

# English-Language Challenges in Scientific Research: A Case Study of PhD Students at the University Centre of Maghnia / ENNEBATI Fatima Zohra & CHIKHI Latifa

## English Language Challenges in Scientific Research: A Case Study of PhD Students at the University Centre of Maghnia

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### Abstract

This study examines the English-language challenges faced by PhD students in the social sciences at the University Centre of Maghnia, where French and Arabic have traditionally dominated academic work. As English becomes essential for accessing research, mastering specialized terminology, and meeting international publication standards, doctoral students encounter significant difficulties due to limited advanced English instruction and scarce academic resources. A survey conducted with PhD candidates reveals obstacles in academic writing, reading comprehension, and engagement with global scholarship. The findings highlight the need for tailored English for Academic Purposes (EAP) support, writing assistance, and institutional strategies to help Algerian doctoral students succeed in international academic contexts.

**Keywords:** English proficiency, Language Challenges, Algerian higher education, PhD students, Scientific research,

### 1. Introduction

In Algeria, the language of academia has traditionally been dominated by French, a remnant of colonial influence that continues to shape higher education today.

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However, in recent decades, the prominence of English as the global language of research, publication, and collaboration has introduced a new layer of complexity for Algerian doctoral students, especially in fields such as the social sciences. For these students, proficiency in English is no longer optional; it has become a vital skill for accessing up-to-date research, contributing to international conferences, and publishing in high-impact journals. This shift towards English is especially significant in an era of rapid globalization, where academia increasingly operates within an interconnected, multilingual network.

Despite the growing importance of English, Algerian PhD students encounter numerous linguistic and structural barriers that hinder their academic progress. Unlike students in countries where English is more widely taught and used, Algerian students may have limited access to advanced English instruction and resources specifically tailored to the demands of academic work in the social sciences. These challenges are not only linguistic but also cultural and logistical, involving the adaptation to unfamiliar academic writing conventions, understanding complex discipline-specific vocabulary, and engaging with predominantly English-language literature. Furthermore, the pressure to publish in international journals and participate in global academic discussions creates additional burdens for students who may not feel fully equipped to compete at an international level.

The objective of this study is to identify and analyze the language-related obstacles that Algerian PhD students in social sciences face at the University Centre of Maghnia. Through survey data collected from these students, this research aims to shed light on the specific areas where support is needed, highlighting gaps in resources and instructional methods. Ultimately, this study seeks to propose practical strategies to help Algerian universities implement more robust English-language support systems tailored to their students' unique linguistic needs. Addressing these challenges is not just a matter of individual student success but also of national academic advancement, as Algeria seeks to participate more fully in the global academic community.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. The Importance of English in Academia**

English has become the dominant language in academia, influencing everything from publication to international collaboration. Scholars worldwide emphasize its critical role, particularly in research dissemination and academic networking. For instance, Phillipson (2009) refers to English as the "lingua franca" of the global academic community, noting that a majority of high-impact journals publish primarily in English, which can both enable and restrict access to knowledge. Researchers like Crystal (2003) also underline the power dynamics at play, suggesting that English proficiency is increasingly viewed as a "gatekeeper" to academic success, allowing

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those fluent in it to participate more actively in scholarly dialogues while potentially marginalizing non-native speakers.

Several studies have explored the implications of English's dominance in academia. Ammon (2001) argues that it creates both opportunities and challenges: while English facilitates communication across countries, it also places additional demands on non-native speakers, who must not only learn English but also master the specific academic register. This challenge is especially notable in countries where English is not the primary or second language, as researchers in these regions may face substantial barriers to publishing and engaging with the broader academic community.

In their study on the impact of English in non-English speaking countries, Curry and Lillis (2004) found that scholars often feel pressured to publish in English-language journals to gain visibility and credibility, despite the significant linguistic challenges this presents. This pressure, they argue, can affect research quality and accessibility, as scholars may prioritize “publishable” topics over locally relevant issues simply to meet English-language publication standards.

