

Higher Education in Times of Pandemic: An Exploration of Teachers and EFL Learners' Perceptions of the Shift to Online Instruction Option

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Abstract

E-learning is, for the time being, receiving significant attention in the literature on English as a foreign language (EFL) learning. It has emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic as a fundamental rescue attempt. This paper intends to contribute to this debate by highlighting some of the strong points and downsides obtained from this new learning initiative. It also discusses the main reasons behind the students' reluctance to learn via the internet and examines the impact of learning on both teachers and learners in the Algerian Higher Education Settings. The researcher focused on the teachers' and learners' perceptions of the new asynchronous online teaching mode and also tried to show how Moodle operated as a substitute for traditional courses. The author carried out a qualitative and quantitative study using questionnaires, and an interview to analyze students and teachers' perceptions and experiences with this instructional model. The findings provide insights into how students and instructors perceived and utilized this learning format. The suggested recommendations show that our awareness-raising approach, if taken into account, can enlighten learners, help teachers get more familiar with this type of learning and better engage in technology literacy, and urge the decision-makers to reconsider the utility of diversifying the teaching/learning modes of delivering knowledge in the area of tertiary education.

Keywords: Algerian Higher Education, Covid-19 pandemic, EFL learners, e-learning, perceptions, university learners

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Introduction

At any time and under any circumstances, education will always remain a basic human right. Education implies essentially acquiring moral values and intellectual ones to gain a profound knowledge of an array of subjects to serve human beings. When education opportunities are provided equally, this can lead to personal stability, societal security, and economic development. Through education, people learn to address and resolve crises and to make the difference between what is beneficial and what is harmful. Thus, being educated allows us to keep our planet a safer and peaceful place even during hard times and specific situations. The world still remembers when the Hiroshima bombing occurred on August 06th, 1945 and when schools opened again in October 1945. Japanese survivors reported that their classes remained held in open-air classrooms for years revealing the paramount role of education and the high necessity to place it among the top priorities. This paper tries to show learners and teachers' perceptions of online teaching during the pandemic and aspires to raise the awareness of the higher education community to ensure a variety of teaching possibilities to help all those involved in the education sphere get ready for any possible scenarios in the future.

Background

Since our world went through the most critical times in its history because of the widespread of covid-19 coronavirus pandemic (Dubey et al., 2020), and to preserve the right to education during this delicate time, higher education institutions all over the world were prompted to shift to remote emergency teaching. It is important to acknowledge that among the main benefits of technology is to illuminate our comprehension and improve the world around us. Therefore, Covid-19 has helped teachers, learners, and all those involved in the sphere of education how to take profit from our networked world since the ongoing and evolving global Covid-19 restrictions have heightened the importance of online teaching and learning in higher education broadly and international education particularly (Dwivedi et al., 2020). During the outbreak, like many countries all over the world, Algeria adopted a new way of delivering knowledge to university learners. It decided to transfer learning to an online stage because the 2020 pandemic has catapulted the style and practice of teaching and learning into the tech arena quite forcefully (Taylor, 2020). Nonetheless, as we are not familiar with the process, both students and teachers have to encounter barriers to adopting online classes (Gopal et al., 2021).

Foreign language classrooms are described as being venues for real-life language use and require learners to show involvement in the teaching/learning process. Many studies show that teacher-learner interactions promote linguistic creativity, encourage language acquisition, and give rise to motivation. Indeed, teacher-student interactions are among the remarkable aspects that help student engagement in the classroom (Wang & Eccles, 2013; Furrer et al., 2014; Quin, 2017; Wang & Derakhshan, 2021). Yet, the new virtual instructional method prevents them from being active and animated.

This asynchronous learning is a mode through which learners acquire knowledge at distinct times and from dissimilar locations. To compare this model with face-to-face education, Alawamleh et al. (2020) believe that most students prefer traditional direct courses in the classroom instead of virtual classes; supporters of this view argue that it's a modality that limits students' interactions with their instructors. Moreover, students cannot also engage with a considerable number of materials. In Algeria, as in many other parts of our planet, Covid-19 as a

global event has impacted students' cognitive load and led them to deal with new study habits. Teachers were also obliged to cope with a novel workload. In an attempt to make this distant teaching a successful experience, significant issues have to be identified to try to fix these problems and decrease or remove the impediments faced by teachers as well as the learners. This digest intends to demonstrate some of the main difficulties experienced by faculty members and their students over the emergency remote phase. In this respect, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What are the English teachers' perceptions of online instruction during the pandemic?
- What are the English learners' attitudes towards the new online instructional delivery in times of pandemic?

We hypothesize that:

- Teachers seem to develop negative attitudes towards the online instructional option.
- There appears to be some reluctance on the part of the learners to become involved in these web-led distance courses.

A Shift from Traditional Classrooms to Internet Platforms

There is ample evidence that the educational implications of E-learning have shown a noticeable controversy among educationalists and scholars.

