Exploring the potential of English as a medium of instruction in higher education in Tunisia

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About the author

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Contents

Executive summary

This report presents the findings of a British Council-commissioned project that investigated the role of English in Tunisian tertiary education and the possibilities for gradually introducing English as a medium of instruction (EMI) at universities. It stems from the British Council's position that educational development initiatives associated with the language of instruction need to be informed by empirical research that explores the affordances and constraints associated with such initiatives.

The study was conducted in collaboration with the Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education, which enabled the fieldwork phase of the project.

The study aimed at:

- exploring the attitudes of university students and staff towards EMI

- investigating the readiness for EMI among university teachers, students and educational stakeholders

- finding out about current capacity, future capability and existing curriculum associated with teaching English or through English at tertiary level

- making recommendations in light of the findings.

In order to address these aims, the study used a combination of responses from online questionnaires completed by 391 respondents who are all current university students in Tunisia and responses from semi-structured interviews conducted with 63 educational stakeholders, namely university teaching staff, university students, and senior members from the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Education.

The main conclusions are:

- English is positively perceived by university teachers and students. It is associated with the language of research, international engagement, mobility, professional opportunities and job market requirements.

- Tunisian university teachers and students value their multilingual repertoires, which means that while they appreciate the need to improve their English proficiency, they highlight the importance of both Arabic and French as part of being a Tunisian citizen. This goes in line with official governmental backing for citizens to speak Arabic (the official and national language) and to master two foreign languages.

- There are current enablers that provide a strong platform for using EMI at tertiary level. These include associating English instruction with interactive pedagogic styles, recognising the instrumental need for English, associating it with soft employability skills and placing it at the heart of the internationalisation agenda of the Ministry of Higher Education (with the aim to recruit international students, send Tunisian students to study abroad, attract international staff and enrich the curriculum with international perspectives accessed through English).

- On the other hand, there are challenges that need to be carefully addressed to enable the transition into EMI. These include providing teacher-training opportunities that focus on English linguistic proficiency and awareness of interactive pedagogy, improving the content of English classes at university level so they are more attuned with the different programmes of study and/or with employability skills and preparations for language proficiency tests, and reviewing schools' English textbooks and ensuring that baccalaureate exams for English assess all language skills.

The study recommends that there is an urgent need for a language policy dialogue to discuss the linguistic identity of Tunisia and the linguistic requirements of the job market to ensure that there is synergy between these aspects and the role of education and higher education in educating citizens and preparing them for the job market locally and globally. It also recommends the importance of empowering and encouraging higher education institutions to locally assess their training needs and capacityto teach some university subjects through the medium of English. At a national scale, there needs to be a transition strategy to higher education with the aim of equipping university students with the linguistic means that enable them to study specialised subjects through English and/or French. This requires a thorough assessment of English textbooks at secondary schools. The study concludes that a flexible multilingualism approach is needed to ensure equal access to linguistic resources in order to ensure the delivery of equitable and inclusive education for Tunisian youth.

1. Introduction

This research project examines how English is currently positioned in the Tunisian higher education system, with the aim of exploring the potential of introducing EMI. Research on the international status of English has emphasised links between access to English and economic development.

As such, English becomes a valuable linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1977) and an important commodity (Heller, 2010) in the global job market. Thompson (1991: 18) stresses that 'the distribution of linguistic capital is related in specific ways to the distribution of other forms of capital … which define the location of an individual within the social space'. As a result, it is quite common for educational development initiatives to ensure equitable access to English.

EMI is witnessing unprecedented growth internationally; however, it is sometimes envisaged too simplistically as an approach to improve university graduates' job mobility (Galloway et al., 2017), particularly in non-EMI contexts. The British Council's perspective on this matter emphasises that students in basic education learn much better in a language that they understand while having the opportunity to receive quality English language instruction at higher levels (Simpson, 2017). The British Council also highlights the importance of an evidence-based approach to arrive at an informed position. This has provided the impetus for this empirical research, one of the first projects to investigate the status of English at tertiary level in Tunisia.

Conceptually, the project draws on language policy and planning research in order to analyse existing language policies, language practices and ideologies associated with the multilingual situation in Tunisia where varieties of Arabic, French and English co-exist. Therefore, the project taps into Spolsky's (2004) three components of language policy: actual language practices, values assigned by speech community to different languages and varieties, and efforts by the speech community to enforce or encourage the use of a certain language or variety. At the same time, the project combines top-down and bottom-up approaches of language policy in order to combine views 'from above' with experiences and opinions 'from below' (Shohamy, 2009). This is done with the view that language learning projects in developing contexts such as Tunisia have to be carefully designed in a way that aligns itself with local needs and aspirations (Tembe and Norton, 2011). Therefore, a detailed language policy discussion is provided to foreground the wider sociolinguistic context in Tunisia, which is a significant contextual factor, while exploring the potential for moving to EMI at tertiary level.

2. Context

Tunisia is a North African country with a population of 11,759,874, based on the latest United Nations estimates (Worldometers, 2019). Tunisia gained its independence from France in 1956. Its income level is currently classified by the World Bank as lower-middle income.

Tunisia has high unemployment rates among its university graduates, and poverty was one of the main drivers of the Tunisian revolution in 2011. The country is, therefore, still on its way to recovery and socio-economic stability.

Sociolinguistically, Tunisia is a highly multilingual country. Walking in the streets of Tunisia, one can see street signs in different varieties of Arabic (Modern Standard Arabic, Tunisian Arabic or Darija), French and English. Other street signs display French or English words in Arabic script or vice versa. Individuals are highly multilingual, drawing fluidly, freely and flexibly on their Arabic, Berber and French repertoires. 'Language' in the Tunisian everyday interaction is creative, hybrid and translingual and is indeed an act of 'languaging', defined as the ability to employ whatever linguistic features language users have at their disposal with the intention of achieving their communicative aims (Jørgensen, 2008).

The Tunisian constitution mentions Arabic as the official and national language of Tunisia, with no mention of the role and/or status of French and English. A common observation during the process of reviewing official documents regarding languages in Tunisia is that the foreign languages in Tunisia are not explicitly specified or mentioned. Therefore, the assumption that French is the first foreign language and English is the second foreign language in Tunisia is not based on official documents that articulate or specify this ordering. Rather, it is perhaps a reflection of the order in which these languages are introduced in the educational system. French and English are taught as foreign languages in the basic education system. French is currently introduced as a foreign language in Grade 3 of primary school, whereas English is introduced in Grade 6. During the fieldwork, a member of the Ministry of Higher Education indicated that French and English will be introduced earlier (Grades 2 and 4 respectively) starting from the next academic year (2019–20).

As far as higher education is concerned, most university subjects are taught through the medium of French with the exception of some disciplines such as history, philosophy, journalism, Islamic studies and Arabic literature. Some universities, as outlined later in this report, have started to gradually introduce some university courses in English. It is also worth mentioning that Tunis Business School, established in 2010, is the first and only public business institution in Tunisia that uses English as the main language of instruction, following the US higher education academic system. Commenting on this educational initiative, the school's website[1] mentions that 'the launch of this institution is in tune with government efforts to boost the Tunisian economy, improve competitive standards, and develop off-shore activities'.

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1. Tunis Business School website: www.utunis.rnu.tn/tbs

3. Research questions

In line with the British Council's perspective on the importance of empirical research in the process of making informed decisions about educational development initiatives, this project aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes of university students and academic teaching staff in Tunisia towards EMI?

2. What is the level of readiness of university students and academic teaching staff in Tunisia for EMI?

3. To what extent does the higher education sector currently have the capacity, capability and curriculum to improve standards of teaching English to be able to transition to EMI?

4. What are the initiatives that need to be taken to transition to EMI where/if appropriate?

4. Research methodology

The project uses a mixed-method approach that combines quantitative and qualitative paradigms.

The first phase started with contextual desk research that entailed reviewing official policy documents in relation to the educational reform agenda, educational regulations and statistics of university graduates and employment rates. The second phase started with the launch of an online survey on 4 February 2019 until 11 March 2019. The third phase entailed conducting semi-structured interviews with university students, university lecturers and senior staff at the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Education. The interviews were conducted in the period between 20 February and 1 March 2019.

This research is epistemologically influenced by Cunliffe's (2008: 127) description of subjective orientation to social constructionism where 'reality is negotiated by individuals within social settings, each of whom has their own perception, meanings and ways of making sense within a broader social context'. This means that the nature of 'knowledge' and the 'reality' depicted in this research are co-constructed by the participants around the researcher's questions and observations.

4.1 Online questionnaires

This data collection instrument offers the opportunity to reach a wider audience. The only inclusion criterion required is to be currently enrolled in a Tunisian higher education institution. It is open to both Tunisian and international students and it accommodates all academic degrees in the Licence, Master and Doctorate (LMD) system.

The questionnaire was designed bilingually showing Arabic then English. The first page of the questionnaire states that participants can complete the open-ended questions in English, Arabic or French. Researching multilingually has proved to offer multiple opportunities, including ensuring that participants understand the purpose of the study and the questions they are answering. It also allows participants to express opinions and views without the need to consider any potential language barriers (Holmes et al., 2013).

The questionnaire asks respondents to rate attitudinal statements about the importance of English in their academic degrees and the envisaged benefits of English in their future career paths. Questionnaire respondents are also required to comment on whether there is a need for English to be used as a medium of instruction at university, and on some expected challenges associated with English at tertiary level.

The questionnaire was completed by 391 respondents who are all current university students in Tunisia. Table 1 represents the university affiliation of the students who completed the online questionnaire. The table also reflects a comprehensive list of all the universities in Tunisia.

