

TRANSITIONING TO ONLINE LEARNING DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF AIN TEMOUCHENT UNIVERSITY

LA TRANSITION VERS L'APPRENTISSAGE EN LIGNE PENDANT LA PANDÉMIE DU COVID-19: LE CAS DE L'UNIVERSITÉ D'AIN TÉMOUCHENT

Hynd KAID SLIMANE¹

Belhadj Bouchaib University -Ain Temouchent / Algeria
kshynd@gmail.com

Abstract : *Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the educational system has been disrupted worldwide ; it has changed dramatically and witnessed the emergence of online teaching and learning via digital platforms. Consequently, educators are trying to re-shape their way of teaching moving from face-to-face interactions towards virtual ones. As in other countries, in Algeria, the pandemic has affected the educational system. In higher education, for example, a distinctive rise of e-learning has been noticed whereby teaching is undertaken on digital platforms. Yet, there are various challenges to overcome since many teachers and students still struggle to take part in the digital teaching and learning process. For this purpose, a case study research consisting of students and teachers from the university of Ain Temouchent has been chosen. Multiple research instruments were used including a students' questionnaire and a teachers' interview. Thus, this paper attempts to highlight the teachers and students' perceptions on online teaching-learning process, to examine the challenges faced by them and to provide some strategies for effective digital educational practices.*

Keywords : *Online teaching/ learning, COVID-19, Higher Education, Digital practices*

Résumé : *En raison de la pandémie du COVID-19, le système éducatif a été perturbé dans le monde entier ; il a radicalement changé et a vu l'émergence de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage en ligne via des plateformes numériques. Par conséquent, les éducateurs tentent de remodeler leur façon d'enseigner en passant des interactions face-à-face aux interactions virtuelles. Comme d'autres pays, en Algérie, la pandémie a affecté le système éducatif. Dans l'enseignement supérieur, par exemple, on a remarqué une augmentation distinctive de l'apprentissage en ligne, l'enseignement étant assuré sur des plateformes numériques. Pourtant, divers défis restent à relever car de nombreux enseignants et étudiants peinent à participer au processus d'enseignement et d'apprentissage numérique. A cet effet, une étude de cas composée d'étudiants et d'enseignants de l'université d'Ain Témouchent a été choisie. Plusieurs instruments de recherche ont été utilisés, notamment un questionnaire pour les étudiants et un entretien avec les enseignants. Ainsi, cet article tente de mettre en évidence les perceptions des enseignants et des étudiants sur le processus d'enseignement et d'apprentissage en ligne, d'examiner les défis auxquels ils sont confrontés et de proposer des stratégies pour des pratiques éducatives numériques efficaces.*

Mots-clés : *Enseignement / apprentissage en ligne, COVID-19, enseignement supérieur, pratiques numériques*

* * *

¹ Corresponding author: Hynd KAID SLIMANE, kshynd@gmail.com

E-learning, also called online learning is a new kind of education in which the main components lie on the physical separation of teachers and students during the instruction process and the use of various up-dated technologies that facilitate student-teacher interaction. Merriam Webster Learner's Dictionary defines distance learning as, "*a method of study where teachers and students do not meet in a classroom but use the Internet, e-mail, mail, etc., to have classes.*" In other words, distance learning occurs when students do communicate but are separated from teachers and peers. According to Newby, Stepich, Lehman and Russell distance learning is "*an organized instructional program in which teacher and learners are physically separated*" (Stepich, 2000: 210). In other words, the learning/ teaching process does not occur in the classroom having a face-to-face contact but rather virtually. Distance learning and its emergence in computer technologies has offered many perspectives to the field of education, it has helped both teachers and learners to interact via various applications though they are separated by space. It is worth mentioning that time is no longer a constraint since compressed video which is delivered in real time is the fastest growing means of distance learning today. Additionally, e-learning could be used as a multimedia support for education since according to Rossiter « *there is a pressing requirement to understand better the nature of e-learning, as an educational innovation, and to evolve contextually derived frameworks for change which align with organisational culture and practice* ». (Rossiter, 2007: 93) Thus, many institutions have started to integrate internet technologies in teaching. All in all, it is asserted that recently, distance learning and its emergence in computer technologies has offered many perspectives to the field of education.

As this paper's target is to shed some light on the current problems encountered by teachers and learners of English in distance learning/teaching context in Algeria, more specifically in Higher education, this inquiry also tries to answer the following research questions :

- 1- Is online teaching in Algeria as effective as it seems to be ?
- 2- Are students motivated in online learning ?
- 3- Does e-learning improve the students' language skills ?