Hyland (2015) further points out that English dominance in academia affects even citation practices and intellectual prestige. He states that English-speaking researchers tend to dominate citation indices and that research in English garners more visibility, establishing an academic “center and periphery” model. This unequal visibility can have long-term implications on knowledge production and sharing, making English proficiency essential for those looking to contribute meaningfully to their fields.

Recent research continues to highlight the expanding dominance of English in academia and its impact on non-native English-speaking scholars. Warchał (2024) found that many academics perceive English as both a valuable tool for international visibility and a source of stress due to publication pressures. Likewise, Zeng et al (2023) describe this dominance as a form of linguistic neo-imperialism, arguing that English marginalizes local knowledge systems and reinforces global academic inequalities. The growing institutional shift toward English is also evident in a bibliometric study by Karabay & Durrani (2024), who report a rapid rise in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) in universities worldwide, further cementing English as the default language of scholarly communication.

In Algeria, this global tendency is reflected at the local level. Laddada (2023) found that Algerian researchers increasingly rely on English for publication, emphasizing its necessity for international recognition despite limited institutional support. Ahmed Kadi & Djaidja (2024) argue that addressing such linguistic disparities is essential to creating a more equitable global academic community.

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Together, these recent studies underline that while English facilitates global collaboration, it simultaneously creates structural linguistic disadvantages for non-native speakers; reinforcing the need for greater inclusivity in academic publishing and multilingual research practices.

In summary, while English's role as the primary language in academia fosters international collaboration and access to a broader audience, it also presents distinct hurdles for non-native speakers, especially in regions like Algeria, where English may not be widely taught or used. Addressing these language-related challenges can help create a more inclusive global academic community.

### **2.2. The Increasing Importance of English in the Context of the Algerian Higher Education**

The Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research has decided to adopt English as a medium of instruction starting from the 2023–2024 academic year. This decision follows the launch of teachers training programmes initiated earlier in the 2022–2023 academic year. In this regard, the ministry instructed regional university conference leaders to coordinate with directors of higher education institutions to prepare for the transition. The directive, issued in an official correspondence on July 1, called on university directors to hold meetings, form pedagogical teams for each subject, and ensure readiness before the summer break. These measures align with the directives of Minister Kamel Baddari to integrate English into teaching practices.

The pedagogical teams, chaired by appointed or elected professors, are to include lecturers and instructors responsible for practical and theoretical coursework. The correspondence emphasized the need for interim reports detailing the preparations for adopting English as the teaching language and creating class schedules aligned with the new directive.

To ensure smooth implementation, the National Committee for Supervising and Monitoring the Training Programme in English for Faculty and Doctoral Students conducted field visits to universities in June-July 2023. University administrative staffs were required to facilitate the committee's mission by providing all necessary data and support.

Within the same regard, the Ministry has laid out a multi-faceted training strategy to strengthen English proficiency among university faculty and doctoral students. These measures include:

- Enrollment in English Degrees: Encouraging faculty members to pursue English bachelor's programs.

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- Intensive Language Learning: Offering opportunities through Intensive Language Teaching Centers (ILTCs).
- E-Learning Platforms: Providing online training for doctoral students and faculty using globally recognized methods.

The directives aimed to:

- Ensure 80% of science and technology, and 100% of humanities, social sciences, and medical faculty achieve English proficiency.
- Improve the global visibility and ranking of Algerian universities by integrating English into academic practices.
- Align with global standards to boost research output, as English dominates scholarly publications.

The Ministry's decision underscores the increasing importance of English as a global academic lingua franca. By embracing English, Algerian universities aim to enhance their competitiveness on the international stage, facilitate access to a broader range of research, and meet the linguistic requirements of publishing in high-impact journals. This transition also reflects a strategic shift away from French dominance, aligning Algeria's academic system with global trends in science and education. The initiative is part of Algeria's broader effort to strengthen its higher education system by bridging linguistic gaps and positioning itself more prominently in the global academic and research landscape.

However, despite the Ministry's recent efforts to transition Algerian higher education toward English, little is known about how these reforms are experienced by students; especially PhD candidates in the social sciences, who are now expected to study, research, and publish in English. Existing studies on English in Algeria tend to examine institutional policies, teacher preparedness, or publication trends, but there is a noticeable absence of research focusing on doctoral students' linguistic readiness and the practical difficulties they encounter during this shift.