The questionnaire was completed by students studying different academic programmes on different degrees, as demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 1: University affiliation of online questionnaire respondents

University affiliation	Number of respondents
Carthage	88
Gabes	13
Gafsa	4
ISET	16
Jendouba	5
Kairouan	6
Manouba	44
Monastir	16
Sfax	30
Sousse	27
Tunis	55
Tunis Manar	85
UVT	1
Zaytouna	1

Table 2: Current academic degrees of the online questionnaire respondents

Degree	Number of respondents
Licence	181
Master's	173
PhD	37
Total	**391**

4.2 Semi-structured interviews

The qualitative aspect of the study was conducted in the period between 20 February and 1 March 2019. It includes 18 institutes and faculties across the capital city of Tunis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 38 university students and 20 academic teaching staff. Some of these interviews were individual interviews; others were pair or group interviews, depending on who was available and willing to talk to the researcher. In addition, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior personnel from the Ministry of Higher Education (four interviews) and the Ministry of Education (one interview). This gives a total of 63 interviewees. Gender representation is 25 males and 38 females, and average interview duration is 27.30 minutes. The disciplines represented are business, engineering, applied linguistics, journalism, mathematics, international politics, marketing, law, marine life, architecture, English literature, French literature, communication studies and biology. Appendix 1 provides information about interview duration, language, and number and gender of the participants, as well as information about disciplinary background. With reference to the language(s) of the interview, the participants were asked to choose whether they preferred to be interviewed in Arabic or English, as the researcher is an expert user of both. I was also accompanied by the project manager who provided ad hoc French translations when needed. As the interviews progressed, instances of translanguaging (cf. Creese and Blackledge, 2015) became evident as many participants drew upon their rich linguistic repertoires and used Arabic varieties (Pan-Arabic, Tunisian Darjah), English and some French.

The semi-structured interviews broadly covered the following themes: individuals' attitudes towards languages in Tunisia, comments on how languages are currently used in education and higher education, practical and pedagogical obstacles associated with using EMI, comments on the capacity of teaching staff to potentially offer subject courses in English, and existing examples of good practices.

4.3 Comments on data saturation and transferability

The design of the case study of Tunis followed the logic of 'data saturation': reaching a stage where participants do not necessarily add something new to what is already known to the researcher as a result of data obtained from other participants. That means that the amount of data obtained from this case study research was dependent on how much new information can be obtained and how much is known as a result of the generated data (Eisenhardt, 1991).

4.4 Notes on data analysis

The questionnaire quantitative data was electronically analysed using OnlineSurvey's statistical analysis feature that mainly uses descriptive statistics of frequency. In addition, the multilingual interview and questionnaire data was transcribed and translated by the researcher, who is an expert user of English and Arabic. The data analysis broadly followed the steps of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This type of analysis is inevitably influenced by the researcher's theoretical and epistemological positions. Even though the themes emerge from the data, they pre-exist in the interview guide, which, in itself, is framed around a conceptual framework inspired by the research questions, language policy and planning research and multilingual education debates. Manual (based on colour coding) thematic coding was conducted under three themes (also referred to as findings):

- English in higher education: enablers
- English in higher education: challenges
- Comments on language policy.

Table 3 maps the findings against the project's research questions.

Table 3: Findings of the research questions

Research question	Themes from the interviews	Triangulation from questionnaire data
1. What are the attitudes of university students and academic teaching staff in Tunisia towards EMI?	English in higher education: enablers	Yes
2. What is the level of readiness of university students and academic teaching staff in Tunisia for EMI?	English in higher education: enablers	Yes
3. To what extent does the higher education sector currently have the capacity, capability and curriculum to improve standards of teaching English to be able to transition to EMI?	English in higher education: challenges	Indicative [2]
4. What are the initiatives that need to be taken to transition to EMI where/if appropriate?	English in higher education: challenges Comments on language policy	Indicative

2.   While questionnaire data does not directly address these research questions, it provides some indicative responses that are in line with the findings generated from the semi-structured interviews.

4.5 Limitations

This exploratory research project aims to explore the position of English in tertiary higher education in Tunisia based on a mixed-method design. The online questionnaires were used as a tool to reach out to participants across Tunisia, but the main online platform for disseminating the questionnaire link was the British Council in Tunisia Facebook page, which has thousands of followers, the majority of whom have some interest in learning English and/or studying abroad. This is a limitation to consider while viewing the overall positive attitudes towards English in the questionnaire results.

To minimise the influence of this limitation, the findings are presented in combination with data generated through the semi-structured interviews, which took place in the capital city of Tunis. While this addresses the first limitation, it potentially creates another limitation based on the geographical location chosen for this project. Therefore, many of the findings and the recommendations reiterate the need to be mindful of the socio-economic differences between the regions in Tunisia, which can significantly affect the quality of education and access to educational resources.

Teaching for Success

5. Research findings

5.1 Key statistical data from the online questionnaires

In response to a question about *the language of the references and textbooks that are currently used by the questionnaire respondents,* 274 reported using English references for completing university assignments and research projects, 213 French references and only 49 Arabic references. It is important to note that this question is a multi-answer question that allows the students to tick more than one answer. This was deliberately designed to capture the linguistic complexity associated with using references, as it is unlikely for multilingual university students to use references in one particular language and the results reported here confirm this assumption. Figure 1 shows the frequency of distribution associated with this question.

This finding will be further discussed as one of the enablers that also emerged in interview data (Section 5.2).

The questionnaire poses an attitudinal question that asks the respondents to *choose the language(s) of instruction they prefer to have in their academic programme.* In response, a majority of 356 respondents chose English as the preferred language. Like the previous question, the respondents were able to choose more than one language. The distribution of frequency shown in Figure 2 suggests the overall positive attitudes towards English. This is an important attitudinal factor to consider while addressing the first research question. This result goes in line with attitudinal findings from interview data, as demonstrated in the next section.

Another attitudinal question asks the students to rate the extent to which they think teaching university subjects in English is necessary. In response to this question and as demonstrated in Figure 3, 58.8 per cent of the respondents strongly agreed and 32.2 per cent agreed that teaching university subjects in English is necessary.