The previous questions lead to the formulation of the following hypotheses :

- a- Since most of the teachers' proficiency in using online techniques is not very high and because of their lack in ICT training, online teaching in Algeria is not very developed and it is less effective than the traditional education methods.
- b- Students show a high motivation in online learning.
- c- Yes, e-learning help students improve their language skills.

1. Online Teaching Techniques and Approaches

Online teaching is different from traditional classroom teaching The former model focsses on an interactive learning environment, designed to stimulate dialogue between teachers and students and among students themselves, where as the latter requires both teachers and students to take active roles. Distance learning works by using computers, tablets,

phones and the internet in general. Student can study from remote locations such as home rather than attending lectures at the university. It's a flexible and a suitable solution for fitting higher education. Lederman (2020) asserts that due to the COVID-19 crisis teachers and students both find themselves in the situation where they felt compelled to embrace the digital academic experience as the main target of the online teaching-learning process.

The innovative methods of teaching strategies that will help teachers in their teaching process are the use of the internet and the Web-based Instruction.

- 1- The internet : It is a tool used in the learning/teaching process. Thanks to it, learners can acquire the up-dated assigned topics.
- 2- The Web-based Instruction (WBI) : "*It is defined as any form of innovative approach for delivering instruction to a remote audience in which the web is included as a tool*" (Relan & Gillali : 1997). There are many websites which have been developed up today in order to provide students with access to various instructional resources from a distance. The most used Web models of learning according to Casey (1998) are :
 - a- The Web as a Source of Information : This is the simplest use of the Web and is considered as being a convenient place to store information about the courses.
 - b- The Web as Electronic Book : Students use the screen in order to read materials, activate multimedia demonstrations, and take self-correcting quizzes or any other activities.
 - c- The Web as a Teacher : In this case, some Web-based courses encompass a kind of personal communication between students via emails or chat rooms.
 - d- The Web as a Communication Medium between Teacher and Students : In this situation, students learn from the teacher « through » the Web and not « from » the Web. In other words, the web, acts as the communication medium for interaction. Thus, this kind of interaction aims to mirror a face-to-face learning environment with which the students will be able to establish some form of human relationship with the teacher (Ruksasuk : 1999).
- 3- Seminars : Their aim is to interact and students are asked to take part in them.
- 4- Virtual Laboratories : They represent a range of equipment on-screen and may offer a very high level of interactivity. Thus, training through audiovisual aids can have a very positive outcome in the learning/ teaching process.
- 5- Telematic Education : It enables students to access in the teaching materials at a more flexible time, place and pace, and outcomes in various flexible learning opportunities.

2. Types of Distance Learning

1. ***Synchronous distance learning*** : This occurs when the learning process occurs at the same time with the delivery of the lecture.
2. ***Asynchronous distance learning*** : This happens at a different time.
3. ***Hybrid distance learning*** : This kind of learning is an educational paradigm where some students attend class in-person, while others join the class virtually from

home. Thus, teachers have to teach remote and in-person students at the same time using ICT tools like video conferencing.

4. **Electronic learning** : Also called e-learning, online learning or distance learning. It refers to a learning system that can be obtained through the internet using an electronic device such as computers or any other digital device.

3. The Advantages and the Disadvantages of Online Learning

Online learning is one of the prominent revolutions in contemporary education. It has contributed in making a huge change in the educational system, more importantly in Higher Education and has also opened great opportunities for students and teachers as well. The best thing about online learning is that students can learn in a relaxed manner. Additionally, unlike classroom teaching, with e-learning students can access the content for an unlimited number of times. In other words, the students have become self-directed learners and they learn asynchronously at any time of the day. To sum up, online learning makes the learning process simple and convenient in order to keep building vital skills for the future.

Though online learning has many advantages, it also has some drawbacks in the sense that it may create a sense of isolation for students in front of their screens. Thus, online learning means more screen-time which may cause some health issues. In order to gain benefit from online learning, students have to be self-disciplined in respecting the time in front of their screens. In addition, teachers have to follow some effective trainings in using ICT tools.