Moreover, while national directives outline ambitious goals for English proficiency, there is limited empirical evidence on whether students possess the language skills needed to meet these expectations or how the transition impacts their academic progress. This disconnect between policy intentions and student realities represents a significant gap in the literature.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a survey-based research design to examine the linguistic challenges faced by Algerian PhD students in social sciences as they adapt to the increasing reliance on English for academic purposes. A survey was selected as the primary instrument because it enables the collection of both quantitative patterns (e.g., frequency of English use, reported difficulty levels) and qualitative perspectives (e.g.,

students' perceptions, open-ended recommendations). Given that linguistic challenges are largely internal, experiential, and self-reported, the survey method provides an appropriate means of obtaining reliable and comparative data.

To ensure alignment with the research objectives, a purposive sampling strategy was employed. This approach targets respondents who are directly impacted by the policy shift toward English-medium academic practices—namely, doctoral students in the social sciences at the University Centre of Maghnia. This group represents a particularly relevant population: PhD students engage regularly with scholarly literature, academic writing, and conference participation, all domains increasingly dominated by English. Although purposive sampling does not guarantee full representativeness, it allows focused inquiry into a population with direct relevance to the study's aims.

### **3.1. Participants**

The final sample consisted of 18 PhD students enrolled in various social sciences disciplines: 9 in Law, 6 in Economics, and 3 in Arabic Literature. This distribution reflects the actual enrolment patterns within the institution. The unequal representation across disciplines—particularly the smaller number of Arabic Literature students—introduces a potential sampling bias. However, this imbalance is inherent to the institutional context and therefore offers a realistic snapshot of the population under study. Participation was voluntary, and invitations were extended to all available doctoral students in the targeted fields to capture as wide a range of experiences as possible.

### **3.2. Research Instrument and Question Design**

The questionnaire was designed to gather comprehensive insights into students' linguistic challenges and perceptions regarding English in academia. It consisted of four structured sections, combining closed-ended items (Likert scales, multiple-choice questions) with open-ended prompts to ensure both breadth and depth:

1. **Background Information:** capturing English proficiency levels, training received, and frequency of English use.
2. **Challenges with English in Academic Work:** to identify specific linguistic and academic difficulties encountered in research, writing, and comprehension.
3. **Support and Resources:** to assess the availability, perceived usefulness, and adequacy of institutional language support.
4. **Perceptions of English in the Academic World:** to explore attitudes toward English as a global academic language and perceived barriers to international collaboration.

The questions were intentionally designed to be clear, neutral, and non-leading, ensuring reliability while allowing participants to provide nuanced responses. The inclusion of qualitative items aimed to capture perspectives not easily quantifiable, thereby enriching the dataset.

### **3.3 Data Collection Procedure**

Data collection took place during the 2023–2024 academic year. The survey was administered online to accommodate students' schedules and ensure accessibility. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured of anonymity, and given two weeks to complete the questionnaire, with a reminder issued midway through the response window.

