Exploring the Challenges of Distance-Learning and Virtual Teaching in the Algerian University: Case Study of the Students at the Department of English, Bouira University

استكشاف تحديات التعلم عن بعد والتعليم الافتراضي في الجامعة الجزائرية: دراسة حالة عند طلاب قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة البويرة

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Abstract (English):

The past worldly state of the confinement procedures due to the Covid pandemic has affected a variety of institutions which had to seek appropriate alternatives. Therefore, education had been altered where virtual learning was/ is used. Overwhelmingly, teachers and learners have encountered problems while shifting to online learning. This paper aims at exploring those hindrances to unveil its reality; a survey questionnaire is used at the University of Bouira -Algeria- to diagnose and suggest appropriate solutions. The obtained results demonstrate the obstacles the students face while joining online classes. The results have also confirmed the benefits of student autonomy.

Keywords: Covid pandemic; challenges; virtual learning; online teaching; solutions.

ملخص باللغة العربية

لقد أثرت الحالة العالمية السابقة لإجراءات الحجر الصحي بسبب جائحة كوفيد على مجموعة متنوعة من المؤسسات التي اضطرت إلى البحث عن بدائل مناسبة. لذلك ، تم تغيير التعليم حيث تم / يتم استخدام التعلم الافتراضي. واجه الاساتذة و الطلبة مشاكل عدة أثناء الانتقال إلى التعليم الالكتروني. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى استكشاف تلك العقبات للكشف عن واقعها؛ وتم استخدام استبيان في جامعة البويرة - الجزائر - لتشخيص واقتراح الحلول المناسبة. تظهر النتائج التي تم الحصول عليها العقبات التي يوجهها الطلاب أثناء الانضمام إلى الفصول الدراسية عبر الإنترنت. وقد أكدت النتائج أيضا فوائد تحقيق استقلالية الطلاب.

كلمات مفتاحية: جائحة كوفيد؛ التحدّيات؛ التعلم الافتراضي؛ التعليم عبر الانترنت؛ الحلول.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The past worldly state of repeated confinement procedures by the governments as a result to the Covid pandemic have affected a variety of institutions which had to abruptly seek an alternative way for delivering and receiving the courses through virtual presence and online learning. This has resulted in quite crucial and obligatory *student autonomy.* According to Davidson and Devaux (2021), there is substantial evidence to suggest that a relationship exists between interaction, reflection and learning in online and distance education.

According to Mulungye (2020), virtual learning refers to the process of learning through the use of internet and its hardware devices such computers, tablets, laptops, mobile phones and computer software (programs) in an online environment inside or outside classroom organization. It can take place in real time (synchronous) or self-paced (asynchronous). In this respect, McIsaac and Gunawardena (2004) consider distance education as a crucial concept in mainstream education. They explain that distance education is a structured learning process which enables both teachers and students to employ their knowledge despite the distance that separates them through a variety of models such as hybrid learning systems, flexible, or network ones. This is also confirmed by Afolabi (2021) who has pinpointed that "...*online learning allows real time participation in online classes in spite of the differences in the physical locations of course participants.*"

Moreover, it is well-known that virtual learning environment is a web-based platform for online learning which allows access to learning materials like tutorials, recorded lectures, weblinks, emails, audio and video clips. In the same vein here, even virtual learning community has become a crucial term to frame the online instruction process. It refers to online classroom or the group of learners who share similar interests that gathered them online for the purpose of learning.

In order to build up a successful virtual learning environment, it is mandatory to provide certain tools which are a combination of hardware and software. Concurrently, chief components of virtual learning are required to establish an evident environment where electronic communication like chat, web publishing, email, blogs and wikis are employed in curriculum mapping and planning. This latter involves breaking a curriculum into assignable and assessable sections that would allow students' achievement tracking as well as teacher and learner online communication through audio or video conferencing under the umbrella of content management which is creation, storage, access to and use of learning resources.

In the light of the aforementioned problematic, two questions have been set forth for investigation in the framework of the study in hand:

- To what extent has the Corona pandemic affected the current Algerian University system of higher education?

- Has the Algerian University succeeded in seeking and applying an alternative way for delivering and receiving the courses?

While the above raised questions are waiting for insightful and deep reflections towards settling objective and quantitative answers, the following hypothesis has been introduced in the terrain of study:

- The Algerian University has not witnessed any success in seeking and applying an alternative way for delivering and receiving the courses.