In addition, the respondents were asked to rate *their readiness to improve their English language skills.* Of the respondents, 82.6 per cent strongly agreed with this statement. As seen in Figure 4, this is another attitudinal factor that suggests that English is positively viewed, and is indeed desired, by university students in Tunisia.
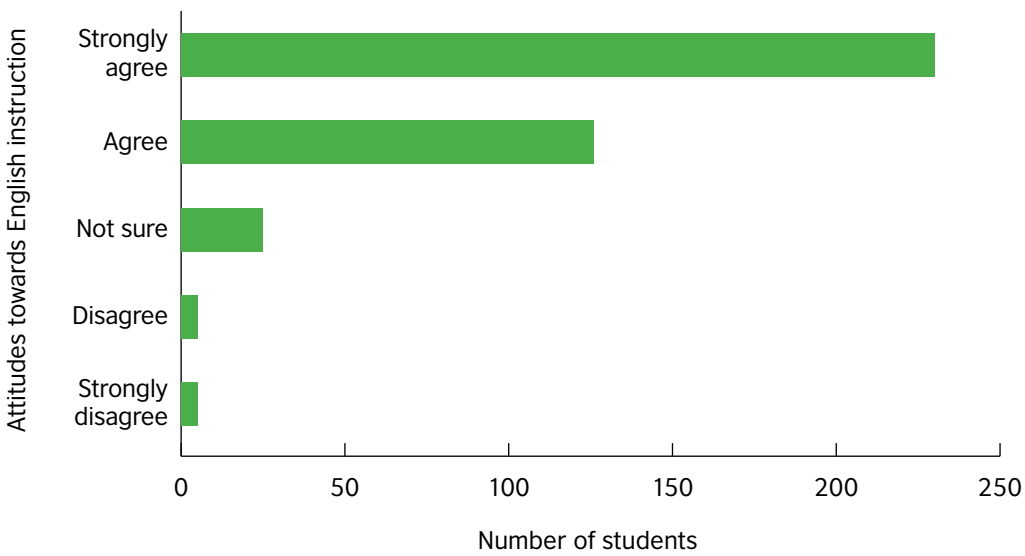
Figure 1: The language of textbooks and academic references
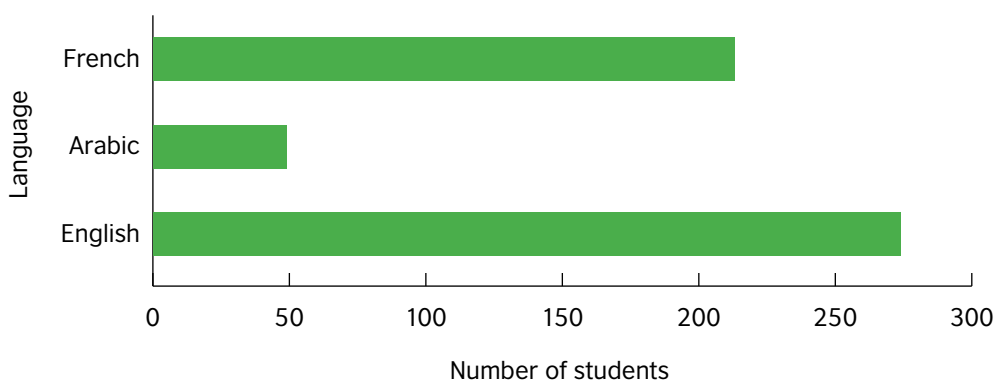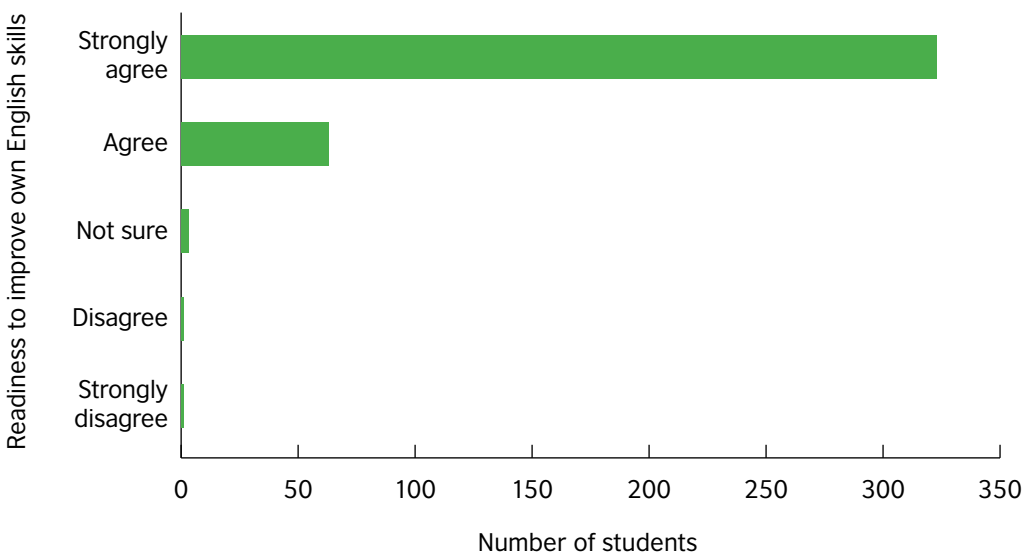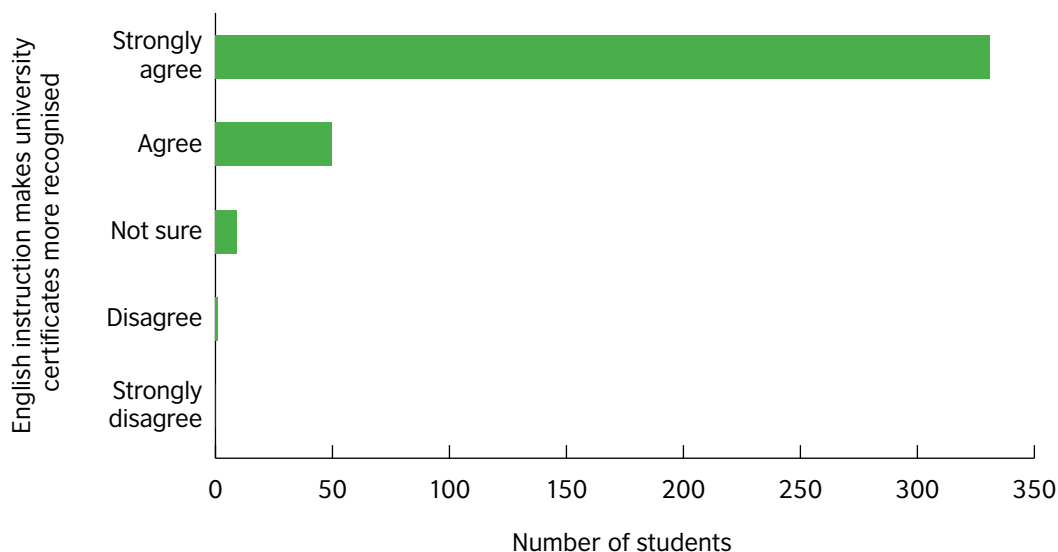
Figure 2: The preferred language of instruction
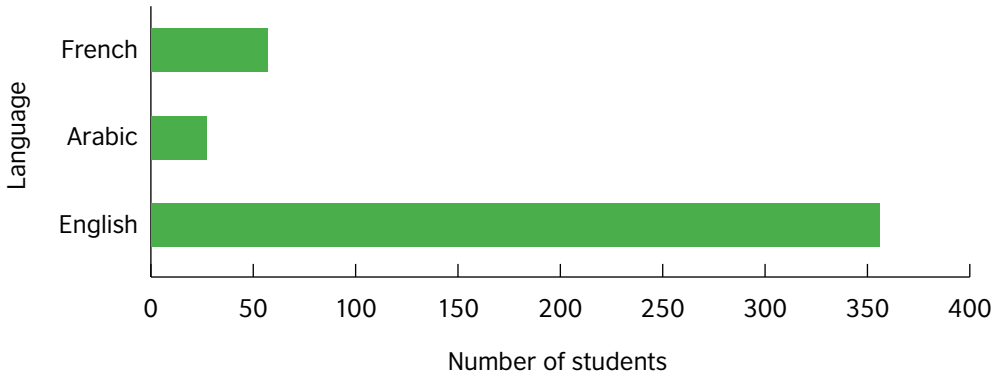
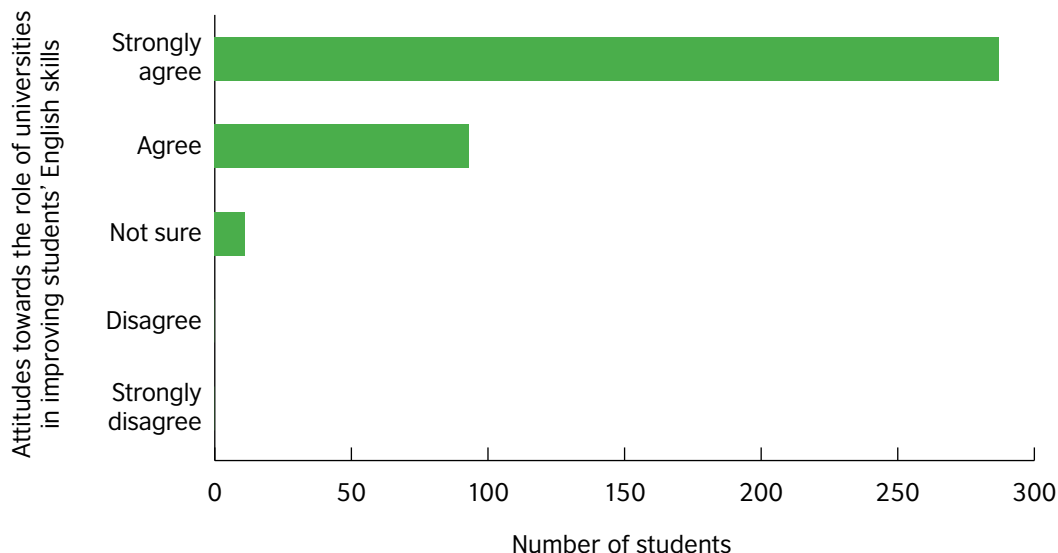**Figure 3:** Is teaching university subjects in English necessary?

Figure 4: Readiness to improve own English language skills

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Figure 5: English instruction would make own university certificate more recognised

Figure 6: Universities should help students develop advanced English skills

Following that, participants were asked to rate a statement on *the extent to which completing university degrees in English would make their certificates more recognised outside Tunisia.* Of the respondents, 84.7 per cent strongly agreed with this statement, and 12.8 per cent agreed. This finding goes in line with research on common perceptions associated with EMI (Galloway et al., 2017). Figure 5 shows the distribution of responses.

The respondents were further asked to rate the following statement: *Tunisian universities are required to help university students graduate with advanced English language skills.* Of the respondents, 73.4 per cent strongly agreed and 23.8 per cent agreed with

this statement. Figure 6 demonstrates the frequencies of responses. It is worth noting that interviews with university teachers indicate that teachers do not necessarily agree that this is part of the university role. Many suggested that they can help with recommending references and strategies but it is not their role to help students develop advanced English skills.

The questionnaire asks students to choose *the expected challenges associated with teaching university subjects in English.* This is also a multi-answer question as it is unlikely that this major educational decision can be reduced to one challenge or difficulty. The responses reported

in Figure 7 confirm this assumption. The findings reported here are in line with findings from interview data, as demonstrated in Section 5.3.

Finally, the participants were asked whether they expect that they'll need English at work after they graduate. In response, 98.5 per cent agreed with this statement, which also is in line with research on the linguistic instrumentalism associated with English (cf. Kubota, 2011). Figure 8 demonstrates the frequencies of responses to this question.

Overall, the questionnaire data suggests that English does not face challengesassociated with attitudinal factors in Tunisia. The responses indicate that students are willing to improve their English language skills, understand the value English adds to their degrees and are aware that English is likely to be a requirement in the job market. These findings are in line with findings from the semi-structured interviews, as will be demonstrated in the following section.