### **3.3. Data Analysis**

#### **Section 1: Background Information**

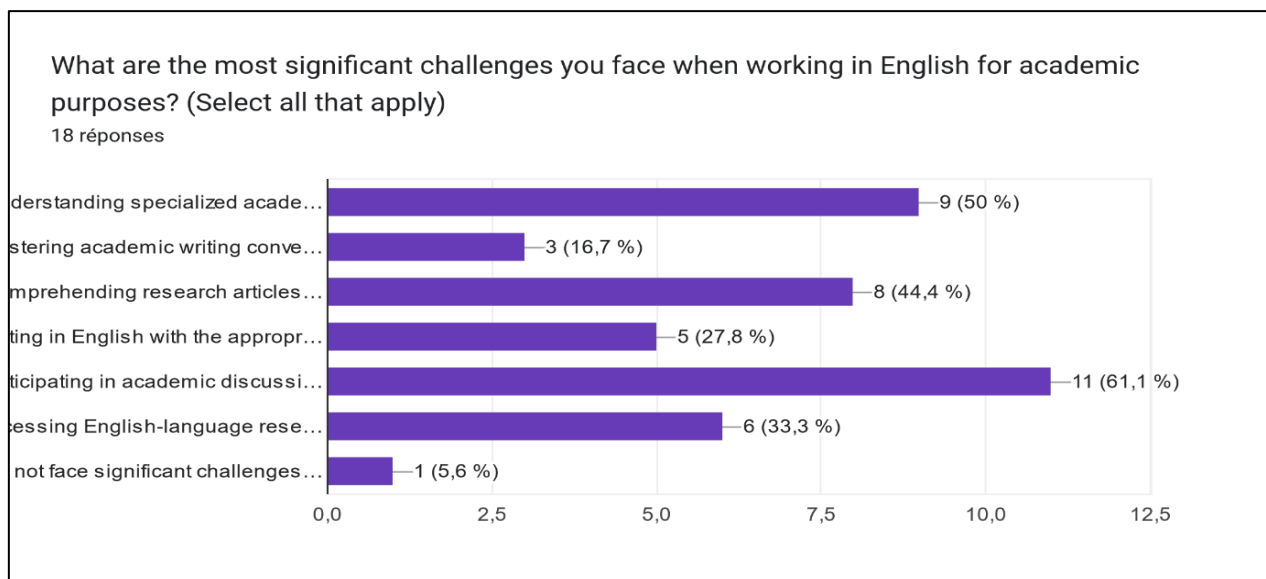
The answers to the first section questions included information about the students levels according to the training they received under the auspices of our ministry. Hence, 5 students already completed the training and obtained the level B2, 09 students are enrolled in B2 level and 4 in B1 Level. All of them started the training in May 2023. The section also included a question about the frequency of the English use by the students, and the results show varied English usage among Algerian PhD students: 38.3% use it frequently, reflecting its importance in global academia; 33.5% use it occasionally, indicating reliance on French or Arabic for most tasks; 22.2% use it rarely, possibly due to limited proficiency or need; and 5.6% never use it, highlighting barriers to adoption. This suggests the need for tailored language support to address different proficiency levels.

#### **Section 2: Specific Challenges with English in Academic Work**

The most significant challenges for PhD students are participating in academic discussions (61.1.3%), and understanding specialized vocabulary (50%) and, followed by comprehending research articles (44.4%). Accessing English resources are each cited by 33.3%, followed by writing with appropriate structure (27.8), while mastering academic writing conventions is a challenge for 16.7%. Only 5.6% reported no significant challenges.

#### **Figure 1: Challenges facing students in Academic work**

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The students provided varied responses regarding how these challenges impact their academic performance. Among them, 38.9% indicated that the challenges somewhat positively impact their performance, while 27% remained neutral on the matter. Additionally, 16.7% reported a significantly positive impact, whereas 11.1% viewed the impact as somewhat negative, and 5.6% described it as significantly negative.

The questionnaire also explored whether students face difficulties publishing papers in English or delivering presentations at international conferences. Regarding publishing, 33.3% of students stated they have not yet attempted to publish in English, while 27.8% reported either facing difficulties or not. The remaining 11.1% indicated they sometimes encounter difficulties.