2. Pros and cons of employing distance- learning

According to Reusser, K (1993): "...*computer environments should be seen as mind-extending or catalysing tools for intelligent and volitional learners and virtually autonomous problem solvers"; They should provide stimulating and facilitating structures in order to promote meaning construction activities, such as planning, representation and reflection.*"

2.1. Pros of distance-learning

Covid pandemic has enormously influenced the world and education is no exception. The process of shifting to online teaching has many unavoidable pros and cons. To begin with, online education and blended learning play a significant role in fostering learners' competencies and increasing their imagination, creativity and self-awareness. (Sun and Chen, 2016). Other advantages can be listed below:

- Ensuring the involvement and accessibility to students who are geographically distant as long as they can log in. It allows them to remain at home and still be taught.

- Reduced cost: Students are relieved from the expenses of transportation and accommodation while Institutions are endowed with a decreased cost of the training, printing, and the delivery of learning materials.

- Time management: several sessions are combined and easily delivered as one, hence saving time where both students and teachers/trainers save a lot of time as they hardly travel to far institutions.

• Students are not intimidated by their colleagues when it comes to online classroom; they would feel freer to interact with their teacher from behind the screen.

• Quick feedback: Students get almost immediate feedback on tests since assessment tools are automated.

• Students are able to acquire digital skills especially on online learning technology. It provides them with the necessary training of mastering tech-tools as a preparation for the work market.

• Students and teachers benefit from the access to online resources of information, hence acquiring worldwide exposure as well as assistance in the assignments by doing documentary research.

• Getting used to the online communication as part of training for the world of work. This later is witnessing an enormous and quick adaptation of the new post pandemic procedures.

2.2. Cons of distance-learning:

Inevitably, it is quite noticeable that the Covid outbreak came up with remarkable changes in society. Algeria, for instance, responded to the pandemic by a partial lockdown where shops, mosques and various institutions like schools and universities were commanded to a temporary closure. To illustrate, the Ministry of Religious Affairs had decided to close mosques in Algeria in order to limit people's contact for the sake of stopping the spread of the virus among Algerian citizens (Nach, 2020).

3. Challenges Facing the Implementation of Virtual Learning Platforms

According to a report, "*Barriers and Opportunities of E-Learning Implementation in Iraq*" by *Ahmed Al-Azawei, et Al* (2016), the implementation of Virtual learning in developed countries have reached advanced stages while it was in its infancy stages in many developing countries. Some of the challenges that hinder its implementation are:

• The poor infrastructure within the developing countries especially connectivity to the internet and electricity. The World Bank report, "Study of Virtual Schools around the World" concludes that the fewness of the number of virtual schools is attributed to lack of reliable power and internet.

• The high poverty level where world report on poverty level in the developing world explains that many people live below a dollar a day. This state obviously limits

learners from purchasing the required equipment for virtual learning such as computers.

- The initial cost of purchasing the hardware and software and its programs as well as maintaining them is high for starters. To add, the high cost of education has put off many of those yearning for education.

- Moreover, the lack of institutional support is a challenging obstacle for virtual learning; According to a study by Ali and Magalhaes (2008), the majority of virtual learners drop at early stages due to lack of support, guidance and motivation from the institution they are enrolled in.

- The culture of people or the way people live also affects the previously mentioned process; in reality, their beliefs affect how they learn and study, as Abdelraheem (2006) pointed out that culture of people, like in many Arabic countries, prevent women from advancing in education.

- Low I.C.T skills proficiency amongst teachers and targeted learners. According to a report published by Mutisya D.N and Makokha G. L (2016) , E-learning and Digital media journal has shown that teachers did not have confidence while using ICT for teaching; they explained the level of IT training as shown in the chart below:
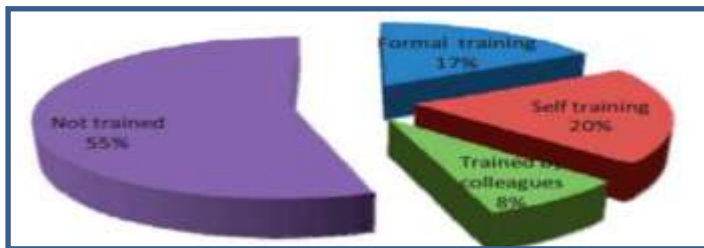
Source: Mutisya D.N and Makokha G. L (2016)

Fig (1): Level of ICT Competency among teachers. (Courtesy)

As demonstrated above, the percentage (55%) cannot be ignored as it reflects an unavoidable number of teachers and their unpreparedness, as they experience an irrational fear towards new technology, including smartphones, computers, artificial intelligence, and other forms of modern devices and technologies. This aversion often affects people who lack knowledge or have misconceptions about technology; consequently, it may lead to 'technophobia' which requires a careful, well- organized and planned training by the ministry of

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higher education. Fortunately, this training had been adopted and launched in the Algerian universities since 2021, and it has affected quite positively the majority of teachers.

