

Possible Challenges and Suggested Solutions of Online English Language Teaching

التحديات المحتملة والحلول المقترحة لتدريس اللغة الإنجليزية عبر الإنترنت

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Abstract:

Recently and due to the onset of COVID-19, education and various sectors have been affected by the most catastrophic global pandemic of the 21st century. Schools and universities all over the world were forced to close their doors to avoid the spread of this virus. Consequently, e-learning emerged as a new movement in the world of education for both learners and teachers. Algeria like the other countries was not an exception as it was severely impacted. This study aims at exploring how English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching and learning at the tertiary level in Algeria was affected positively and negatively when universities has been moving towards online learning. Moreover, the present study will highlight a theoretical framework of some issues with implications by shedding some light on the most common challenges faced by Algerian EFL teachers and learners especially at the Centre University of Salhi Ahmed, Naama with the shift to e-learning with a specific focus on the main possible solutions.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, distance learning, e-learning, EFL

ملخص:

في الآونة الأخيرة وبسبب ظهور فيروس كورونا ، تأثر التعليم وقطاعات مختلفة بأكبر جائحة عالمية في القرن الحادي والعشرين. اضطرت المدارس والجامعات في جميع أنحاء العالم لإغلاق أبوابها لتجنب انتشار هذا الفيروس. وبالتالي ، ظهر التعلم الإلكتروني كحركة جديدة في عالم التعليم لكل من المتعلمين والمعلمين. الجزائر مثل البلدان الأخرى لم تكن استثناءً لأنها تأثرت بشدة. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف كيفية تأثر تعليم وتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المرحلة الجامعية في الجزائر إيجاباً وسلباً عندما كانت الجامعات تتجه نحو التعلم عبر الإنترنت. علاوة على ذلك ، ستسلط الدراسة الحالية الضوء على الإطار النظري لبعض القضايا من خلال إلقاء بعض الضوء على التحديات الأكثر شيوعاً التي يواجهها مدرسو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية والمتعلمون الجزائريون خاصة في مركز الجامعي صالح أحمد ، نعام ، منذ التحول إلى التعلم الإلكتروني مع التركيز بشكل خاص على الحلول الرئيسية الممكنة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: جائحة كوفيد -19، التعلم عن بعد، التعلم الإلكتروني، اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

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1.Introduction:

Globally, education has changed dramatically during COVID-19 disease on March 2020 which led to the rise of e-learning, whereby teaching and learning processes are undertaken remotely on various digital platforms to reinforce and support both teaching and learning. Thus, such kind of learning emerged in response to schools shut all across the world so that countries have been implementing remote education programmes and teachers were obliged to move from their traditional teaching way towards online teaching. To keep the world's students learning, many online learning platforms started to offer free access to their services whether it is language apps, video conferencing tools (Zoom/Google Meet), virtual tutoring, or online learning software. In this regard, Merine (2021: 907) states that “ ‘Moodle platform’ was employed by all Algerian institutes and departments to publish courses for all degrees of study and establish online sessions beginning with first year LMD students to second year Master students”. In fact, many experts in the field believe that such quick and unplanned move to online learning with no training will surely result in a poor user experience and problems of shifting from face-to-face to online learning environment for several reasons. On the other hand, others believe that the integration of information technology and the implementation of remote education programs have several advantages. The current research can contribute to the development of online learning process, for it provides information on the usefulness of this method employed to deliver the courses. Based on the previous discussion, the following research questions guide the present research paper:

- 1- What challenges do university students and teachers face with online learning and teaching of EFL during the current pandemic?
- 2.What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages to online learning during the pandemic?

The two questions will be answered through a review of the most recent literature published in the field of EFL and language education since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020. Moreover, this paper tries to present an overview about online learning during the pandemic. Last but not least, it attempts to shed some light on some tips to guide educators and students towards effective teaching and learning practices by keeping the learners engaged and most importantly motivated to learn.

