30 (37.50)
Near-native	5 (6.25)	0 (0.00)

Note. These categories reflect self-evaluation and are not equivalent to tested CEFR levels.

7.2. Experience of Multilingualism and Linguistic Coexistence

A large majority of respondents (87.5%) reported having lived or worked in a multilingual environment. In separate single-choice items answered by the full sample, two languages were the most frequently reported configuration, and communication problems were the principal difficulty associated with multilingual interaction. The results suggest that multilingual competence alone does not eliminate interactional problems; participants also associate coexistence with intercultural and institutional conditions. Despite these difficulties, 87.5% considered linguistic coexistence beneficial. Cultural enrichment and intercultural understanding were the principal benefits identified. The most frequently reported challenge was unequal access to education, followed by language barriers. The prominence of educational inequality shifts the discussion from symbolic identity alone towards the distribution of learning opportunities.

Table 5. Experience of multilingualism and reported difficulties

Indicator	Response	n	%
Experience in a multilingual environment	Yes	70	87.50
Number of languages typically encountered	Two languages	50	62.50
	Three languages	20	25.00
	Four or more languages	10	12.50
Principal difficulty associated with multilingual communication	Communication problems	50	62.50
	Cultural misunderstandings	20	25.00
	Integration difficulties	10	12.50

Note. Each item in this table was analyzed independently against the full sample (N = 80); the language-number and difficulty items were not conditional on the initial yes/no response.

Table 6. Perceived benefits and challenges of linguistic coexistence

Indicator	Category	n	%
Coexistence considered beneficial	Yes	70	87.50
Coexistence considered beneficial	No	10	12.50
Benefit cited	Cultural enrichment	40	50.00
Benefit cited	Intercultural understanding	40	50.00
Challenge identified	Unequal access to education	40	50.00
Challenge identified	Language barriers	30	37.50
Challenge identified	Cultural tensions	10	12.50

Note. The benefit and challenge questions were treated as separate single-choice items, each calculated against N = 80.

7.3. Attitudes towards Foreign-Language and Science Education

Pronunciation was identified as the principal difficulty in learning French, followed by insufficient practice and limited teaching resources. These perceptions support a greater emphasis on sustained oral exposure and opportunities for meaningful use, although the survey does not independently measure the effectiveness of particular teaching methods. Respondents were evenly divided on whether the teaching of French and English should be strengthened. Because both languages were combined in a single item, the result cannot reveal whether participants held different attitudes towards French and English. Future versions of the questionnaire should ask separate questions for each language. Modern Standard Arabic was the preferred language for teaching scientific subjects for half of the sample, followed by English and then French. The pattern does not indicate a simple replacement of one language by another. It suggests a combination of symbolic attachment to Arabic, growing association of English with science and technology, and reduced preference for French in this particular item despite its established institutional role.

Table 7. Main difficulty reported in learning French

Difficulty	n	%
Pronunciation	40	50.00
Insufficient practice	30	37.50
Lack of teaching resources	10	12.50

Table 8. Views on strengthening the teaching of French and English

Position	n	%
In favour	40	50.00
Against	40	50.00

Note. The questionnaire addressed French and English jointly in this item; the result therefore concerns the strengthening of foreign-language teaching as a combined proposition.

Table 9. Preferred language for teaching scientific subjects

Preferred language	n	%
Modern Standard Arabic	40	50.00
English	30	37.50
French	10	12.50

7.4. Proposed Measures for Promoting Linguistic Coexistence

Intercultural activities were the most frequently selected proposal, followed by public policies supporting linguistic diversity and language-training programs. Twenty-five respondents either proposed another measure or gave no specific classifiable proposal; these responses were retained in a combined residual category rather than treated as missing data.

Table 10. Proposed measures for improving linguistic coexistence

Proposed measure	n	%
Intercultural activities	27	33.75
Policies supporting linguistic diversity	20	25.00
Language-training programs	8	10.00
Other measure or no specific proposal	25	31.25

Note. No imputation was used. Responses not classifiable under the three named proposals are reported as “other measure or no specific proposal”.