Figure 7: Expected challenges if universities teach subjects in English
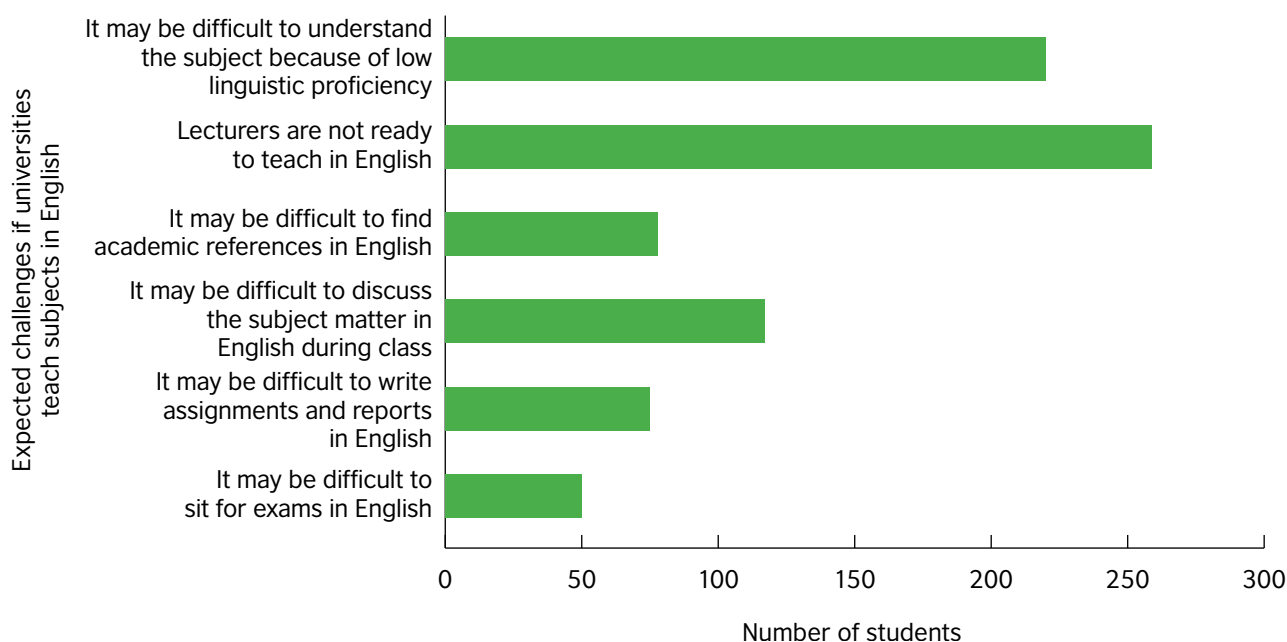
Figure 8: I expect that I will need to use English at work after I graduate
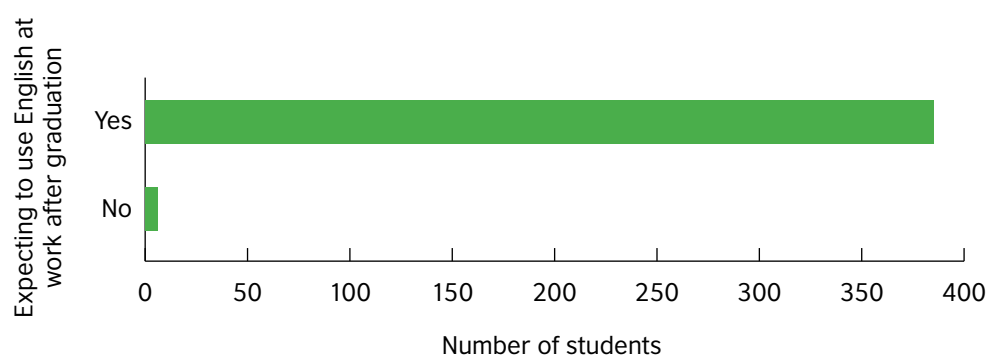
5.2 English in higher education: enablers

This section presents some enabling factors, referred to here as 'enablers', that could gradually contribute to empowering the status of English in Tunisian higher education. Collectively, the section aims to address the first and second research questions regarding attitudes towards EMI and the readiness of university teachers and students. At the same time, these enablers are discussed alongside current challenges in order to reflect a realistic description of the current situation. These enablers are also presented in a way that brings to the fore the voices of the research participants through direct quotations where possible.

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1. Many of the participants associated teaching university subjects through the medium of English with a more effective, interactive and student-centred style of teaching and learning. The following quotation explains this association:

We don't only use English but also the American style of higher education. The French way of higher education is mainly knowledge transmission to give students knowledge and techniques and they get exams to make sure that they got the materials. The American, the British type of higher education combines knowledge with soft skills and competences.

(Interview 1: Mathematics lecturer)

This is an important attitudinal factor that links using English with more advanced and preferred pedagogic styles of teaching.

2. English is seen as integral to global access, which is not currently offered nor facilitated by the current mediums of instruction:

Those people who want to communicate, send reports, send emails in a global way, they have this type of challenge so teaching in English can solve this problem.

(Interview 1: Mathematics lecturer)

This view is echoed in the following quotation from a university student:

I need English to say hello world. It is spoken by everyone around the world. I have friends from Japan and Australia. I want to speak with different people.

(Interview 30: Biology university student)

3. English is a necessity for research publications, which force university lecturers to write their articles in English in order to be accepted for publication. At the same time, it is a necessity for university students, who find more online academic references in English than in French. While this necessity is presented as an 'enabler' here, it is not without challenges.

The following quotation summarises how the majority of university lecturers feel about the role of English in their education and research careers:

English is an important language but at my time we didn't study enough English at university. Most of the teachers here belong [to] two schools: francophone who can write and read in English but they struggle with oral communication, and anglophone who can communicate and write without problems. The francophone group is much bigger. The English taught here requires a lot of improvement … Our problem with English is that we understand the research published in English but we cannot deliver the information in English. About ten per cent of our teachers studied in anglophone countries and these teachers can teach in English.

(Interview 22: Agriculture lecturer)

While being forced to publish their articles in English, some teachers are not convinced that they need English for their teaching:

My colleagues and I understand the articles in English but we find it difficult to write and speak in English. It is very important for us as researchers … We are aware that we need to improve English for our research but not for our teaching. I don't think I need English in my teaching.

(Interview 16: Engineering lecturer)

The sense of resisting English in the above quotation potentially stems from viewing English as a threat to some lecturers who possibly viewed their inability to teach in English as a factor that could put their jobs at risk if more university subjects are to be taught in English. This raises the importance of supporting, training and reassuring university lecturers ahead of any strategic decision to offer (parts of) their courses in English.

At the same time, many teachers emphasised the importance of English to enable their students to access new research areas:

If you don't master the English language you cannot access some contemporary areas of research and development such as 'big data' … Most students choose to do their presentations in English and it is good to see how students are thriving.

(Interview 13: Software engineering lecturer)

Both students' interviews and students' questionnaires confirmed that the majority of students use English references when they work on university projects because these references are more accessible and publicly available. Some explained that they might need to Google Translate some of these references to French if they are not able to understand the English reference. The following quotation reflects the general impression in relation to how students talked about accessing references in English:

English is the language of IT and software documents. We are a community of engineers around the world and we use one language to communicate with each other. We can find more resources in English. It is easier to find resources when we search in English.

(Interview 6: Computer engineering students)

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4. English seems to be placed on the educational reform agenda, as it appears to be perceived as part of employability soft skills. That said, it is important to emphasise that the official 'Educational Reform Strategies' document (available in Arabic [3]) does not officially outline any strategies to improve the level of English in the current educational system. In spite of that, many of the interviewees explained that English is, in fact, part of the ongoing educational reform:

The new reform forces institutions to have a number of English courses at the higher education level. In a way they are trying to imitate the culture we have here that combines English skills with soft skills. They are trying to create a hybrid system of education. English should be there. All schools should have a minimum number of English classes.

(Interview 1: Mathematics lecturer)

Commenting on this, a senior member from the Ministry of Higher Education discussed some measurements taken by the ministry to improve the status of English in higher education, while admitting that there are some problems to be addressed:

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3. Available online at: www.utunis.rnu.tn/fileadmin/test/2015-05-13_Rapport%20Arabe%20-%20derni%C3%A8re%20version%20%28en%20arabe%29.pdf

Teaching for Success

KB: What is the role of English in the current reform?

English is a problem. It is a soft skill and it is important to be able to communicate. We support the focus on languages because it offers the ability to be open to the surrounding environment locally and globally. We now support the teaching of languages at university. Not only English, but also French. We have increased the credit for these courses now so students cannot graduate without successfully completing these courses. We are trying to raise awareness about the importance of languages through these regulations. Jobs are limited, but languages open doors.

(Interview 29: Staff member, Ministry of Higher Education)

Nonetheless, the initiative to improve English skills among university students by increasing the credits for foreign language classes is not combined with a clear strategy as to what the content of these classes should be about. Many of the students who were asked about their English classes reported the sentiment that their programmes are so intensive that they end up skipping English classes:

When we are overwhelmed with work and projects, we skip classes. Mainly English classes because they are easier than the subject classes that we find difficult to skip.

(Interview 24: Computer engineering student)

Other students challenged the content of the English classes:

S1: We always talk about language basics and rules and there is no liaison between the English class and the other subjects. We repeat the same things year after year and there is no added value.

S2: We sometimes use ten-year-old documents. They are not up to date.

S3: It is the ministry's decision to include English as an additional subject. We want these English classes to be more specialised and more related to my field of study. In our exams the test is in French and the documents are in English. We requested more English that is specialised in our field.

(Interview 22: Agriculture students)

All the English teachers reported that attendance was a major problem. They reported that students take two to three hours of English classes a week, which is not enough to help them improve their English. These classes are usually scheduled later during the day or just before the lunch break. Therefore, students tend to skip them. The teachers indicated that more communication is needed with other subject teachers in order to make English classes more relevant to the themes students are studying in other courses.

This discussion presents an opportunity and a challenge at the same time. The current educational structure has room for English classes and some investment has been made in this structure, but English teachers are left to their own resources. Many reported the challenges of finding recent textbooks and teaching materials. As a result, their English classes are not well attended, because they are neither relevant nor challenging enough for many students, who find this a justification for not attending them.

5. Universities have the independence and agency to teach courses in English without having to apply for permission from the Ministry of Higher Education.

Some university teachers were not clear on the legal aspect of offering courses in English instead of French. The following quotation from a senior member of the Ministry of Higher Education confirms that universities have the authority and the agency to change the medium of instruction if they are equipped with teaching staff who can teach through/via the new medium:

KB: What if a current institute decides to teach in English? Are there legal challenges?

Not at all. If you decide to teach some courses in English, that's fine. The challenge in this case is the ability to find a teacher who can actually teach in English.