2. Online Learning/Courses

Before defining online learning, it is worth mentioning that there are some differences among the following concepts: distance learning, e-learning and online learning even though they seem to be similar. There are similarities and difference among them and the term distance learning is the umbrella term that combines the other terms. So, online learning is just one type of “*distance learning*” and it is the most popular form of distance education today. It means that education takes place over the Internet and it is often referred to as “*E-learning*” among other terms. In this respect, it should be mentioned that there are different types of online/distance learning including:

Correspondence Courses: In this type, interaction between the teacher and student is limited, i.e., they are conducted through regular mail or electronic transmission with little interaction and they are generally initiated by the student.

Telecourses: This type is presented and delivered via radio or television broadcast.

CD-ROM Courses: This type is used for storing and sharing data especially when students suffer from poor Internet.

Online Learning: This type is the modern version of courses in which learning content can be created and shared in an organized way that allows users to learn in a good condition. In other words, they are Internet-based courses offered synchronously and/or asynchronously. Such courses include videos, images and text. They can be shared by a link or invitation email being sent to the users.

Mobile Learning: In this type, several means of devices are used such as cellular phones, PDAs and digital audio players (iPods, MP3 players).

Various interpretations are proposed for the concept of online learning/courses due to its complexity. As a matter of fact, early forms of distance education can be traced back to 1840, when Isaac Pitman used mail in order to teach and collaborate with learners (Bezhovski and Pooran, 2016). In a simple way, E-learning or online courses is regarded as a system employed for formal teaching, or a network where information is delivered through electronic resources to a large number of audience and the extent to which it is used differs from place to place (Harandi, 2015). Through online learning, students can gain knowledge and skills through learning applications that are written, communicated, supported, and managed with internet technology. Thus, computers and the internet are the main elements to ensure the functioning of such systems because they offer a wide range of possibilities for sharing information and uploading documents with different formats. Many authors make a clear statement and describe online learning as access to learning experiences via the use of some technology (Benson, 2002; Carliner, 2004; Conrad, 2002). In their turn, both Benson (2002) and Conrad (2002) define online learning as a more recent and improved version of distance learning which improves access to educational opportunities for students. It was described as being non-traditional and disenfranchised.

According to Gallie and Joubert (2004), traditional education is more teacher-centered but with the development of distance learning a shift towards a student-centered education can be viewed. The great difference between traditional and online learning can be seen in terms of quality of education, principal sources of information or evaluation; for instance, in traditional education, learners are assessed only by teachers, who are their main source of information, and the quality of education is dependent on teacher's knowledge and competencies. However, in online learning, the assessment may be done through the use of tools and systems, learners can get information from several documents uploaded on a particular platform, and the quality of education is related to the competence of teachers in using technology (Nycz and Cohen, 2007).

Chun, Kern, and Smith (2016) point out that remote learning is an educational system in which teachers can still deliver the lessons, and learners can still receive the lesson at their homes through the integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). In this respect, teachers are facilitators rather than transmitters of knowledge. Online learning is a part of distance education which is a combination between electronic technology and internet-based technology which are highly dependent on the availability of internet, i.e. a range of technologies such as audio and video conferencing, email delivered over computer networks. Furthermore, online learning is a program to organize online learning classes addressed to students.

Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland (2005) proposed the major features of online learning as follows:

- ✓ Computer-based Learning
- ✓ Accessibility
- ✓ Social interaction
- ✓ Inclusive community of learners
- ✓ Digital classroom
- ✓ Interactivity
- ✓ Enrichment
- ✓ Constructivism

In the same vein, Allen & Seaman (2008) define online learning as a learning system in which learners are separated from the teacher and the learning process uses various resources without a direct face-to-face interaction. Teachers can use different platforms and applications such as Google classroom, Google Meet, Zoom and others and the main device needed is a computer or android connected to the internet network.