Trying to highlight some benefits of E-learning, we can say it encourages:

- Having access to course content at any time which allows the learners to review the lessons whenever they desire.
- Gaining much more time as some students do not need to follow the pace of learning of other peers.
- Saving lives in specific times like a pandemic. Thus, learners receive knowledge from the comfort of their homes without moving to their institutions' locations.
- Selecting and focusing on the critical parts of the lesson to better memorize information without being obliged to deal with the whole learning material.
- Offering an environmental-friendly teaching system that does not harm the environment as it reduces the use of sheets of paper and copybooks to a vast extent. Therefore, EFL teachers at the university of Oran2 have to cope with this emergency. For this purpose, they are advised to reinforce their computer skills and to acquire these abilities. They are not obliged to be experts in the area of computer sciences, as stated by Ko and Rossen (2017), who argued that a basic familiarity with computers and the internet will more than suffice. That means how to do the following:
 1. Set up folders and directories on a hard drive.
 2. Use word-processing software properly (for instance, cut, copy, and paste, minimize and maximize windows; save files).
 3. Handle email communications, including attachments.
 4. Use a web browser such as Chrome, Safari, Internet Explorer, or Firefox to access the internet, including multimedia resources like YouTube, and to navigate between windows and tabs.

5. Download and upload: that is, retrieve a file from your institution's computer network or from the internet or learning management system and save it on your own computer, and having made changes or created a new document or image, be able to transmit it back to your online class site (Ko & Rossen, 2017, p.18).

Thus, being equipped with these capabilities can allow teachers to enter the online platforms with comfort and more confidence. Conversely, the observed downsides of E-Learning can be cited as follows:

- Lack of social interaction.
- Overuse of technological means.
- Problems with internet connection.
- The psychological state of learners (such as demotivation and lack of confidence).

Objectives of the Study

This research intends essentially to:

- Highlight the teachers' and learners' views on E-learning.
- Offer a discussion about the role of E-learning in the Algerian context.
- Examine teachers' and students' coping feedback with the new virtual teaching format.

Methodology Design

Context and Participants

This research took place at the University of Oran² within the department of English right after the start of in-person classes. The study targeted 08 English teachers and one teacher covering computer sciences courses, all operating at the same institution and a total of 575 learners. The great majority of them, 526 are third year LMD students, and 49 are Master II graduates.

This research investigates all these respondents' views about the implementation of e-learning during the Covid-19 period. Data were collected by administering a questionnaire to the students and conducting an interview with the teachers.

Questionnaires were designed and given to the learners because they constitute a medium of remote conversation between researcher and respondent (Brace, 2018). They have also been viewed as data gathering instruments that continue to play a unique role in producing data on attitudes and behaviors for which there is no viable alternative (Beatty, 2020).

Considered as helpful data collection means, interviews were utilized since it is claimed that researchers conducting personal interviews may be able to build rapport with respondents, leading them to develop a sense of trust and to be open in their responses (Milder, 2017).

Main Findings

Learners' Questionnaire

The totality of learners (100%) declared that they've never pursued online classes, which they described as unusual and strange. Almost all the learners (98, 56%) asserted that they did not try to check their courses because they were not acquainted with this type of teaching. Many of them contended that they did not have the desire to enter Moodle platform and have a look at their

courses. Students claimed that the feedback was not received from the teacher within the required time. The analysis of the students' questionnaire shows that most (97, 56%) of them were in favor of face-to-face instruction; they pointed out that the physical presence of the teacher in class provides a feeling of safety and readiness to learn. They highlighted the massive difference between being within the classroom, where everything is under the control of the teacher and strict rules are implemented and followed by everyone, and being in front of a screen (mobile, tablet, or personal computer) left to your own devices, without being controlled by anyone. While only 1, 91% consider that digital platforms can also facilitate learning and enhance learning outcomes, 98, 09% insist that nothing can replace the classrooms that they describe as environments that promote their focus, inspiration, and confidence. Nearly all the respondents, 97, 21%, expressed their strong desire to encourage blended learning.

Teachers' Interview

All teachers (100%) revealed that they had never taught online before the pandemic. They also expressed their satisfaction concerning the importance given by the government and the role it played in assisting them and to all university learners. Approximately all the interviewed participants (88, 88%) mentioned the impossibility of establishing through distant education regulations and instructions to be followed, which will prevent learners from grasping and respecting the sense of discipline, and this, according to them, may have negative impacts on their behaviors and academic gains. The totality of the informants asserted that uploading courses only from a platform can be very problematic for learners who require live clarification and specific assistance. The whole participants acknowledged the pressing need to rethink online education, find out ways to up opportunities for live queries, optimize safe and interpersonal interactions, and promote effective communication.

Discussion

The results indicate a credibility gap regarding online teaching. Students seem to prefer the traditional option that includes learning in groups, getting assignments, taking exams and tests, and attending classes regularly. Teachers opined that despite online courses' key role in disseminating knowledge, it should be noted that they have led to several hindrances. They also added that while posting lectures online has been a contributing tool during the outbreak, it has also created some downsides and this is due to a high dependency on the internet among their colleagues and the students as well. The findings disclosed a range of themes.