4. Problems of Distance Learning

In spite of the various advantages of e-learning, there are many other disadvantages in using it, among them are the problem of quality instruction, the misuse of the new technology. « *technology does not teach students; effective teachers do* ».(Palloff and Pratt, 2000 : 4) So, the point is that the problem doesn't lie in technology itself, but in how it is used in the design and the delivery of lectures. According to some researches made in the field, it has been noticed that most of the time, teachers do not design their lessons to take advantage of the technology presented as they used to do in traditional classes and this may negatively affect the quality of instruction provided to students. In addition, another issue arises from the fact that most of teachers lack training in using such technology, the reason for which they have to be trained to use distance learning technology in order to reach satisfactory results. Another problem in distance learning can be caused by the malfunction of the equipment which can inhibit the effectiveness of distance learning. For example, if a problem happens in a class, or if the connection is deficient, everything will come to a standstill and thus, the learning process is then interrupted. As a result, the whole course may be affected.

5. ICT Use In Higher Education in Algeria

In order to alter the development of its educational system, Algeria is giving importance to ICT-related human resources through which it is trying to pave the road for an ICT policy

framework. A number of initiatives have been adopted especially during the pandemic Covid-9 in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning. They are as follows :

- Foster the development of e-learning resources.
- Promote the development of integrated e-learning curriculum to support ICT in Higher Education.
- Promote distance education and virtual institutions.
- Provide affordable infrastructure in order to facilitate the inculcation of knowledge and skill through different e-learning platforms.

In the same vein and in order to facilitate the entry of Algeria into the information society, the following national ICT initiatives have been designed:²

- The project of the Ministry of Education to equip all schools with computers by 2005
- The distance education project
- The virtual university project
- The research network to be put in place by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.

6. Methodology

To explore teachers' and students' attitudes towards e-learning in Higher Education, the researcher has opted for an exploratory case study and used a quantitative and a qualitative exploration. An online questionnaire is sent to students of English at Ain Temouchent University. For the quantitative study, the sample population consists of sixty (60) Master students from the department of English. Throughout the questionnaire we also aim at providing a comprehensive analysis and in-depth interpretation of the collected data. Concerning the qualitative investigation, a teachers' interview is used. Five (5) structured questions are asked to ten (10) teachers from the department of English in the same university.

6.1. The Students' Questionnaire

(Only the most important questions are analysed in this part, for the others, the results are interpreted in the discussion).

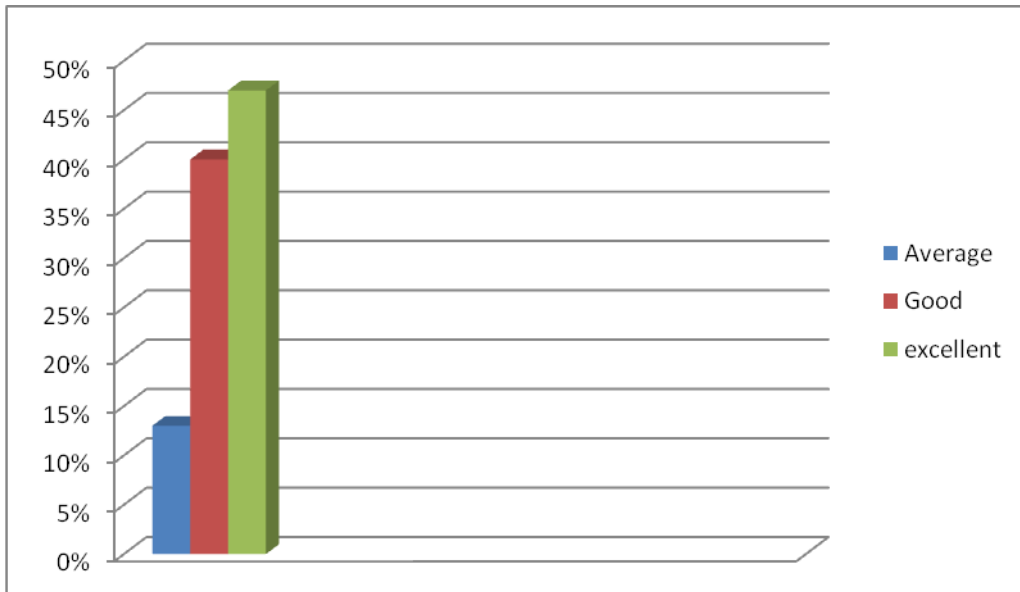
Q1 : What is your proficiency in using ICT ?

Table1 : *Students' Proficiency in Using ICT*

Answers	Weak	Average	Good	Excellent
Number	00	8	24	28
Percentage	00%	13%	40%	47%

Figure1 : Students' Proficiency in Using ICT

² Contribution de l'Algérie à la réunion préparatoire africaine du Sommet mondial de la Société de l'information, Bamako, du 28 au 30 mai 2002.