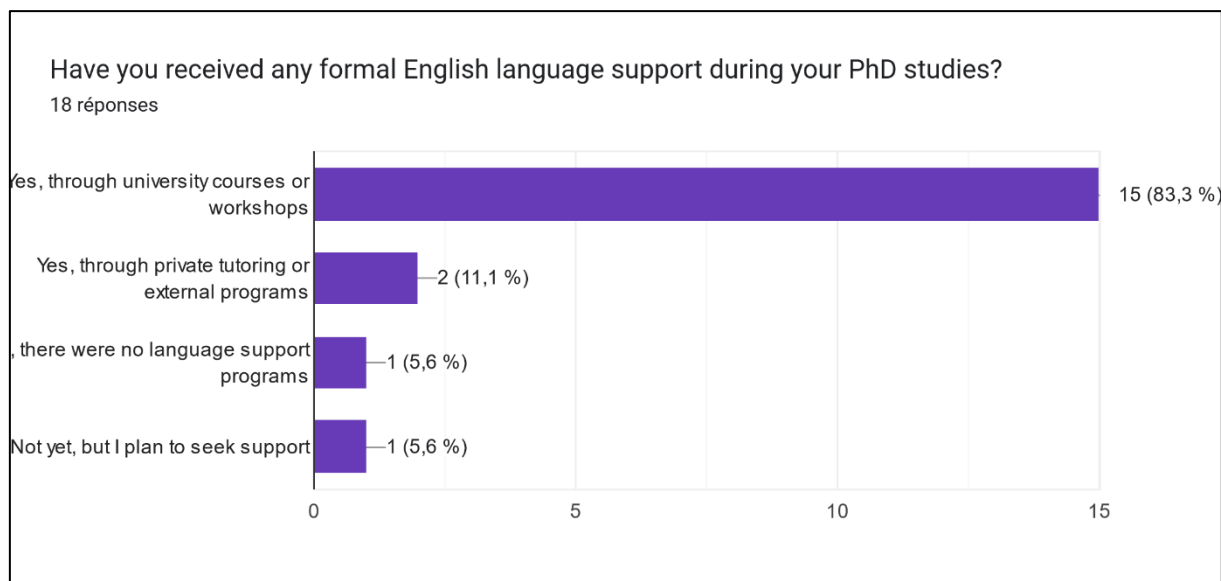
For conference participation, 44.4% of students acknowledged experiencing difficulties in preparing presentations, while 33.3% reported occasional difficulties. Additionally, 11.1% each stated they rarely or never face challenges in this area.

### Section 3: Support and Resources

This section comprises four questions, with the first focusing on whether students received any formal training in English during their PhD studies. As shown in the graph below, 83.3% of students reported attending university-provided courses and workshops, while 11.1% indicated they had pursued private tutoring. Meanwhile, 5.6% stated they had no access to support programs and were not planning to enroll in any and 5.6% said they plan to join support programmes.

**Figure 2: Institutional support and resources**

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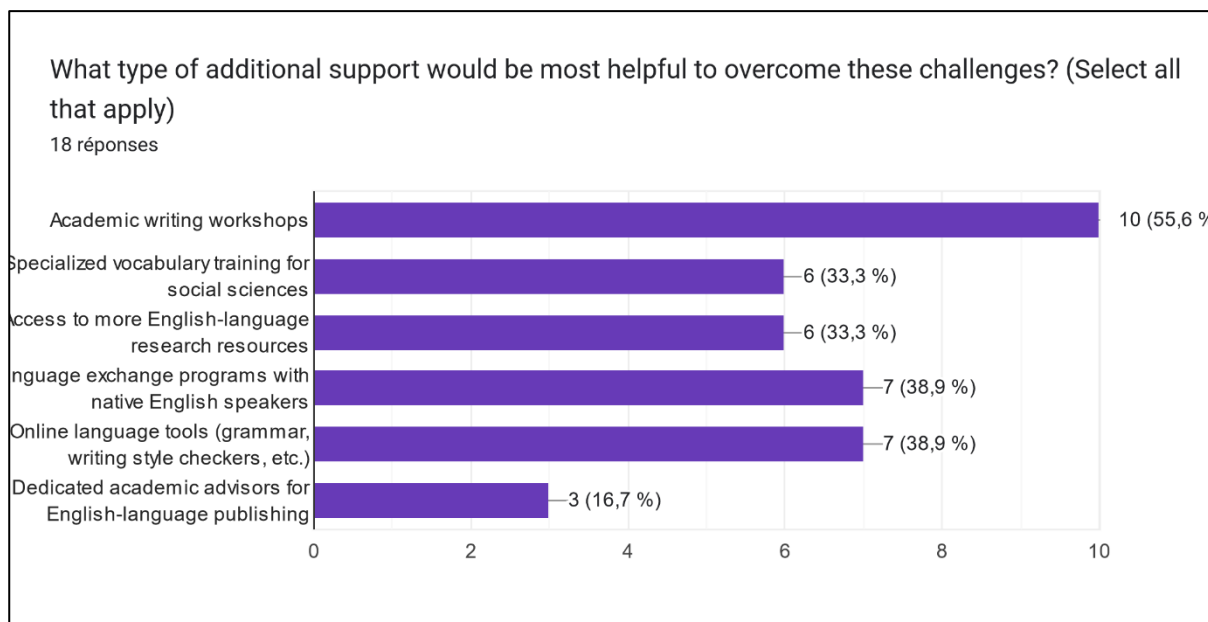