Discussion of the Learners' Questionnaire

The students' narratives reflected the following broad headings:

1- Interruption:

The participants claimed that they could not manage to work for a long time and concentrate on the content of their courses without interruption. One of the informants opines:

“With the temptation to answer a call or to check my email, I had trouble reading attentively and thoroughly my courses.”

2- Passive Learning as a Habit:

Results reflected that students' negative attitudes towards online learning had become a culture and a habit to which they had become accustomed. For most of them, listening to a lecture and getting knowledge with the guidance of a teacher is their preferred learning style. A considerable number of students made the following statement:

“Sitting on the benches, listening to a teacher with attention, posing questions, and engaging in discussions with him/her provides us with more confidence.”

3- Low Flexibility to Suit New Conditions:

Most of the respondents declared that they were unable to suit new conditions of learning and revealed that time management was among the faced constraints.

4- Unavailability of Resources:

Students could not move to the library and did not have access to academic resources. In addition, they stated that many beneficial electronic resources were not downloadable, and it was impossible to get access to them.

The results reflected that EFL students prioritize face-to-face teaching and interaction with their peers over online modality.

Discussion of Teachers' Questionnaire

The teachers' responses have accentuated the following points:

1- Old Practices, New Contexts:

There is a growing recognition that education is changing, and change is always accompanied by uncertainty, fear, and anxiety. Some teachers contended that they felt uncomfortable when obliged to break up with their old practices and adopt unfamiliar ones.

2- Absence of Immediate Feedback:

According to the teachers, in the area of language teaching, feedback has a fundamental role since it helps teachers understand whether the learner got the message entirely or not. Yet, in e-learning environments, the feedbacks are asynchronous, and the students cannot discover their mistakes in a short time. It is recognized that when exposed to new concepts and new learning versions without being guided by teachers, the learners can make many mistakes.

They believe that their students' reluctance may be due to the following components:

- . Poor quality of Internet connection was a discouraging factor.
- . Increase in social isolation.
- . Absence of teacher/learner interaction.
- . Lack of well-planned guidance.

3- Absence of Communication:

Teachers claimed that this internet-based way has led to the non-existence of communication between them and their learners, which has resulted in learners' misunderstanding their courses and instructors' failing to meet their students' expectations.

4- Difficulties to Monitor Students' Progress:

The respondents declared that good monitoring ensures a well-planned follow-up to check how the learners develop so that teachers can make any necessary changes, and it helps the students stay on track and perform better.

5- Unfamiliarity with Online Teaching:

Since all teachers revealed that they have no experience with e-learning, this can cause real obstacles that can hamper the effectiveness of the courses and lead to professional (classes transferred online) and psychological (anxiety, social distancing) challenges.

Significant Considerations

However, it's important to mention that the launch of E-learning via our universities' platforms (The Case of the University of ORAN2) has shown possibilities for developing other learning models. These instructional modalities can help learners improve their skills to adapt to the 21st-century transformations and change their behaviors about the manner they learn and their expectations about the future of higher education.

This educational experience also seems to have increased the sense of sharing responsibilities between teachers, officials, learners, and parents, intending to ensure a better quality teaching that satisfies the students' demands, meets the teachers' aspirations, and comforts parents.

This leads us to think about creating unique teaching models that can cope with new circumstances and new environments (Zoom, Google Meet, etc.).

It should be noted that despite the many drawbacks of internet-based courses cited by the learners who took part in this study, some vital points were also raised by them, such as:

- Getting used to independent work.
- Learning to meet deadlines.
- Reinforcing their technology literacy.

Conclusion

We believe that with the emergence of covid-19, governments in general and their higher education establishments, in particular, have started to grasp the utility of adopting new ways of imparting knowledge to the students in specific and challenging times and have begun to look for other alternatives and better practices and e-learning has come to the forefront of those alternatives. It was observed that the findings of this study revealed a considerable level of dissatisfaction balanced by requests for forceful engagement in various online formats. We insist that we should circulate increased attention and awareness among our colleagues. We also need to consider future directions for particular work in the area. Additionally, we must create opportunities such as organizing conferences and workshops to voice and challenge our beliefs about e-learning.

To recap, there are multiple things that we have learned from this experience, including the following:

- Trying to be prepared for any possible advent.
- Encouraging better teaching facilities.
- Involving all the contributors in the education sector, including the parents to participate in the advancement and well-being of the Algerian university, Algerian teacher, and Algerian learner.
- Diversifying the teaching models by providing other options for learning. It should be noted that in live courses, teachers and students can establish a real community of knowledge, something we don't believe online courses ever will.

We conclude that further research must be undertaken to explore e-learning effects on teachers and learners deeply. Until this happens, we recommend teachers, researchers, and decision-makers to re-examine the existing delivery methods to be prudent that we do not replicate the weaker facets we've come across when navigating in online teaching, and to capitalize the merits and minimize the limitations.

About the Author

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