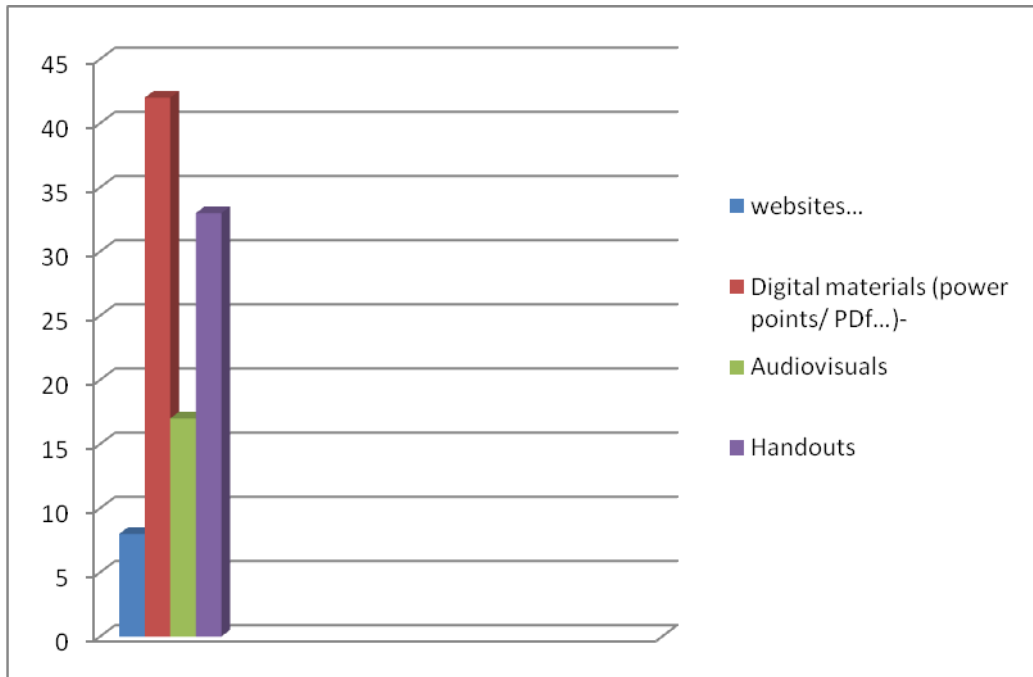
The results show that most of students (47 %) assert that their mastery in using ICT is excellent. In addition, (40 %) of them claim to be good and (13%) think that they are average in such a field. It is worth mentioning that no student has a weak level, this means that students are considered as being proficient in using ICT materials since they are considered as the digitalized generation.

Q2 : Which kind of aids are provided to you by your teacher in distance learning ?

Table 2 : Kinds of aids provided by teachers in distance learning

Answers	websites...	Digital materials (power points/ Pdf...)-	Audiovisuals	Handouts
Number	5	25	10	20
Percentage	8%	42%	17%	33%