(Interview 29: Staff member, Ministry of Higher Education)

This point deserves further clarification as some teachers assume that special permission needs to be sought. Others were aware that they can do this but they emphasised the importance of meeting students' expectations. Unless the university states otherwise, students expect that university courses are taught through the medium of French, with the exception of courses traditionally offered in Arabic such as some journalism classes, Arabic and Islamic studies, and history:

It is a question of meeting students' expectations. They sign up to universities and they know the language of instruction. There is a hidden contract or law that we need to respect. If we suddenly switch from French to English some students will complain.

(Interview 13: Software engineering lecturer)

It is worth mentioning that many of the institutions that took part in this research project reported that they were gradually introducing specialised courses in English at postgraduate levels. The following quotation reflects this gradual process:

We try to teach some courses in English. We started by checking who is comfortable to teach his or her course in English. We also allow students to submit PhD dissertations in English. I am going to show you an example for a dissertation I am examining. We don't have any problem with the language. Students can choose the language of submission. The majority of students submit in French.

(Interview 21: Marine life and environment lecturer)

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6. Most scholarship schemes available for Tunisian graduates require advanced English language proficiency skills.

In an interview with a senior member of the Internationalisation Team at the Ministry of Higher Education, English was emphasised as an important criterion for obtaining scholarships. Chevening (the UK government's international awards scheme) has recently increased its Tunisian quota. In addition, the ministry has scholarship arrangements with Germany, France, Canada, the US, China, Hungary and Turkey.

In a separate interview with a member of staff at Tunis Business School, the first public higher education institution to teach academic programmes in English, one of the advantages of studying through the medium of English was the ability to secure scholarships to study abroad:

With the new language of instruction, we have brought a new philosophy of education. Our students get most of the international scholarships. This is what other students in other institutions lack. They are perhaps very good at maths, economics, but they don't know how to express themselves well enough and how to set their objectives.

(Interview 1: Mathematics lecturer)

7. Many universities in Tunisia are trying to recruit international students following the development of a new programme that will require international students to pay tuition fees.

This was piloted in the academic year of 2018–19. The programme is believed to be attractive to international students since the tuition rates are relatively cheaper than other neighbouring countries such as Egypt. The ministry has a target to increase the number of international students, which is expected to improve the international ranking of Tunisian universities. In response to this aim, 'a green light [was given] to faculty members to teach in English', said a senior member of the Ministry of Higher Education.

In an interview with university students, the presence of non-Tunisian, international students was described as a positive factor that allows students the opportunity to communicate in English:

We have international students from Germany, Denmark and Palestine. We communicate with them in English. It is a dynamic community.

(Interview 2: Business studies students)

During the same interview, it was clear that the presence of international students on campus can also affect classroom dynamics:

Classes are mostly in English because we have some international students so teachers prefer to keep classroom interactions in English to include international students who don't understand French or Arabic.

(Interview 2: Business studies students)

Overall, the ministry's plan to increase its target of international students in Tunisian universities is likely to be linked with strategies to increase university programmes taught through the medium of English. It is important to bear in mind that the majority of Arabic-speaking countries use EMI in scientific disciplines at higher education level, and a gradual shift to offering more university programmes in English is likely to make Tunisia attractive in the international education market.

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8. It was evident during the interviews that more parents send their children to private schools to learn English from a young age. That was referred to as a 'mindset change' by the interviewee:

The mentality in Tunisia is changing. Parents are pushing their kids to study in English from a young age. I have my own English private school and we use Cambridge curriculum. English definitely has future here. The Tunisians are trying to detach themselves from the French influence. There is a mindset change in the country.

(Interview 3: Mathematics lecturer)

A similar view was expressed in another interview with a university lecturer who described English as a tool parents use to ensure that their children stay ahead of the game:

People are spending money to send their children to private classes to get ahead of everyone else.

(Interview 10: Applied linguistics lecturer)

In addition, some universities use English as a 'differentiation card' in the higher education market:

English is an instrument and an identity card and a differentiator in the market. Some private universities are joining in this competition. Right now language is a key differentiator. We expect that five or ten years from now we might lose this differentiator … We expect that many other public universities will start giving courses or even full programmes in English.

(Interview 5: International politics lecturer)

These views indicate the ongoing process whereby English is commodified in the Tunisian market and how this commodification is further triggered by job market demands, parents' involvement and growing competition between higher education providers in Tunisia.

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9. Some computer engineering institutes have a mandatory language requirement that students have to fulfil in order to graduate.

The requirement is to pass the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) with a minimum score of 750 (IELTS 5 equivalent). Commenting on this requirement, a university lecturer emphasised that it is not a major academic hurdle for most students:

For the majority of our students it is not a big issue to pass the TOEIC exam and acquire the minimum requirement of 750. It is mandatory to have this English requirement. It has been in place for more than 12 years – well before President Ben Ali instructed that English needs to be made a component at universities.

(Interview 23: Computer engineering lecturer)

Some lecturers in universities that do not currently require a mandatory language test with a certain minimum score explained that it is not the university's duty to improve the English level of students. Rather, the university is responsible for making students understand that English is important for them:

KB: Is it the responsibility of the university to ensure that graduates have good English skills?

Yes and no. Yes, because we need to provide them with basic background, but no because nobody can make you fluent. We are responsible for making them understand the importance of being open to the world. They are not aware of the importance of English unless they are planning to study abroad. It is a moral responsibility rather than a pedagogical one.

(Interview 13: Software engineering lecturer)

On the other hand, some of the students requested to have their English classes linked to preparing them for an internationally recognised language proficiency test such as IELTS, TOEFL or TOEIC. They suggested that doing this can contribute to solving current attendance issues affecting English classes at university level:

Private universities include a certification element linked to English classes so that students find it important to attend English classes. Private universities have a different vision. They are training their students to pass English tests. Our programmes are more demanding than theirs, but they are more connected to the market. They are more up to date. They have dynamic programmes linked to companies.

(Interview 6: Computer engineering students)

10. The current practice of teaching *l'informatique* (computer science) in English in pioneering middle schools was reported by some students and lecturers as a good step towards increasing the presence of English in schools:

S1: There is something that may be helping. I studied computer science in English in pioneering schools. That is a big advantage. Even though in high school we switch back to French, I still remember the terms. That's a good start if we start with computer science. We can do it in English. The internet is available in English.

S2: Students these days are attached to films and phones. We have the basics. We can work on it ourselves if the system guides us.

(Interview 12: Software engineering students)

This proposition was discussed with other students, university lecturers and senior staff at the Ministry of Higher Education, and it received conflicting views. From the perspective of students who experienced this, they seemed to be in favour of studying this subject in English during middle school; still, they were aware of its limitations:

I was at a pioneering school and I studied l'informatique *in English and physics in French. That was the best opportunity I had during school.*

KB: What do you think of studying l'informatique *in English?*

I don't think it can work for all middle schools. It is a question of passion and mentality. You either love English and want to study in English or not.

(Interview 21: Marine life and environment students)

Some teachers were equally concerned that this practice could not work for all schools in Tunisia:

There are differences between regions. English worked in pioneering schools but when we consider other schools, other regions, they are very different.

(Interview 4: Marketing lecturer)

Furthermore, a member of the Ministry of Higher Education challenged the practicality of teaching *l'informatique* in English in more schools by raising the issue of teacher training:

Teachers who teach l'informatique *in English in pioneering schools are trained in French. Start with training and the programmes first before you start teaching subjects in English. This is a continuous circle.*

KB: Where does it start?

Starting foreign languages at an earlier stage so that students can master French and English from an early stage. Students are encouraged to set up student clubs and communities. They have an important role.

(Interview 29: Staff member, Ministry of Higher Education)

The above quotation sheds light on the current chicken-and-egg situation surrounding teacher training in Tunisia. Almost all suggestions for improving the status of English in the educational system were faced with the subject of teacher training.

5.3 English in higher education: challenges

While the previous section presented some positive factors that can be utilised in a strategic and effective way to improve the status of English in Tunisian higher education, there are some challenges that need to be considered as part of any strategic language planning in relation to language management. In fact, these challenges are part and parcel of addressing the third research question regarding exploring current capacity, future capability and existing curriculum in preparation for transitioning into EMI. These challenges are represented using 'voices' from the field as direct quotations.

Many of the challenges discussed here can be summarised under three themes: lack of language management/policy, teacher training needs, and problems inherited from school and brought along to university.

1. The question of whose responsibility it is to take action was recurrent in the project data. Many of the participants I questioned the value of speaking to them instead of addressing this subject 'from the top'.

   There seemed to be a consensus that this is a case of lack of policy, strategy and structure. It is also a question of investment to change the status quo. The following quotation reflects this sentiment:

   Maybe you haven't heard that before but one of the main stakeholders that you should talk to is not teachers and students. You should talk to politicians. You know it is a political decision. Everything is around politics. I am sorry because you are wasting your time. I can analyse the situation; it is a political decision. They don't want to invest now. They are happy with their comfort zone. Everything is in French. They don't want to change, because change costs money.

   (Interview 17: English for specific purposes (ESP) lecturer)

   This quotation makes an argument for challenging the 'benign neglect' (Piller, 2016) approach to language policy. It reinforces the influence of governmentality, defined as 'practices of government [which] are deliberate attempts to shape conduct in certain ways in relation to certain objectives' (Foucault, 1978 cited in Rose, 1996). Governmentality raises questions in relation to the current status of French and how it continues to be reproduced by the government, elites and francophone educationalists through the educational system and teacher-training programmes that mainly operate through the medium of French.

   In response to this lack of strategy, the following quotation reflects the frustration parents have when they make decisions in relation to educating their children at school:

   We are not sure if we are trying to prepare students for using Arabic for jobs. I am aware of parents' complaints. Many shift to French schools at middle school so they prepare their children for when they shift to French at secondary schools later. They don't do this because they like French but because they want to help their children for when they study everything in French at secondary school.