8. Discussion

The results illustrate a layered linguistic order rather than a single language shift. Algerian Arabic forms the common first-language base of the local sample, while French and English are both present in reported individual repertoires. French retains a higher proportion of advanced self-ratings, whereas English is prominent at the intermediate level and is preferred by more respondents than French for scientific instruction. This pattern is compatible with a transitional distribution of functions, but it cannot by itself demonstrate that English is replacing French. The positive evaluation of multilingual coexistence is equally significant. Respondents do not primarily frame linguistic plurality as a threat to national unity. They associate it with cultural enrichment and intercultural understanding, while locating its main problems in communication and unequal educational access. This distinction supports a policy perspective in which the challenge is not multilingualism itself, but the unequal conditions under which languages are learned and used. The preference for Modern Standard Arabic in science education requires careful interpretation. It may reflect national identification, a desire for educational continuity, or a normative belief about the role of the official language. The substantial preference for English indicates a simultaneous pragmatic orientation towards international knowledge. The comparatively low preference for French in this item should not be equated with its disappearance from scientific or professional practice, where established resources and institutional habits remain influential (Chariet, 2020; Cherfaoui, 2021). The survey therefore reinforces the distinction between language status, language ideology, and language practice. Arabic has constitutional authority and strong symbolic legitimacy; French retains practical capital in established domains; English is acquiring new institutional and aspirational value; and Tamazight’s constitutional recognition remains unevenly translated into everyday institutional use. These positions overlap rather than forming a stable hierarchy applicable to every context.

9. Policy Implications

First, language planning should be additive rather than substitutive. Strengthening English need not require the elimination of French, and recognizing the practical role of French need not weaken Arabic or Tamazight. The relevant objective is to define complementary domains while ensuring that language choice does not become an unjustified barrier to education or employment. Second, educational continuity requires coordinated language progression. Students in scientific and technical fields need explicit support when the language of instruction changes between educational stages. Discipline-specific language courses, bilingual glossaries, bridge modules, and teacher training should accompany any expansion of English-medium or French-medium instruction. Third, the official status of Tamazight should be supported by operational planning: teacher preparation, curriculum materials, public-service terminology, media production, digital resources, and mechanisms that respect regional varieties. Constitutional recognition provides a legal foundation but cannot substitute for implementation. Fourth, policy evaluation should rely on transparent data. National and regional surveys should distinguish language exposure, tested proficiency, self-reported competence, language preference, and actual domain use. Separate questions should be used for French and English, and sampling procedures should allow comparisons across age, region, education, and occupation.

Finally, local participation should be integrated into policy design. Municipalities, schools, universities, professional organizations, and cultural associations can identify domain-specific needs that are not visible in national policy documents.

10. Limitations of the Study

The empirical findings must be read within several limitations. The sample is small, local, non-probabilistic, and disproportionately composed of students and younger respondents. The use of university and community networks may have favored participants with greater exposure to formal education and multilingual communication. Proficiency measures are self-reported rather than tested. The item on strengthening French and English combines two languages in one proposition, and the final proposal item retains a broad residual category. Finally, the cross-sectional design does not permit claims about historical change, generational progression, or causal effects of language policy.

These limitations do not invalidate the survey's exploratory value. They define the level at which its findings can be used: as evidence of perceptions within one local sample and as a basis for designing a more systematic comparative study.

11. Conclusion

Algerian language policy has moved from a post-independence project centered on Arabisation towards a more complex configuration that combines the constitutional authority of Arabic, the official recognition of Tamazight, the continuing institutional presence of French, and the expanding role of English. This development should not be described as a linear succession in which one language simply replaces another. The functions of languages remain differentiated across education, administration, professional life, science, and everyday interaction. The Saida survey provides a local illustration of this complexity. Respondents express strong attachment to Arabic, substantial reported competence in French and English, and broad support for linguistic coexistence. At the same time, they identify communication barriers and unequal educational access, indicating that the principal challenge lies in the organization of multilingualism rather than in plurality itself. A coherent policy should therefore connect legal status, educational planning, and lived language practices. Additive multilingualism, continuity between educational stages, practical implementation of Tamazight's official status, and transparent evaluation of language outcomes offer useful directions for language planning in a multilingual society.

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