Figure 2 : Kinds of aids provided by teachers in distance learning



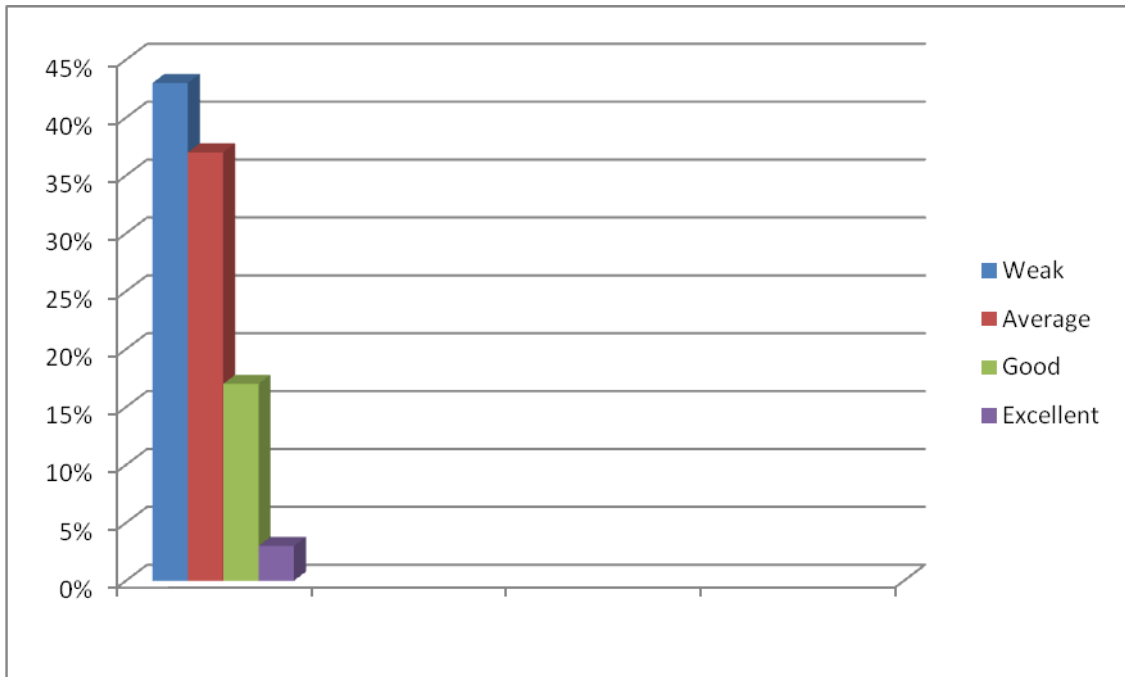
As shown in the table above, according to (42%) of the students, the first aid provided by teachers in distance learning are digital materials such as Power Points, PDFs,The second one with a score of (33%) being handouts for lectures. In the third position (17%) of respondents assert that teachers rely on audiovisuals in delivering the lectures and finally, only (8%) of them declare that websites are also used by their teachers.

Q3 : How do you evaluate your teacher’s methods in online education ?

Table 3 : Students’ evaluation of their teachers’ online education methods

Answers	Weak	Average	Good	Excellent
Number	26	22	10	02
Percentage	43%	37%	17%	3%

Figure 3 : Students’ evaluation of their teachers’ online education methods



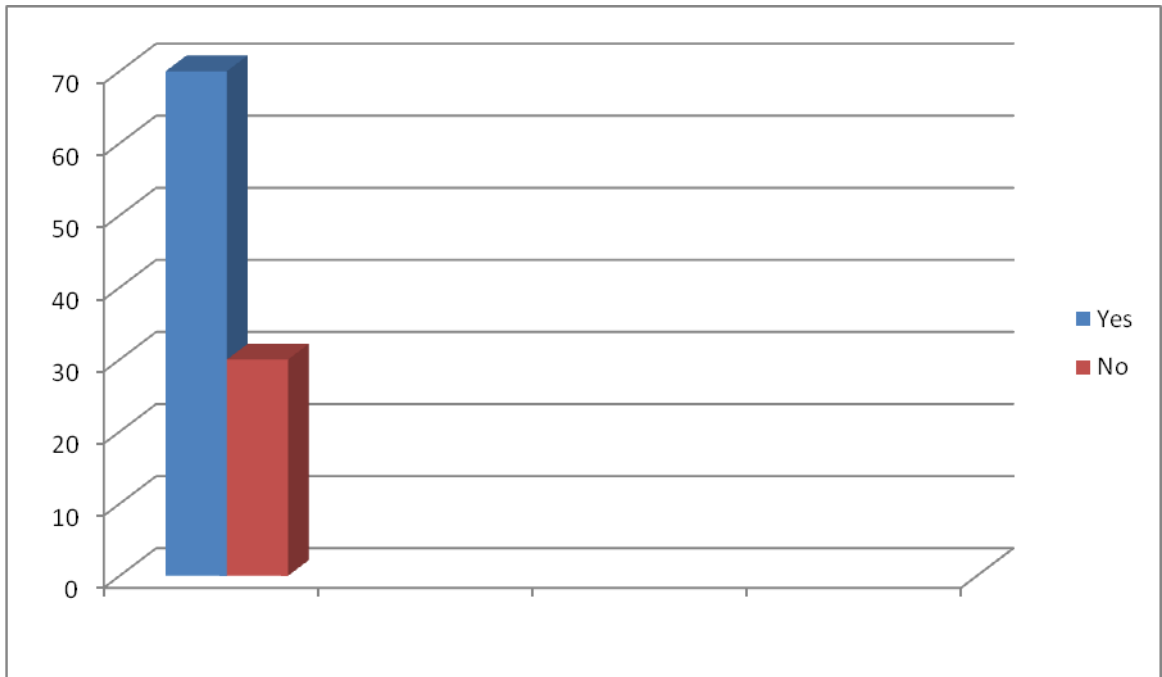
This table illustrates that the majority of the respondents (43%) evaluate their teachers' online education method as being weak, in other words, most of them are not satisfied by the way their teachers are delivering the lectures. Additionally, (37%) of them assert that it is average, they that the methods used by their teachers are to some extent ineffective. A small number of informants who represent (17%) show a favourable answer and only a very small number of them with a percentage of (3%) agree on the fact that their teachers' methods is effective.