   (Interview 4: Marketing lecturer)

   Another challenge that was raised in relation to policy is that most initiatives are usually associated with a certain person. When that person moves to another position, a new person comes and previous initiatives are discontinued:

   Heads of institutions can be keen on English and they support English for specific purposes. They leave the job, the new person comes in and we have to reinvent the wheel, and this happens with ministers as well. People come and go, and they leave no policy behind. The programme should not depend on a single person. There needs to be a structure, and professionals should be the ones who do the work.

   (Interview 10: Applied linguistics lecturer)

Teaching for Success

2. University lecturers are not prepared to teach in English. Some argued that training is the way forward but they questioned the nature of the training and its delivery. Others argued that it is too late to train old, experienced teachers and that this is an ambitious task that can wait until the next generation of university lecturers.

The following quotation reflects the first camp of university lecturers, who think that there is scope for training to enable them to teach some courses in English:

Most teachers are not able to teach in English. It is a major obstacle. Teachers need free training. Good training is very expensive. Most teachers teach an average of eight hours a week and the rest is dedicated to research. I think that teachers can attend training if it is offered at a reasonable rate. We need opportunity to practice English, improve our English pronunciation. I cannot talk about what we need to be included in the training. It varies from one to another.

(Interview 16: Engineering lecturer)

In response to this, there was a view that there is current capacity to train teachers by relying on Tunisian specialists in the area of applied linguistics:

We have capacity. We have qualified staff. We can find the experts and we can offer the training. There is enough. There is critical mass. We can do it. The thing is sustainability. You need to be committed to a long-term policy that is carefully planned and implemented.

(Interview 10: Applied linguistics lecturer)

On the other camp there were some lecturers who argued that experienced university teachers are not students and therefore they cannot be trained in a traditional way. They are professionals whose training should be based on short stays overseas to encourage them to practise English:

KB: What about older, experienced teachers. How can they be equipped with English?

They don't need convincing that English is important. The opportunity before wasn't there. They need training and some short stays abroad. I think for English the major obstacle is not in writing but to understand and express ourselves in English is a challenge.

KB: Training, sustainable training. Can we make use of English teachers to offer training to staff?

It will not be very efficient. Our teachers need to be in an English environment. The environment is more important. They are not students. They are teachers. Participating in English webinars, symposiums and conferences is the way to train them.

(Interview 23: Computer engineering lecturer)

While this is a valuable opinion, it raises three challenges: 1. the sustainability and economic costs associated with this kind of training, 2. the impact it can have on trainees' English language development given the short duration of time, and 3. some potential attitudinal challenges associated with accepting fellow teachers to act as 'trainers'.

On the other hand, the majority of the students are aware of this situation. There are numerous examples where both teachers and students admitted that the current generation of university students is ahead of their teachers when it comes to English language proficiency. Students are aware that their teachers studied in French and therefore it is not always possible to expect them to teach in English.

3. Budgetary cuts affect the ability to recruit teaching staff on a permanent basis and do not encourage foreign staff to work in Tunisia.

    Funding and investment continue to be a major challenge, and this has direct consequences on the educational system. The following quotation summarises the impact of cuts on recruiting teachers:

    One of the challenges we are facing is that we wanted to bring teachers from other countries such as the UK and the US to establish this new academic culture, but after the revolution and the collapse of the regime etc., the priorities have changed. We've had major cuts in the budget and therefore we have to be content with what we already have in Tunisia. We are approaching people who were educated in the French system. We build the culture through information days; we meet to emphasise the need to teach in conformity with the US and the UK educational culture.

    (Interview 1: Mathematics lecturer)

    These cuts affect the ability not only to recruit foreign staff to establish a 'new' and 'interactive' research and academic culture but also to employ new Tunisian staff who have the calibre and expertise to contribute to this new academic culture. Some of the teachers who were interviewed in this project were graduates from the US but were employed on fixed-term contracts with no career stability. While they speak passionately about returning to Tunisia to teach and make a change, they are uncertain as to whether or not they will continue to be employed next term.

4. Teaching school subjects in French at secondary schools has major consequences for the educational system. Students requested to have this practice reviewed in order to prepare them for 'the world' after graduation:

    Math in secondary school and all the things we were taught in secondary school were taught in French. It is a good language. But with the world developing using English, if we are the decision makers, we won't only change the language but also the subjects so that we can adapt to the changing world and the different things we are going to encounter in the future. It needs time to change.

    (Interview 2: Business studies students)

    Many participants were asked about the reason why many secondary school subjects are currently taught in French. Their responses did not provide clear justifications, but many invoked historically entrenched reasons. Some explained that the Arabicisation of the curriculum stopped at secondary schools because it was difficult to find experts who could Arabicise advanced maths and sciences. Regardless of the reason behind this practice, it was flagged during the project's fieldwork as problematic and requiring urgent review from the Ministry of Education. Some believed that this practice detracts from students' and parents' focus on Arabic as a national language; it raises questions regarding the identity of the nation and the educational system; and it continues to reproduce the current status of French at a time when many voices call for a gradual shift to English for instrumental purposes associated with employability and internationalising the sector. At the heart of this sociolinguistic complexity lie university students who expressed that they need reassurance that their university degrees will be valued when they graduate and that they will open doors for employment locally and globally.

5. English classes at university are not well attended:

We don't attend the English classes, because we have a lot of classes to attend from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. We skip easy classes like the English class to take a break. We are quite good at English because we learn it from films and novels and we study the same grammar rules and topics. It is 1.5 hours a week for English and we are allowed to be absent for four times, and we use these times to skip English classes.

(Interview 6: Computer engineering students)

The above quotation echoes the general views on English classes, also known as English for specific purposes (ESP) classes. ESP teachers also raised the attendance issue and were aware that the content of their classes continues to be a challenge. If they make the course more challenging, they lose students with low English proficiency skills, and if they make it less challenging, they lose students with advanced English proficiency skills. This raises an issue with how students can be grouped without bearing in mind the different linguistic proficiencies they bring to the class.

Some students suggested that their English classes need to be more connected to their university subjects. When this was raised with ESP teachers, they explained that there was no collaboration between them and the rest of the teaching staff who teach academic subjects. Others argued that this is too much to ask of them as they should not be expected to be experts in English and experts in other subjects such as software engineering or marketing.

Another suggestion was made by students who requested linking their English classes to an English proficiency test so that the classes act as preparation courses for exams such as IELTS, TOEFL and TOEIC. It is obvious that the practice of obtaining professional certificates is valued by the Tunisian job market and language test certificates are one of these valued documents.

ESP teachers, on the other hand, raised the concern that they are not always valued as specialised practitioners of language. They have been trained to deliver English classes in a system that does not always justify the need for English classes and to students who see in these classes an opportunity to take a break in the middle of a busy day full of academic lectures delivered mainly in French. In addition to this, many ESP teachers reported that they lack up-to-date resources such as recent textbooks, interactive software and online subscription to practitioner research.

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6. English classes at schools are repetitive and unchallenging, and exams do not test all communication skills.

The following quotation reflects the general comments received from the research participants when they were asked about the English they studied at secondary schools:

English at secondary school is boring. We repeat the same topics we took in previous years. We also don't practise oral skills. My English marks are high. I understand it, read it and write, but I don't speak it.

(Interview 6: Computer engineering students)

The majority of students complained that their English classes are not challenging. They are quite repetitive and do not focus on trending topics that are relevant to them. The students reported that they are not 'progressing' or 'evolving' as they moved from one year to another. In addition to that, the testing system, which focuses on measuring written skills, seems to exacerbate the difficulties students face when they try to communicate orally. The following quotation from an applied linguistics lecturer confirms this issue:

Students don't take speaking or listening exams in the baccalaureate tests. It is all based on measuring reading and writing skills. The test in Tunisia is like an entity which is floating without getting affected by the reform and the findings in research. You have the same copy of the test which was instructed in 1994 … The textbooks include speaking, listening and communicative tasks. This is not reflected at all in the test.

(Interview 11: Applied linguistics lecturer)

7. Students comment on traditional pedagogic styles that tend to be teacher-led and non-interactive.

Another challenge facing the educational system in Tunisia is that it tends to be teacher-led inside the classroom while students are encouraged to communicate and express themselves during extracurricular activities:

I'd like more time and oral exams. It is mainly the teacher comes, he talks, you take notes and revise. You don't have time to take time and try things on your own. Teachers tell us it is important to know how to communicate, how to speak. We don't have time to develop this capacity. We need to be part of extracurricular activities to help us acquire these skills.

(Interview 21: Marine life and environment student)

This is a pedagogic challenge that affects the interaction dynamics inside the classroom whereby students are positioned as passive recipients of knowledge. Many of the students reported that one of the challenges of being taught in a foreign language such as French or English is that they do not have the communicative competence required to engage in advanced, specialised discussions. This can be one of the reasons why most classes tend to be teacher-led.

Another reason could be the lack of pedagogic training offered to higher education lecturers and school teachers. In an interview with a member of staff at the Ministry of Higher Education, it was reported that teachers need training in pedagogy and language proficiency but the system is stuck with resourcing problems as they do not have financial resources to offer such training.

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8. The lack of language policy and strategy that deals with the linguistic requirements and expectations of university students causes uncertainty and frustration.

Here, a student comments on how this lack of strategy affects him:

The Tunisian market wants to be part of the global market. We don't know how to integrate globally but the only thing we thought about was to require [a] good level of English from graduates. We don't include English in university subjects. How can you expect graduates to have a good level of English if all the English they study is based on memorising grammar rules and filling in blanks?