Moreover, Cheung and Cable (2017) present eight main principles that stand at the core of effective online teaching including:

- ✓ Encouraging contact between students and faculty;
- ✓ Collaborative learning;
- ✓ Quick feedback;
- ✓ Active learning;
- ✓ Task time;
- ✓ Encouraging students to allocate more time for completing tasks;
- ✓ High-expectations;
- ✓ The teacher should communicate their expectations in order to motivate students, diversified learning, and technology application.

In the past, online courses with its different types were designed for learners who live in remote locations, who were unable to attend traditional classes, who cannot find a particular class at a particular institution, who work full-time and cannot study only after work, and those who like to learn independently. With the onset of Covid-19, online courses became obligatory and beneficial especially in higher education. As a matter of fact, several studies before the pandemic and after have been conducted to assess the effectiveness of online learning by investigating whether learners prefer it to face-to-face learning. For instance, Paechter and Maier (2010) investigate students' attitudes towards online learning versus face-to-face learning. They recruited 2196 Austrian undergraduates, whose points of view were collected through a questionnaire. The results reveal that the respondents believe that online learning is an organised approach to learning. Also, they prefer face-to-face learning when communication is required, i.e. in speaking activities.

More recently, Fansury et al. (2020) examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning. 20 teachers and 50 students were interviewed and asked to complete a questionnaire. The results revealed that learning can take place digitally to overcome social distancing and the suspension of schools. Moreover, they found that students preferred online learning to traditional classroom learning. Nevertheless, both teachers and students complained about technical problems such as internet

disconnection and the cost of internet data. Actually, both studies found that students and teachers see online learning in a positive way. However, it is not clear if students prefer this type of learning because they are bored with traditional methods and it is a new form of teaching, or whether they prefer it because it is really more effective.

In their part, Song, Singleton, Hill, and Koh (2004) conducted a study to investigate graduate students' perceptions of online learning. It was found a mix of facilitating and discouraging factors. Students expressed that course design was an important factor that distinguished successful from unsuccessful online learning experiences.

1.2. Benefits of Online Courses in Higher Education:

Before the pandemic, online learning has gone through different stages; the first stage is called CALL system which started in some universities in 1980 to promote the teaching learning process so that the quality of learning will be improved. CALL was defined as computers and additional software to supplement language teaching in such as CD ROM. Thus, internet-based learning was considered as an alternative to traditional learning but during the pandemic it became a necessity for keeping learning going, maintaining the activity of universities and to meet with the needs and requirements of learners. For the sake of avoiding the spread of the virus, better communicating with the students, ensuring the continuity of the educational process and enhancing the learning process, universities all over the world adopted online learning as a new policy. In this regard, Berbar (2020) states that: "to avoid the proliferation of this dangerous disease, traditional face-to-face education was prohibited and replaced by digital online education." In fact, online courses depend on the use of diverse kinds of ICTs and electronic devices in the process of teaching and learning. They offer various benefits for both teachers and learners and they are widely needed "to provide quality education to all students, regardless of location and time" (Chaney, 2010: 21). Such courses are more flexible because they involve student-centeredness. Among the main benefits of online learning platforms are control over the content and control over the time spent on learning.

Online learning provides accessibility because all students can learn from any place in the world especially for those students who want to study abroad. Online courses address different learning styles and result in increased variety and creativity of learning activities in addition to ability to document and record online interactions. Through such courses, students will gain experience concerning the use of technology not only during the pandemic but even later, i.e. they have an opportunity to gain technical skills in developing their ICT skills. Students will be motivated and able to develop confidence and self-esteem so that they can overcome or at least reduce the set of obstacles that they may face in their journey. On the other hand, teachers will gain much more time to examine students' work more thoroughly. Furthermore, online learning is cost-effective because learners do not need much money to learn and to buy books.

Psychologically speaking, shy students prefer such kind of courses because they can take more time to think and reflect before communicating with their peers and teachers; this will improve several skills like time management, increased depth of understanding, increased learner-to-teacher and learner-to-student interaction, more active learning and less passive listening, a greater sense of independence and

connectedness. On the other hand, Unger and Meiran (2020) conduct a research which reveals that learners present many responses, with most expressing anxiety toward online learning, disappointment regarding graduation ceremony, and online learning being different than standard in-class learning.