Q4 : Does e-learning help you improve your English language skills ?

Table 4 : Students' Perceptions on e-learning and their improvement in English language skills

Answers	Yes	No
Number	42	18
Percentage	70%	30%

Figure 4 : Students' Perceptions on e-learning and their improvement in English language skills



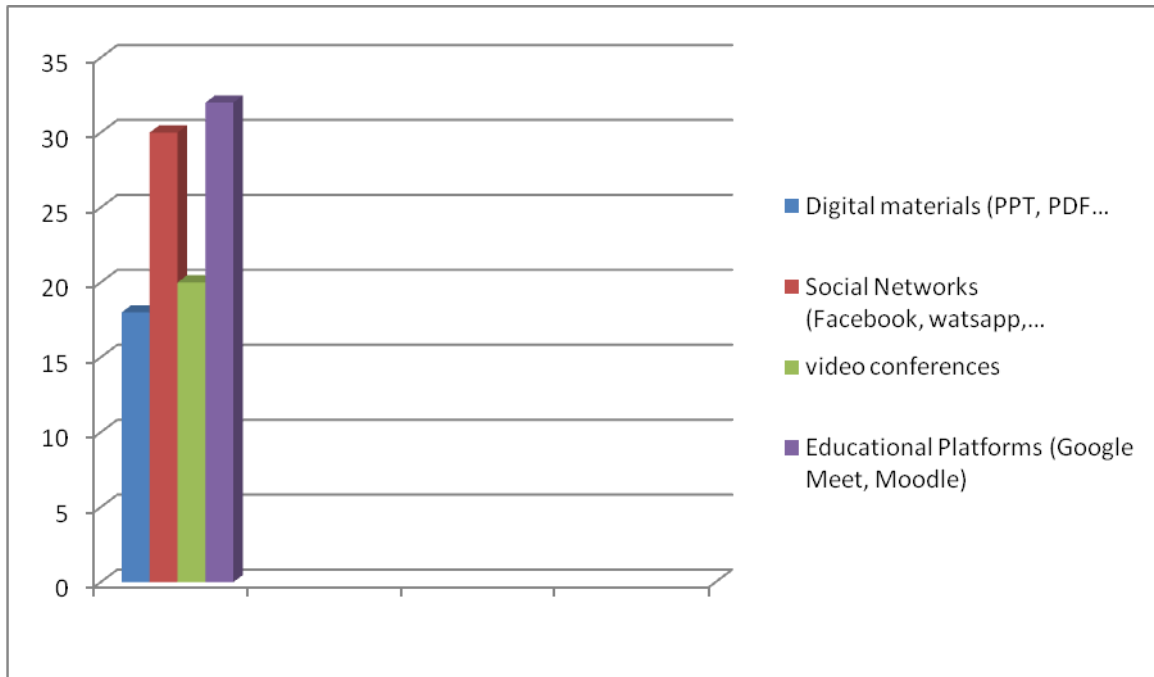
The collected data show that most students assert that e-learning improves their English language skills with a total percentage of (70%). It can be said that they show positive attitudes towards e-learning process in learning English. Contrarily, (30%) of the informants do not agree with this fact since they show negative attitudes since they may be accustomed to the traditional classes and face-to-face interaction with their teachers. As a result, though most of the students are favourable to e-learning, some of them are still reluctant about its integration in the learning process.

Q5 : Which ICT materials do you prefer in learning English via online learning ?

Table 5 : Students' preferences of ICTs for English online learning

Answers	Digital materials (PPT, PDF...	Social Networks (Facebook, whatsapp,...)	video conferences	Educational Platforms (Google Meet, Moodle)
Number	11	18	12	19
Percentage	18%	30%	20%	32%

Figure 5 : Students' preferences of ICTs for English online learning



From the results, the overall majority of students (32%) prefer using educational platforms such as Google meet, moodle,...in addition to (30%) of them who are for using social networks such as facebook, whatsapp,...Others (20%) opt for the use of video conferences and the last group representing (18%) of the whole number of students choose digital materials such as ppts and pdfs.