(Interview 21: Marine life and environment student)

Commenting on this, the following quotation from an applied linguistics lecturer emphasises the importance of a clear strategy with a practical structure that enables implementation under the supervision of specialists who have academic and research expertise in language acquisition, language teaching and pedagogy:

There is a need for English in almost every sector. The need is clear, there is no doubt about it. The problem is with policy. Will the policymakers pay attention to this issue? It is OK for them to take the decision but we need a structure, a plan and framework that enables training ESP. Ignorance of the fact that to develop a programme you need more than a single teacher with a BA. You need someone with expertise in course design. As long as this mindset does not change, nothing will change. There is a misconception about who can do all this work.

(Interview 10: Applied linguistics lecturer)

To summarise the challenges discussed in this section, the educational system in Tunisia seems to be significantly affected by teacher training and teacher recruitment issues. On the one hand, experienced staff on permanent contracts need training in interactive pedagogy and teaching through the medium of a foreign language. On the other, newly qualified staff with more up-to-date training cannot be easily recruited on a permanent basis in the current economic situation. In addition, the status of English in the Tunisian school and university system needs to be reviewed so that it becomes more relevant to students' needs. And because testing affects what is taught inside the classrooms, baccalaureate exams for English and French are required to assess all language skills. This is likely to make the classrooms more interactive. Finally, the question of lack of strategy or language policy continues to be raised.

5.4 Comments on language policy

Since its independence from France in 1956, Tunisia has emphasised the importance of Arabic as an identity marker for the nation. It is, therefore, the official language of Tunisia and the current medium of instruction in state primary schools (six years) and middle schools (three years). The challenge, however, lies with finding official language policies regarding the other 'foreign languages' that already exist as part of the linguistic repertoires of the Tunisian citizens. The Tunisian constitution does not specify the foreign languages in the state, nor does a legislation[4] document issued in 2002 to outline the aims of primary and secondary education. According to Chapter 9 of this document, schools are particularly encouraged to:

• enable students to master the Arabic language, the national and official language of Tunisia

• enable students to master at least two foreign languages.

Discussions with university teachers who were interviewed as part of this project suggest that decisions on when to teach foreign languages have not been consistent throughout the years and that they lack pedagogic and cognitive understanding of how languages are taught and learned. In spite of this, Arabic continues to be the medium of instruction during primary and middle school before students encounter a major linguistic shift as they enter secondary schools where most school subjects are taught in French. The higher education system echoes the secondary school situation where most academic programmes are taught through the medium of French.

While the current official language policy seems to promote multilingualism and agency on the surface, current linguistic practices in education continue to impose, reproduce, perpetuate and reinforce the status of French as the 'unofficial' first foreign language in Tunisia. The role and status of English is not clear.

The students and lecturers who took part in this project think of English as the language of the future, but some were hesitant to assign such a role, because this needs to be validated by an official strategy:

In the past we used to export products and people to a certain market, but now we are looking for international people and international products and English facilitates this access. It depends on the orientation of the government. We cannot say for sure that English is the language of the future. The language of the future is the one that goes with the orientation of the government. Where you want to export your products, with whom you want to build relationships, where you see the future of your country. This is not a general rule that will apply to everyone even when we say today that English is key. It is not right all the time.

(Interview 4: Marketing lecturer)

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4. Available online at: www.legislation.tn/detailtexte/Loi-num-2002-80-du-23-07-2002-jort-2002-062__2002062000801

As a result of the lack of clarity when it comes to language planning, the same lecturer raised the question of 'what are we preparing our university students for?':

We're preparing students for what? Are you preparing them for the Tunisian market? … Are you preparing them to leave the country? We should provide positions and an environment that welcomes them. Otherwise, they'll be depressed, anxious and will create problems. Some are going abroad and this is a short-term solution as they are not asking the government to employ them.

(Interview 4: Marketing lecturer)

This absence of an explicit language strategy can create confusion, lack of motivation and serious linguistic challenges for university students who are first taught in Arabic during primary school and, by the time they are expected to reach advanced Arabic proficiency, switch to French in secondary schools. This switch is cognitively demanding, as they are only not expected to use French for basic interpersonal communication skills (known as BICS, cf. Cummins, 2001). Rather, they are expected to use French for advanced cognitive and academic purposes such as learning maths, sciences and computer engineering. This major linguistic leap creates confusion on the part of students as well as their parents, who try to educate their children privately in French schools in preparation for this abrupt language shift.

The same challenge is brought to higher education institutions where students continue to grapple with language at a time when they are expected to learn advanced specialised knowledge. The following quotation from an ESP teacher summarises this challenge caused by the absence of linguistic management:

The programme is too intense that students don't have time or energy to focus on language. Students study sciences in Arabic then they move to French. Students don't have a solid background in any of these languages. Some students come here and they are struggling with both French and Arabic. I try to encourage them to produce simple sentences in French. They come here without a good background in any language. They come to us and we are aware of the linguistic challenges. We added French and language courses as part of the academic programmes to scaffold their language skills. The problem is that students don't attend language classes. I don't know why. They don't see the value of learning English classes. They are forced to attend English and French classes. Master classes are in French but we teach them how to write in English because all their references are English.

(Interview 31: ESP lecturer teaching sciences students)

The same confusion is expected to continue even after students graduate and enter the job market. This brings to the fore the strategic question of 'what are we preparing our graduates for?':

Sometimes English is a barrier. If they learn everything in English and are employed in a company where everything is required in French, it is difficult for them to shift to French again. At the same time, they will have access to new opportunities. It is hard to tell.

(Interview 4: Marketing lecturer)

80 per cent of our students remain in Tunisia. 15 per cent leave, go. It is an issue with brain drain but it is a relatively small percentage and I am for an open-door policy. The ones who stay in Tunisia are then asked to switch from commercial English to commercial French.

(Interview 5: International politics lecturer)

To conclude this section, while the current official language policy can indeed offer room for agency and individual/institutional initiatives (e.g. some universities are gradually introducing some courses to be taught in English without facing legal barriers), Tunisia does not yet have an explicit language policy regarding the identity of the country and its future directions. While Arabic continues to be seen as the official and national language, it has a very limited role in the Tunisian higher education system. While students need to master at least two foreign languages, higher education institutions are ethically, morally and professionally responsible for offering programmes that can help their graduates find work after completing their studies. To this, there seems to be two contradictory narratives: those who study through the medium of English will have to switch to French to meet local demands, while those who study through the medium of French will have to switch to English to meet global demands and demands from new companies.

Given this linguistically complex situation, what is strategically required is the promotion of flexible multilingualism, which ensures that students graduate from higher education with advanced linguistic proficiency skills that enable them to communicate effectively in Arabic, French and English repertoires. This will be further discussed in the recommendations (Section 7).

6. Summary

Overall, this study has proved that there are positive attitudes towards English as a language that teachers and students need to add to their multilingual repertoires.[5] English is positively associated with research, employment, mobility, advances in technology, global communication and entertainment.

However, as a medium of instruction, English is seen as a barrier for students who are already grappling with a foreign language as a medium of instruction. As outlined in this report, there is a list of challenges facing the implementation of EMI; three of them are highlighted here:

- The content of English as a school subject does not prepare university students to receive specialised, advanced knowledge in English.
- Some experienced university staff are not prepared to teach and interact in/through the medium of English.
- The current role that French plays in secondary schools poses a major linguistic leap, and shifting to teach in English at university offers a second major linguistic leap.

That said, some universities are now offering courses and/or complete programmes through the medium of English while offering at least one or two terms of intensive English classes at the beginning of the academic programme in order to smooth this linguistic transition into English.

Concerning students and teachers' readiness to shift to English, the findings reflect a mixed picture. Those who were in favour of this shift seemed to be already linguistically prepared to handle this linguistic change. On the other hand, those who were against the shift to English found in this proposal a threat to the status quo and to the investment they have already made in French. Teachers, in particular, expressed different sentiments in response to whether or not they are ready to be trained to teach in English, with some resisting the idea of being treated as 'students' again.

Moving on to discuss current capacity and future capability to teach in English, there are no recent figures on the number of programmes or courses taught in English or on the percentage of university teaching members who were educated in English or those able to teach in/through the medium of English. That was mentioned as a common response to my questions about current capacity and future capability. However, the previous sections have provided a list of challenges, outlined below:

1. Providing teacher-training programmes that focus on English as a language and EMI with emphasis on interactive pedagogy.

2. Improving the content of English classes at university level so they are more attuned with the different programmes of study and/or with employability skills and preparations for language proficiency tests.

3. Reviewing the schools' English textbooks and ensuring that baccalaureate exams for English assess all language skills.

4. English university graduates are trained to be English teachers as many of them study English literature, English arts and civilisation. These degrees do not always entail courses on Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (also known as TESOL). This means that relying on the numbers of English graduates is not an accurate measure of current capacity.

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5. Blommaert and Backus (2013: 11) define a 'repertoire', a core sociolinguistic term, as 'all the "means of speaking", i.e. all those means that people know how to use and why while they communicate'.

7. Moving forward: Recommendations for educational stakeholders

7.1 The need for dialogue between the different actors involved in academic language planning

The study has highlighted the need for dialogue between 'people with power' (Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Education and major employers), 'people with expertise' (applied linguistics researchers and practitioners), 'people with interest' (parents, strategic developers) and 'people with needs' (university students).[6] The focus of this dialogue is to address some questions related to language management in Tunisia such as:

- What is the role of Arabic in the national identity of Tunisia? Does that role need be sustained in a coherent and consistent approach until students graduate from university?

- What are the linguistic expectations that employers have of university graduates? Where do these expectations come from? How can they be met by the Tunisian education system?