Many studies were conducted to explore the use of online learning during school closures because of COVID-19 epidemic. In this vein, Singh & Mishra (2009) confirm that students and teachers can develop their cognitive abilities through e-learning because learners can get countless information just by a click of a button. Thus, it can be said that this kind of learning promotes research which will help them in their professional career. Then, all students are equal; they are not treated differently based on race, religion and sex, etc. Rather online learning is beneficial for learners who face problems in commuting with those at a distant place. Additionally, online learning allows students to learn at their own pace without the time restriction and this enhances their concentration because they can take as much time as they need to complete their tasks.

According to Lochner et al (2016), when online learning is used as an additional method to traditional classes, students' learning experience will be enhanced and their engagement with the lectures will be increased. In their part, Alsaaty et al (2016) conducted a study in which they investigate and compare traditional learning with online learning. The results revealed that the majority of students get more information through face-to-face interaction and at the same time they express that their online experience was extremely positive even though they encountered challenges in using E-learning platforms.

In their part, Adnan and Anwar (2020) investigate the perceptions of Pakistani higher education learners towards online learning during this period (COVID-19). The results reveal that online learning cannot lead to the intended results in countries like Pakistan because learners and teachers do not have proper access to the internet and they lack both adequate training and the financial resources.

Last but not least, it is obvious that with the appearance of online learning, the world has become a small village as it provides opportunities to learn remotely. Learning technologies must be used appropriately because if they are used wrongly, they are likely to undermine the role technology and thus the failure of the learning process. The success or the failure of such kind of learning differs from country to another country as it was found that "online learning cannot be effective in underdeveloped countries, where a majority can't get access to the internet due to technical as well as economic issues (Mohammad, 2020).

2.2. Challenges of Transition to the Online Teaching of English during the Pandemic

With the sudden shift to online learning, several problems came to the surface since the situation led to a total reliance on online learning as the best option available which is absolutely different from face-to-face learning. In this vein, Claudiu et al (2020) declare that "this paradigm shift could generate changes in students' perception of this way of teaching and their perception might be different from the one found in studies previous to the pandemic". It is worth mentioning at this level that technology is a good slave but bad master. In spite of many advantages brought by this time of crisis in terms of learning, E-learning might decrease the learning process for students

and teachers as they came across many obstacles. Among the main issues and problems being discussed during this period is the lack of students' motivation (Elyas & Al-Grigri, 2014). In fact, using E-learning platforms has also some features that might be considered challenges in learners' process of learning, such as decreased motivation in students because many students have no idea about the use of technology, others do not have computers, others have problems of internet connection. Additionally, learners feel that they are isolated due to lack of physical presence of teachers and their classmates. Further, teachers are not available when students need their help to understand the lesson.

During the pandemic, many teachers and learners were not ready and have little or no prior experience and knowledge about teaching in the online environment which becomes necessary; they may lack enough experience in using technology and this may lead them not motivated because they are using online platforms for the first time.

Actually, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development listed some of the main challenges that universities have to take into account so that to face them in an effective way. Among them:

- ✓ Keeping an equilibrium between online courses, that could affect students health, them;
- ✓ Spending many hours in front of a screen;
- ✓ Analyzing and focusing on learner's emotional health;
- ✓ Supporting them to learn effectively;
- ✓ Taking into consideration that not all learners have access to the internet;
- ✓ Helping them and managing their access to technical devices;
- ✓ Last but not least, keeping the content of the course relevant.

On the other hand, Aboagye et al (2020) declare that learners also struggle with many challenges including:

- ✓ Lack of appropriate devices;
- ✓ Lack of communication and interaction with teachers and classmates;
- ✓ Connectivity;
- ✓ Accessibility.

Actually, the shift towards online learning and teaching according to Allen et al. (2020: 233):

Has led to significantly intensified workloads for staff as they work to not only move teaching content and materials into the online space, but also become sufficiently adept in navigating the requisite software.