6.2. The Teachers' Interview

The interview occurred between the investigator and some of the teachers of English in of the university of Ain Temouchent in order to have a deeper look and significant results of the research. The most important findings are the following:

Q1 : Were you trained about using ICT tools in your teaching process ?

The total majority of English teachers (8/10) assert that they haven't received any training about using ICT tools. They started learning alone from online platforms such as Youtube...Hence, they have not been provided any in-service or pre-service training about using this new technology for their teaching career.

Q2 : Are your students' results satisfactory when doing online assessments ?

The results demonstrate that most of the teachers (7/10) confirm that their students' online assessments' results are rather satisfactory. This proves that this new generation belongs to the digital age; students have no fear of technology since they are daily users of it.

Q3 : Are your students motivated in online learning ?

The absolute majority of teachers (9/10) state that many of their students are really motivated in e-learning yet there are many constraints which inhibit them from having

online courses such as the low debit of the internet flow in addition to the non availability of some online platforms such as Google Meet in their university.

Q4 : What is your proficiency in using online teaching method ?

The answers of the teachers show that most of the teachers' proficiency in using online techniques is average, a few of them admit to have a good level. The outcomes are certainly due to various reasons characterized in the lack of ICT teachers' training.

Q5 : Can e-learning enhance English language course ?

According to the answers, most of the teachers reveal (8/10) that e-learning can enhance English language course in the sense that student can learn the language effectively using different online platforms which can effectively introduce new pedagogical learning contents.

7. Discussion and Recommendations

The first question seeks to explore the students' level and proficiency in using ICT. Accordingly, the findings reveal that the majority of the students have either an excellent or a good mastery of ICT tools. In other words, the respondents show a high motivation in learning English using ICT instruments since they consider them effective in today's world. It is worth mentioning that no one of the informants has a weak level in using ICT tools. Additionally, the outcomes of the second question show that the dominants aids which are provided to learners by their teachers via distance learning are the digital material such as ppt and pdf files. Handouts of lectures take the second position in the teaching/learning process. Taking this discussion into account, it seems that teachers prefer using ppts, pdfs, handouts more than audio-visuals and websites the reason for which students most of the time claim to integrate such audio-aids in order to reach more information and enjoy a concrete language learning experience. The collected data of the third question reveal that teachers' online education methods are rather weak or average. A few of them assert that these methods are good or excellent. Hence, we assert that students have different self-evaluations of the methods and techniques used by their teachers which means that they might have different language needs.

Considering the outcomes of the fourth question, it is noticed that the majority of students confirm that e-learning improves their English language skills including : listening, reading, speaking and writing. Only a few of them opt for the traditional methods used in classrooms. Hence, online learning is perceived as an effective way in today's education. Additionally, the findings of the fifth question highlight that most students are interested in using educational platforms and social networks because they offer a simple and a wide range of different lectures supported by their teachers' and mates' interactions, evaluations, exchange of documents....It is also worth considering that an important number of respondents are also in favour for the use of video conferences as well as for digital materials. Thus, the increasing numbers of students enrolling in distance learning classes underscore the need for "comprehensive and thoughtful evolution of distance education if it is to become the educational model of the future" (Harnar, et al. 2000 :37). Moreover, and according to the interview results, teachers postulate that e-learning promotes English language courses and students are motivated in such kind of learning

though most teachers' proficiency in using online techniques is average since most of them haven't received any training about using ICT tools.

Finally, and according to the researcher, the main issue that the Algerian higher educational system has to solve is the teachers' and the students' resilience to change towards e-learning. Teachers should be provided efficient and sufficient training programs to fulfill their students' needs. By doing so, online teaching-learning will be accepted and adopted as the new and updated teaching method.

8. Limitations

The study provides relevant information regarding the way the educational process is taking place in the Algerian higher education during the pandemic, information according to which the online teaching-learning process can be improved. However, the researcher had encountered some limitations when conducting the research work. Some of these lie on the fact that the research was conducted only in one Algerian university and the number of informants was not considerable. The researcher did not have enough time to collect answers from many respondents and from different universities and even the pandemic situation inhibited us from conducting interviews with many teachers. As a result, the outcomes cannot be generalized to the entire Algerian higher educational system.