Many of the participants indicated that the communication channels between 'people with power' and 'people of expertise' need to be improved. Some of the 'people with expertise' who were interviewed reported that their applied linguistics specialism needs to be valued in discussions about language management. Similarly, some participants reported feelings of confusion that some parents might have regarding the language support they need to provide to their children in order to ensure that they are 'ideal citizens' (Flores, 2013) – i.e. citizens who continuously develop their skill set to become and stay employable. In addition, many of the students who took part in this report needed reassurance that their university degrees will make them employable. All this suggests the need for improved communication channels between these different stakeholders. This is to ensure the delivery of inclusive and equitable education for all.

7.2 Facilitating the transition into higher education

Transition into tertiary education is an educational challenge in many international contexts (cf. Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997), and many educators still believe that tertiary academic literacies are not something their teaching should address (Fenton-Smith and Gurney, 2016). Academic literacies were mentioned by students when they talked about developing writing, presentation and debating skills. These were mentioned as academic challenges that are exacerbated by having to use a foreign language, be it French or English. Developing these skills is a linguistic requirement in contexts where a foreign language is used as a medium of instruction.

To address this challenge, universities need to develop a support mechanism to smooth the transition into higher education. One example could be offering academic and professional literacies courses in French and English during the first and second years of the licence degree. These courses could include academic/professional/commercial writing, referencing, presentation skills, public speaking and debating skills, communication in professional settings, etc. Such courses can be incorporated within English and French classes to make the content more relevant for students and to scaffold their soft skills and employability skills. It is expected that students will value these classes and this could potentially solve the attendance problem associated with English and French classes at university. At the same time, they are expected to offer linguistic support to enable students to access academic discourses in French and English.

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6. The first three categories are from Fenton-Smith and Gurney (2016). Fourth category added by author.

While some students suggested making their English and French language classes more relevant and specialised, it is expected that language teachers might find it difficult to access specialised subject knowledge in many fields such as maths, engineering, sciences and medicine. Therefore, it is more practical for language teachers to utilise their classes for scaffolding academic literacies, employability and soft skills while trying to match the themes of the lessons with some of the broad topics students cover as part of their programmes. They can also use these language classes to create spaces for addressing language-related challenges that students face in their academic programmes. For example, some students reported that they find it difficult to understand a certain essay or video in English that they have to access before a lecture that will be delivered in French (or vice versa). Language teachers can make their role more prominent and more relevant for students if they try to create a connection between students' linguistic needs and the language classroom. This can create a win-win situation for both teachers and students. Students who do not attend languages classes can be encouraged to attend, and teachers who feel that they do not have an important role at university can become empowered.

7.3 Multilingual and pedagogic teacher training

Teacher training was heavily featured as a challenge in this project. Many teachers are theoretically trained to teach certain subjects through the medium of French. They lack pedagogic training on interactive, student-centred pedagogy. Students reported that this is a demotivating factor that affects their attendance and their academic performance. This teacher-led approach was reported as an issue with almost all university subjects. This suggests the need for pedagogic training to university teaching staff.

Another training challenge was that teachers are mainly trained in French and therefore find it difficult to teach in English or Arabic. In addition, language proficiency is not currently listed as a factor during the teacher recruitment process.

Therefore, it is recommended to offer training opportunities in pedagogy and in language (Arabic, English and French) to enable teachers to

be active agents in a flexible multilingual approach to education. While it is difficult to comment on current training capacity due to lack of figures, many of the applied linguistics lecturers and students who took part in the project expressed their willingness to be part of any sustainable language training initiatives. Such initiatives need to start by identifying local needs and capacities, as discussed in the next recommendation.

7.4 Needs analysis and capacity analysis in higher education

Some of the lecturers and heads of departments who were interviewed reported that they are gradually attempting to introduce more university courses in English. Some institutes aim to introduce complete programmes in English. While most of these initiatives stem from local needs analysis, i.e. analysing the needs of the students in light of local and global market demands, they are also linked to local capacity analysis conducted by individual institutes, departments or academic units. They are based on who can teach what in what language. This is all important strategic planning conducted locally and de-centrally at different academic institutions. This agency, independence and authority is highly valued and indeed deserves to be nurtured.

The challenge with this, though, is that most of these initiatives are one-sided. That is to say, university staff make decisions on the language of instruction without consulting students or ensuring that their students' linguistic proficiency in English can enable them access to a demanding specialised programme through a foreign language. In response to this, some teachers argue that their students are highly adaptable and can cope with this linguistic challenge. Others are concerned that English is acting as an unnecessary barrier to students who are already challenged by the subject knowledge. Therefore, it is important to create better communication channels between 'people with expertise' (teachers in this case) and 'people with needs' (students) to ensure that when departments assess their needs and their capacity to offer courses in English, their students' needs and abilities are factored in. This creates another rationale for the need for facilitating transition through academic literacies support programmes, as discussed in Section 7.2.

7.5 Flexible multilingualism

A final recommendation, which has hopefully been consistent throughout this report, is the need to embrace a flexible multilingual approach to education. Flexibility entails the need to set value and directions while continuing to modify and assess in light of local conditions. Tunisia is not only a multilingual country, it is also a country with diverse economic distribution, which means that different regions have different local demands and infrastructure/resource challenges. Universities are spaces where multilingual students from different regions of Tunisia meet. This turns universities into complex social places where it is unlikely that a one-size-fits-all strategy will work for all students. At the heart of this complexity, linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1977) continues to be unequally distributed, and to address this disparity and for the sake of education equity, flexible multilingualism needs to be nurtured in schools to order to be fed into universities after that.

Without moving forward with a flexible, balanced multilingualism approach, there is a risk that access to language (French and English) can turn into a mechanism of social closure, defined by a 'process of subordination whereby one group monopolizes advantages by closing off opportunities to another group of outsiders beneath it which it defines as inferior and ineligible' (Murphy, 1988: 88). While some can argue that streamlining French and English as subjects in public schools prevents the occurrence of social closure based on language access, it is crucial to remember that this is a question of quality and advanced linguistic proficiency, rather than an act of course offering through the public school system. Many of the participants in this project reported that parents from middle- and upper-class backgrounds send their children to French schools or private schools at middle-school age to help them improve their French language proficiency before they send them back to public schools at secondary school level. Other families educate their children privately in English and/or French so that they can be ahead of other children. Some of the university students reported that their peers in private universities receive intensive English language training and exam preparation. All these are examples of potential social closure facilitated by social class.

8. Epilogue

It is hoped that this study has contributed to the growing research on the impact of language management in multilingual education and to the importance of merging views 'from the top' with voices 'from below' in order to develop an inclusive and equitable educational policy.

It is also hoped that this study has provided a thorough understanding of the position of English at tertiary education and the challenges and opportunities surrounding a gradual implementation of EMI in Tunisia. In addition, it is hoped that this report has provided a platform for empowering the 'voice' of the different educational stakeholders involved in this study so that their views, experiences, attitudes and feelings can be part of making an impactful change that sets the agenda for the Tunisian education sector with the aim to improve life chances for Tunisian youth.

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Appendix 1: Details about interview duration and participants' disciplines

Interview number	Duration	Type	Language of the interview	Gender	Discipline
1	40.44	University lecturer	English	Male	Mathematics
2	45.16	University students	English	1 Male 1 Female	Business studies
3	13.50	University lecturer	English	Female	Mathematics
4	38.28	University lecturer	English	Female	Marketing
5	38.40	University lecturer	English	Male	International politics
6	44.40	University students	Arabic	4 Males	Computer engineering
7	30.10	University lecturer	Arabic and French	Female	Digital marketing
8	35.36	University students	Arabic	2 Females	English literature
9	15.00	University lecturer	Arabic	Male	French literature
10	43.55	University lecturer	English	Male	Applied linguistics
11	44.01	University lecturer	English	Male	Applied linguistics
12	34.33	University students	English	1 Male 2 Females	Software engineering
13	33.29	University lecturer	English	Female	Software engineering
14	11.36	University student	English	Female	Finance
15	63.15	University students	Arabic and English	1 Male 2 Females	Architecture
16	17.01	University lecturer	Arabic	Female	Engineering
17	65.05	University lecturer and two university students	English	3 Females	ESP (tourism)
18	6.00	University student	Arabic	Male	Economics
19	27.29	University lecturer	Arabic	Female	Law
20	7.51	University student	Arabic	Female	Law
21	27.42	University students	Arabic and English	2 Males 1 Female	Marine life and environment
22	44.02	University lecturers	Arabic	2 Males 2 Females	Agriculture

Interview number	Duration	Type	Language of the interview	Gender	Discipline
23	22.26	University lecturer	English	Male	Computer engineering
24	12.47	University student	English	Female	Computer engineering
25	17.16	University students	Arabic	2 Females	Linguistics
26	28.20	University lecturer	English	Female	ESP (journalism)
27	23.06	University students	Arabic	2 Females 1 Male	Communication journalism
28	27.53	University students	Arabic	2 Female	Multimedia communication
29	24.59	Personnel from the Ministry of Higher Education	Arabic	Female	Ministry of Higher Education
30	8.47	University student	English	Male	Biology
31	8.22	University lecturer	English and Arabic	Female	ESP (sciences)
32	21.50	University student	Arabic	Female	Electrical engineering
33	19.40	University lecturer	Arabic	Male	Electrical engineering
34	4.12	Medical student	Arabic	Female	Medicine
35	4.40	University lecturer	English	Female	ESP (medicine)
36	2.51	Medical student	English	Male	Medicine
37	15.01	University lecturer	Arabic	Female	Medicine
38	36.44	Personnel from the Ministry of Higher Education	English	Female	Ministry of Higher Education
39	38.21	University lecturer	English	Female	Linguistics
40	27.14	University students	English	2 Males 2 Females	English literature and civilisation
41	30.45	Personnel from the Ministry of Higher Education	English	Male	Ministry of Higher Education
42	40.45	Senior staff at the Ministry of Education	Arabic	Female	Ministry of Education