To assess the usefulness of the programmes, the next question asked students how beneficial they found these initiatives. The responses revealed that 39.8% found them "very useful," and an equal percentage rated them as "somewhat useful." Meanwhile, 11.1% considered them "not useful," and another 11.1% indicated that they had not utilized any resources.

Another question in the survey focused on the additional support these students might need. The results showed that 55.6% recommended more academic writing workshops. Similar percentages were recorded for other forms of support: 38.9% suggested language exchange programs with native speakers and the use of online language tools, such as grammar checkers. Additionally, 33.3% of respondents recommended teaching specialized vocabulary, while another 33.3% emphasized the importance of providing access to more English-language research resources. Lastly, 16.7% suggested other forms of support.

**Figure 3: Additional support needed by PhD students**

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The follow-up question asked participants whether they believed their academic institution should provide additional English-language support. The responses were as follows: 56.6% of respondents answered "Yes, definitely," indicating a strong need for more support, while 22.2% selected "Yes, to some extent," suggesting a moderate need. On the other hand, 16.7% felt that the existing support was sufficient, and 5.6% were unsure about the adequacy of the current resources. These findings highlight varying perceptions of the availability and effectiveness of English-language support within academic institutions.

### Section 4: Perceptions of English in the Academic World

This section addresses two key questions: the perceived importance of English proficiency in the global academic community and its role as a potential barrier to international collaboration. Regarding the first question, 88.9% of respondents considered English proficiency "very important," while 11.1% viewed it as "moderately important." Only 5.6% believed it was "not important," and no respondents were unsure.

For the second question, 50% identified English proficiency as a significant barrier to participating in international conferences, publishing, or collaborating with scholars from other countries. Meanwhile, 16.7% acknowledged it as a barrier but not a major one, 16.7% felt it posed no barrier, and another 16.7% stated they had not yet attempted international collaboration. These findings underscore the critical role of English in academic engagement and highlight the challenges faced by non-native speakers in global academia.

The final question in this section was an open-ended inquiry: *What would you recommend to improve the English language support available to PhD students in Algeria?* Respondents provided a range of recommendations emphasizing the critical need for enhanced English language support. Key suggestions included:

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1. **Specialized Training:** Offering workshops and courses dedicated to academic writing, grammar, and presentation skills.
  2. **Practical Application:** Establishing peer review groups, discussion workshops, and opportunities for interaction with native speakers to promote real-world English practice.
  3. **Institutional Support:** Developing English language centers, creating language exchange programs, and integrating English training into existing PhD curricula.
  4. **Resource Accessibility:** Ensuring access to English-language research materials and digital tools to support self-directed learning.
  5. **Collaboration:** Building partnerships with international universities and initiating exchange programs to foster a global academic experience.
- These recommendations highlight the dual importance of institutional backing and individual initiative in enhancing English proficiency for Algerian PhD students, enabling them to better navigate the demands of global academia.

### 3.4. Results Discussion

The findings of this survey shed light on the complex and increasingly indispensable role of English in the academic trajectory of Algerian PhD students, particularly within a higher education system historically shaped by French. While students express clear awareness of the value of English for academic mobility, research engagement, and international publication, their responses reveal persistent structural, pedagogical, and linguistic barriers that hinder their effective use of the language in advanced academic contexts.