4.   Challenges the Algerian University has Faced with the Implementation of Virtual Learning

The situation in Algeria is not very different from countries such as Ghana, Turkey, and India. Online education using a variety of platforms such as Google classroom or Zoom application for videoconferencing is not a novel way of teaching. Yet, when integrating those technologies in the classroom, many educators have not expressed a broad embracement. This makes the educational reforms very challenging especially in an alarming way due to the present challenges.

In this respect, not only educators, but also students have expressed poor responses especially on fee payments, considering that many are living hand to mouth; concurrently, this would result in poor attendance to classes by lecturers and students, who might be engaged with home affairs and shortage of communication between the institution and students living in rural areas with weak network. Furthermore, the lack of adequate facilities like computers to support all the virtual staff has resulted in an increased number of dropouts; many students might abandon studies and venture in business while some others get married.

Finally, all of the above mentioned obstacle would surely bring about high examination failure; this is because students will hardly get time for books, many might not be able to manage their time appropriately.

5.   DATA COLLECTION METHOD

This research topic inquiries into multiple and diverse impacts of the Covid 19 pandemic on higher education within various international contexts as numerous researchers navigate new educational and social realities. The crisis has led educators seek not only quick reactions to the nature of these immediate changes, but also studies the possible impacts of these changes and what they could have brought beyond the current movement of the uncertain educational future after the pandemic. Indeed, the stakeholders had to question basic premises about the higher educational system which was taken for granted under scrutiny, including face-to- face classes, instructional pedagogy, discrepancy in resources and the very nature of school itself. A rapid radical reshaping of educational institutions was demanded, as these moments of

collective trauma provide opportunities, as described by Klein (2007) *"to engage in radical social and economic engineering."*

As for the local context, a first step of identifying the state of online-education during the Covid pandemic was needed. Therefore, an exploratory study has been conducted to collect quantitative data from different Algerian students through a questionnaire intending to discern and analyse their experiences and feedback on the primary conditions they have lived through due to the abrupt shift to online-learning in higher education.

The questionnaire was designed and sent to a total of 83 students at the department of English at the University of Bouira (center of Algeria). It has consisted of seven items (see the appendix below) serving in the data and results that have been collected. However, due to the alarming situation and unpreparedness for the shift to online-learning, the time of the achievement of the study was limited which explains the small size of the sample compared to the whole population.

6. DATA RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The obtained results demonstrate the multiple obstacles facing the majority of the students in Algeria while having to join online classes as a measure taken during the confinement of the Covid pandemic. A detailed analysis of the gleaned results is displayed in the following section:

- **The scope of online-teaching before the pandemic:**

The results indicate that only a number of classes used to be taught through the blended learning method where students attend lectures and courses, and teachers would e-mail them later with either books for more research or assignments to be also sent via e-mail to their teachers. Students provided us with feedback about some teachers against using technology; this is probably due to technophobia and adhering to the traditional method of delivering lessons being a safe zone for them.

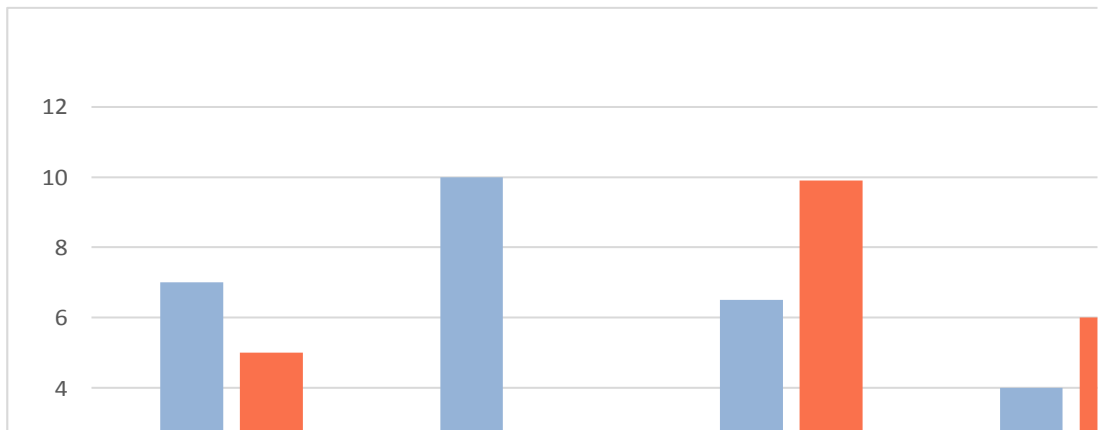- **Materials used for classes before and after the pandemic**:

Fig (2): Students use of the different tools and materials before and during the pandemic

The results show clearly the impact on the ways used for learning which were dependent on physical tools like worksheet and printouts given during classes, as well as books of the institute's library, whereas during the pandemic, lectures were delivered through videoconferencing for the first time which was a big challenge for all parties (administration, teachers and students). Students became more dependent on online resources such as pdf books and social apps (particularly Facebook) than they used to be as they could use the latter for communicating, peer work, and sharing data about their study).