Similarly, it is not surprising that learners faced many difficulties adapting to the abrupt and unplanned shift to online learning (Baticulon et al., 2021). It was not obvious if students were ready for real-time online learning or not (Tang et al., 2021).

With the aim of prompting deep understanding of how students and teachers see online courses according to their present experience, many students and teachers from the English department at Salhi Ahmed Naama University Centre were asked about the main challenges of online teaching and learning. The aim was to develop successful interventions and correct deficits in learning and at the same time understanding the limits of this type of learning and therefore helping to anticipate and adapt the effects of this sudden transition. Their perceptions were summarized as follow:

- ✓ The majority of students and teachers in Algeria are not technologically well prepared and ready for real-time online learning.
- ✓ Many students live in areas that do not have internet access.
- ✓ Poor internet connection in Algeria as the internet disconnects every 10 minutes or less which prevents the effectiveness of online classes.
- ✓ Many EFL teachers and students prefer traditional (face to face) classes.
- ✓ The lack of social interaction with teachers.
- ✓ Interaction with teacher in online classes is less than interaction in face to face classes.
- ✓ The current online courses that are delivered to students are unplanned and they have relatively little body of knowledge.
- ✓ In online courses, it becomes difficult for instructors to find new methods and strategies to encourage students to develop critical thinking skills and active learning.
- ✓ Some learners are lazy and less enthusiastic to participate in online learning.
- ✓ In online learning, technical problems were a significant impediment in comparison to traditional classes.
- ✓ Lack of time management and maintaining interest and motivation to learn effectively.
- ✓ Lack of support from university and administration, lack of ICT equipment, lack of appropriate devices, the misuse of technology and also lack of adequate training.
- ✓ Lack of relevant infrastructures and facilities that support online education.
- ✓ The accessibility, availability and use of technology in education are not widespread.
- ✓ Students living in regions with limited or no access to internet are negatively affected.
- ✓ While in traditional education, students are evaluated only by their teachers, in online learning, the evaluation may be done with the help of tools and systems.
- ✓ Some modules cannot be taught through online teaching.
- ✓ During the online teaching– learning process, there is a great lack of interaction and communication between teachers, students and their peers.
- ✓ Gaining knowledge only on a theoretical basis and ignoring practical side.
- ✓ Both teachers and students are not skillful enough in digital skills and in the use of many devices such as Laptops and internet.
- ✓ Both teachers and students sometimes feel disturbed due to the visit of family members during online lessons delivery and assessments.
- ✓ Last but not least, poor integration of technology can lead to poor communication, sense of isolation and a sense of frustration.

Actually, the transition to exclusive online learning which becomes an integral part of education system in the world during this time of crisis highly affected the educational process. Different applications and platforms started to be employed for sharing information and uploading documents with different formats. Thanks to the variety of technological tools that are available today; this led to the development of many types of distance learning. The above discussion focused on identifying the main difficulties that students and teachers encountered while learning online.

3.2. Suggestions and Recommendations to Implementing Effective Online Learning

During the pandemic crisis of COVID-19, higher institutions and universities entered a digital age as they started to rely on technology to deliver online lectures. Thus, teachers and students should positively exploit such circumstance by using ICTs tools not only in difficult times but also in normal situations as an

additional/alternative tool besides the physical presence of the teacher. Taking into account the aspects mentioned above and based on students' and teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards online courses, this part will offer some recommendations and solutions to have effective online classes that can improve and overcome the challenges of online learning. Thus, to minimize the major challenges in online learning faced by teachers and learners, especially in EFL learning, instructors and learners suggest solutions that can be applied:

- ✓ It is of utmost importance to use the videoconference function during courses instead of Moodle platform to balance the number of theory and practical tasks; without the physical presence of the teacher, students feel depressed.
- ✓ With the need for technical skills, both teachers and students should be trained enough to use technology in order to gradually improve their technical competencies, to make online courses more beneficial, to avoid spending too many hours in front of the computer, to help them adapt to the changes, to help them understand that the future of education in higher education systems may move towards online environment.
- ✓ Since online teaching is a new way to interact with students, the authorities should schedule a number of class training for both teachers and students in Algeria to facilitate using technology and therefore delivering the lectures effectively.
- ✓ In the online environment, the technological infrastructure must be improved to facilitate students' assimilation of information.
- ✓ Instructors are required to use various teaching tools for the sake of providing information in multiple ways (audio, video, text), and to figure out particular strategies to attract their interest and keep them focused during courses.
- ✓ Instructors should offer supplementary materials in a case when students encounter technical difficulties so that they could have access to the information.
- ✓ As far as the materials are concerned, learning materials should be interesting in every way possible.
- ✓ Collaborative and active learning is necessary to increase students' engagement and involvement in the educational process.
- ✓ In the online environment, teamwork is necessary to compensate for the lack of interaction.
- ✓ Thus, instructors must be flexible and creative in thinking and designing tasks that stimulate collaborative learning.
- ✓ It would be advisable to implement programs and tasks meant to improve interaction between students.
- ✓ Understanding the main elements of successful online program by incorporating both synchronous and asynchronous activities.
- ✓ Allocating more time for completing activities and tasks.
- ✓ Instructors are requested to quickly provide feedback on the activities solved by students to guarantee the success of online courses.
- ✓ Technological tools should be integrated appropriately.
- ✓ Both teachers and students must be provided with the necessary that facilitate the learning teaching process.
- ✓ Keeping the content of the lectures consistent and relevant to nurture the learning-teaching process.

- ✓ Effective teaching and learning processes should combine traditional and online classes; i.e. the physical presence of the teacher is also necessary.
- ✓ Many factors must be taken into consideration when preparing the online courses such as: social dimensions, the learning climate, controlling for age and gender.
- ✓ Last but not least, online platforms and applications such as Moodle could be developed and improved.

The emergence of COVID-19 led the authorities to suggest adopting alternatives to traditional learning methods to ensure that learners are not left without studying and to prevent the epidemic from spreading. In this respect, the traditional educational methods were replaced by e-learning. Actually, while traditional methods in education are more teacher-centered, with the development of E-learning, a shift towards a student-centered education can be obviously viewed. Consequently, to guarantee the success of online learning and enable access to a massive amount of data, some conditions should be met such as the availability of high flow speed of internet, learning materials (computers and smart phones) and social distance interaction through web-conferences using different applications such as Zoom or Google Meet applications. Moreover, teachers should take into account important aspects like students' motivation and autonomy. All in all, the above discussion presents some solutions for online learning problems during the Covid-19 pandemic with regard to both learners and instructors.

3. Conclusion

After the pandemic situation of Covid19, the traditional learning method of academic institutions across the whole world has been widely affected; there was an urgent need to figure out and develop strategies to save the field of education and to limit the chance of being infected by this dangerous disease. Before the pandemic, online courses were used only for the sake of facilitating the process of language learning that's why this type of learning became subjects of interest for many researchers. Now, all universities moved towards fully online learning with the help of electronic resources in which all the learning and teaching activities are carried online to continue with the academic work and keep students engaged during the pandemic without necessarily moving to university. Therefore, to continue teaching activities from March 2020, it becomes obligatory that all learners take fully online classes in which they are supposed to follow the lectures online; i.e. to download courses and assignments and provide tests and quizzes posted by their teachers by using applications and platforms like Moodle, Zoom, Google Meet and others. Accordingly, the current paper was designed to explore the instructors' and learners' perspectives on online learning in terms of its benefits, challenges and possible solutions to be adopted during and after the pandemic COVID-19 in the higher education in Algeria. The descriptive approach has been applied. Further research either theoretical or practical is needed to understand the difficulties, advantages, and challenges of e-learning in higher education by collecting data from a large sample of participants from different educational departments throughout Algeria about Algerian teachers' and students' perceptions of online learning during COVID19 lockdown and everything related to education. Such research should be mended rather than ended.

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