#### 1. English Usage and Proficiency

The variation in English proficiency and frequency of use among respondents indicates highly uneven linguistic backgrounds and learning trajectories. Although 38.3% report using English frequently, the majority still rely predominantly on French or Arabic in their academic work. This linguistic divide suggests that only a portion of PhD students are currently positioned to access the benefits of English-medium scholarship, which dominates social sciences research globally. Students who seldom use English face limitations in reading the latest studies, integrating international theoretical frameworks, or submitting to indexed journals. These disparities may also reflect inconsistencies in prior language instruction, availability of resources, and differences in academic specialization, pointing to a need for more structured and continuous English preparation throughout earlier university stages.

#### 2. Challenges in Academic Contexts

The survey results reveal significant challenges across core academic tasks, including understanding specialized vocabulary, following advanced theoretical texts, contributing to academic discussions, and producing scholarly writing. These

difficulties hinder students' capacity to critically engage with contemporary debates, develop original arguments, and position their own research within global conversations.

Problems related to accessing reliable English-language sources and adapting to international writing conventions further exacerbate these obstacles. Such challenges not only slow research progress but also reduce students' confidence and participation in academic forums, illustrating a mismatch between current language training and the linguistic demands of doctoral research.

### **3. Support Systems and Perceived Usefulness**

While a large majority (83.3%) report having received some form of English training, its effectiveness remains questionable. Only 39.8% consider the training very useful, indicating that existing programs may be overly general, insufficiently practical, or not aligned with the specific tasks required at the doctoral level—such as research-based writing, abstract production, peer review, or conference presentation skills. The strong demand for academic writing workshops, personalized feedback, and opportunities to apply English in real academic situations highlights a gap between theoretical instruction and practical language use. These findings underscore the need for sustained, discipline-specific English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs rather than generic language courses.

### **4. The Role of English in Global Academia**

The respondents overwhelmingly agree (88.9%) that English proficiency is essential for academic success, reflecting a widespread recognition of English as the dominant language of research dissemination. However, nearly half also perceive English as a barrier to publishing internationally—including difficulties preparing articles, responding to reviewers, and understanding publication guidelines. This contradiction reveals a tension between aspiration and ability: students understand what is required of them in the global academic arena, yet lack the linguistic and institutional support needed to fulfill those expectations. This challenge is not unique to Algeria but aligns with trends in many multilingual or postcolonial educational contexts where English functions simultaneously as a gateway and an obstacle.

### **5. Student Recommendations**

The students' proposed solutions highlight an informed and proactive understanding of what is needed to overcome these linguistic barriers. Their recommendations—including specialized workshops, writing centers, institutional partnerships with international universities, peer discussion groups, and cultural or academic exchange programs—reflect global best practices in doctoral language support. Importantly, these suggestions emphasize the need for sustained, practical, and interactive language development rather than short-term or purely theoretical instruction. Students' emphasis on practical exposure underscores their desire for

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authentic engagement with English in real academic contexts, signaling that institutional reform should prioritize experiential learning opportunities.

### 4. Conclusion

The survey findings highlight the critical role of English proficiency in the academic success of PhD students at the University Centre of Maghnia. While most students recognize the importance of English for engaging with the global academic community, many face significant challenges in using English effectively for academic purposes. These challenges include difficulties with academic discussions, understanding specialized vocabulary, and engaging with English-language research materials.

Despite having access to some formal language training, students expressed a need for more practical, context-specific support, particularly in academic writing and presentation skills. The demand for workshops, peer review groups, and opportunities for interaction with native speakers reflects the importance of providing students with real-world English practice. Additionally, institutional support in the form of English language centers, exchange programs, and access to more English-language resources is seen as crucial in enhancing students' academic performance.

The survey also highlights the gap between the recognition of English's importance and the ability to use it effectively, with many students still viewing English proficiency as a significant barrier to publishing and international collaboration. To address these challenges, universities should consider expanding and refining their English language programs, focusing on both institutional initiatives and opportunities for practical application. This dual approach will not only help students overcome language barriers but also empower them to succeed in the increasingly globalized academic landscape.

In conclusion, improving English-language support for PhD students in Algeria is essential for enhancing their academic experiences and fostering greater participation in international research and collaboration. With tailored language programs and more robust institutional support, students will be better equipped to meet the demands of global academia and contribute meaningfully to the international exchange of knowledge.

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