- **Types of distance-learning during the confinement:**

As per the participants, teachers have used different ways to deliver their courses, fundamental units were synchronously lectured via videoconferencing (using Zoom or Google Meet), and the exam was also given online within limited time for students to hand it out while the remaining units' lectures were shared on Moodle simply with more recommendations via email in some cases, and their exams were research papers sent in e-mails as well.
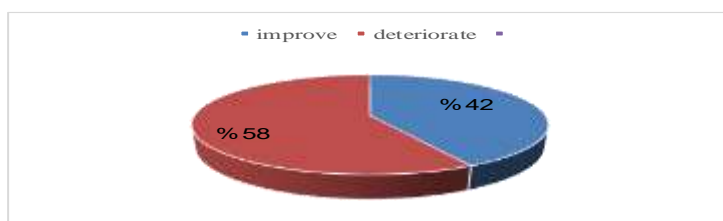
- **Students' level using English:**

Fig (3): Students' level in communication using English

A number of students revealed that they had a better chance to communicate using English because they had access to language or chat websites where they could meet native speakers rather than being limited within the classroom, as well as being independent because of being left alone thus getting more focused. However, the majority of students reported a negative feedback in this regard which can be traced back to a number of causes such as weak network, lack or absence of basic devices (computer/laptop and internet subscription) due to the high price that students cannot afford considering them living hand to mouth, demotivation being away of the university environment, social hinders such as the nature of the community where it is not welcomed to perceive the girl talking to foreigners, besides being busy with home affairs or jobs which reduced their practice time significantly.

- **The impact of the confinement on practising English**

Students who delineated that they had a better chance with English language practice during the lockdown said that they could use their computers more for research; they had more time online which gave them an opportunity to use the virtual resources which they could not access when they were in the university campus due to the limited expanses, they can afford living away of their homes which cannot cover internet subscriptions as well as having quite a troublesome network and instability in coverage.

- **Hurdles during online classes**

Students have complained about several difficulties that hindered them from reaching their goals in practising the language and improving their level in English; the following points mention the most common ones:

- Lack of motivation.
- Technical issues such as poor internet connectivity and power.
- Limited communication skill acquisition.

It appeared that hindrances were more than what students themselves mentioned which we can add in what follows:

- Learner and teacher's unpreparedness and technophobia.
- Increased dropout rate due to the feeling of disconnection (Rovai, 2002)
- Safety and security, ranging from devices to learning software programs.
- Difficulty to control plagiarism and online examination cheating.

7. **The Pedagogical Gaps that should be Addressed for an Effective Implementation of Virtual Learning**

Both teachers and students are nominated to a necessary training on how to use technology for education; alignment of online learning materials with the technological tools should be used during traditional mode of learning, as well as making sure they are available and accessible.

Furthermore, setting up central communication centers and appropriate developing tools for an easy planning and delivery of online courses for the students would surely guarantee a motivation towards online discussions. After all, availing affordable technological tools such as free software and low-cost hardware have an effective support for both teachers in teaching and learners in learning online.

- **Technological Gaps**

Apparently, there is fluctuating internet connectivity both for teachers and students in various places, with the one available being too slow. Therefore, an urgent need for improvement on high bandwidth and a strong internet connection has to be provided. Inevitably, homes — especially in remote areas — need to be connected to a more reliable source of power, as well as connecting to the main grid to lower the cost of solar panels and batteries for home online learners. The cost of internet installation is too high for students; therefore, the authorities are urged to reduce taxes on internet as well as connect every small market with high-capacity fiber network.

- **Legal Gaps**

Security and data privacy are bound to a common interrogation which targets whether students' personal information is handled carefully especially during the online validation of identity; questions are raised about the protection of data from external access and hacking risks where any institution's online content requires security to protect it from malwares and illegal vendors who might attack or modify data or sites.

On another side, there is also the risk of misuse of data; that is whether there is a legal contract of agreement between the students and the institution to prevent using the data for other purposes other than those bided by the online learning/ teaching process.

Even copyright and plagiarism are a major issue to be tackled; copying other persons' work and using it for online teaching is a major concern. Photo copying materials denies authors market for their products. Same remark is addressed to labour issues where teachers always advance questions regarding their working condition, remuneration and protection which are perceived as a short cut to cheap labour.

- **Social Gaps**

The first and firmest issue to be addressed is technophobia or the abnormal fear of technology that causes a lack of efficiency. Most of the students and teachers fear because they have little knowledge about it; thus, they need to be trained first. This training must not undermine the resistance to adaptability where methods from the face-to-face to virtual learning form a struggle for students with fear of social segregation and the extrinsic drives.

Moreover, technical issues caused by being located in remote areas where there is no reliable source of power and internet connection which incapacitates virtual learning cause students to easily drop out. This will clearly result in a high level of unemployment which reduces the affordability of education due to financial constraints, considering that virtual learning community is mostly made of adults.

Another social issue is that lack of interest, self-motivation and commitment where most learners enroll but fail to dedicate their time, energy and attention to the virtual learning. This is due to other commitments at home like family, business and leisure, and inability to realize its importance.

8. CONCLUSION

The Covid pandemic has changed education where all teachers were forced to quickly shift from their classical teaching way to online teaching. This quick change was hindered by a number of obstacles and challenges. Certainly, there is a high hope in the virtual learning at the University Bouira to progress considering the measures the institution is taking, but it is not possible for the mode of learning to replace the traditional one considering the following factors:

- Students and lecturers' unpreparedness, as the two parties have not been fully orientated on the virtual learning earlier. The university might have organized for a virtual training, but only a few attended, with the trainer doing it hurriedly.

- Lack of adequate technological tools by the university; the institution has few computers which can hardly be used by all lecturers. There are no webcams and reliable projectors to the virtual lecturers.

- Devices needed are too expensive for students to purchase especially during this time when everybody is losing their job. Most of the students live in rural areas where there is no reliable source of power and internet connection is very poor to support video conferencing.

- Lecturers are too overloaded with normal classes and research, assigning the virtual ones without clear guidelines on payment is a call for crises.

Despite those factors on the whole world, there is a bright side of the pandemic which concerns upgrading online education (Thomas and Rogers, 2020). Therefore, Algeria has coped up with an unavoidable wave of changes and prepared itself for the after-crisis phase in higher education. Technologies and different digital resources have been used more frequently in the Algerian classroom concerning the integration and the elevation of online learning within the university itself. New reforms were taken into consideration in the University of Bouira to guarantee the adaptation of a new persistent path towards improving virtual learning.

Because of the application of this study and the repeated quizzes distributed by the TUTORAT's cell, the new e learning platform has been updated several times to meet both teachers' and learners' needs. Moreover, all of the faculties have provided special rooms with cameras and filming materials for the processing of videoconferencing to facilitate for the teachers who experience some difficulties in saving, editing and producing their videos on the platform. Meanwhile, all the processes were conducted in a transparency and a welcoming cooperative atmosphere under the supervision, guidance and control of well- experienced programmers who were pinpointed by the head of the university; each faculty had an admin that has created accompanied Facebook groups which guide both students and teachers to have an interrelated exchange of knowledge.

Nevertheless, those reforms have necessitated crucial collaboration and inter-connectivity among teachers, students, syllabi designers and government authorities. This latter in precision has the thickest duties of furnishing all of the Algerian schools and universities with the needed material to catalyse better application of distance learning. Above all; education is the skeleton of every nation to accomplish improvement of life quality with social and economic maintenance.

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APPENDIX:

The Questionnaire

- Place: Department of English Language — University of Bouira.
- Time: Monday, October 11th, 2021.
- Number of participants: 83 students
- Tool implied: a questionnaire
- Types of questions: yes/no Q / MCQ / Open- ended questions.

The Questions:

- Have your teachers applied blended learning before the pandemic? (face-to-face + lectures or homework via e-mail)

- All classes - Many classes   - Some classes   - No class
- What were the materials used for classes before the pandemic and after the pandemic?

Before the pandemic	After the pandemic
• Books	• Books
• Printouts / Worksheet	• Printouts / Worksheet
• YouTube	• YouTube
• Phone and Laptop	• Phone and Laptop
• Social apps	• Social apps
• Zoom / Google Meet	• Zoom / Google Meet

- During the confinement, did you experience distance-learning:
    - Synchronously
    - Asynchronously
    - Both ways
- Did your level in communication in English:
    - Improve   - deteriorate
- Did your pronunciation:
    - Improve   - deteriorate
- How did the confinement give you a better opportunity to practise English since it is done online?
- What are the difficulties you have experienced during the online classes?