Conclusion

Because of the COVID-19, the Algerian educational system is progressively shifting from the traditional methods towards the digitalized process. Yet, it has been observed that though most of students do favour the use of e-learning, the outcomes of this kind of learning were rather unsatisfactory which is probably due to many limitations faced by both teachers and learners. So, in order to remedy to this problem, and in the light of technological transformations, we suggest that a paramount importance should be devoted to the field of distance learning/ teaching in Algeria. Moreover, it is also important to provide teachers with suitable and efficacious pedagogical and ICT training with the updated equipments without forgetting to increase the internet debit in the universities. Thus, teachers will be equipped with technology resources and skills and will be able to effectively teach the necessary subject matter to meet the students' needs including motivation and autonomy. All in all, we assert that nowadays, the traditional teaching method can no longer enthuse the students, the reason for which one of the paramount attributes for today's educators is to adapt and adopt the updated technological methods in their teaching process. Hence, despite the need for improvement, the future of online learning seems bright.

Bibliographical references

- ABOU EL-SEOUE S. ; SEDDIEK.N. 2014. E-Learning and Students' Motivation: A Research Study on the Effect of E-Learning on Higher Education. *Int. J. Emerg. Technol. Learn.* 9, 689-695.
- CASEY.C.D. 1998. Learning « From » or « Through » the Web: Models of Web Based Education. (<http://www.acm.org/pubs/citations/proceedings/cse/282991/p51-casey/>).
- Education Responses to COVID-19: Embracing Digital Learning and Online Collaboration. Available online: <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/education-responses-to-covid-19-embracing-digital-learning-and-online-collaboration-d75eb0e8/>
- HARNER M., et al. 2000. Measuring the effect of distance education on the learning experience: Teaching accounting via Pictoretel. *International Journal of Instructional Media*, 27 (1), 37-50.
- LEDERMAN D. 2020. Will shift to remote teaching be boon or bane for inline learning? Inside Higher Ed.
- LOCHNER L. ; WIESER.H. 2016. Combining Traditional Anatomy Lectures with E-Learning Activities: How Do Students Perceive Their Learning Experience? *Int. J. Med. Educ.* 7, 69-74. (<https://www.ijme.net/archive/7/combining-lectures-with-e-learning-activities/doi:10.5116/ijme.56b5.0369>).
- NEWBEY T; STEPICH. 2000. *Instruction technology for teaching and learning*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill.
- PALLOF R. , PRATT.K. 2000. *Making the transition: Helping teachers to teach online*. Paper presented at EDUCAUSE: Thinking it through. Nashville, Tennessee. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 452 806).
- POPOVICI A. ; MIRONOV C. 2015. Students' Perception on using eLearning Technologies. *Procedia Soc. Behav. Sci.* 180, 1514-1519.
- RELAN A. ; GILLANI B. 1997. Web-Based Instruction and the Traditional Classroom: Similarities and Differences in Khan, B. H. (ed.) *Web-Based Instruction*. New Jersey : Educational Technology Publications.
- ROSSITER D. 2007. Whither e-learning? Conceptions of change and innovation in higher education. *Journal of Organisational Transformational and Social Change*, 4(1), 93-107.
- RUKSASUK N. 1999. Library and information science distance education in Thailand in the next decade. In 65th IFLA Council and General Conference, Bangkok, Thailand, 20-28 Aug, 1999.
- WEBSTER M. 2021. Online Dictionary copyright by Merriam-Webster, Incorporated

Appendix I

Students' Questionnaire

Thank you in advance for responding to this questionnaire. Your answers to which will contribute to the completion of a research study about e-learning at the University of Ain Temouchent. Your assistance in completing this questionnaire is highly appreciated.

In the light of this study, could you please answer the following questions ?

Q1 : What is your proficiency in using ICT ?

Weak Average Good Excellent

Q2 : Which kind of aids are provided to you by your teacher in distance learning ?

Websites Digital materials (power points/ PDF) Audiovisuals Handouts

Q3 : How to you evaluate your teacher's method in online education ?

Weak Average Good Excellent

Q4 : Does e-learning help you improve your English language skills ?

Yes No

Q5 : Which ICT materials do you prefer in learning English via online learning ?

Digital materials (PPT, PDF) Social Networks (Facebook, whatsapp)
video conferences Educational Platforms (Google Meet, Moodle)

Q6 : Which were the difficulties that you encountered while the courses/seminar were developed online ?

.....
.....
.....

Q7 : Considering the structure of the courses taught online, their content include:

More theory than practical tasks More practical tasks than theory

Q8: To what extent do you consider the online environment to be suitable for education and training at university level?

To a small extent To a great extent

Q9 : Compared to face-to-face taught courses, are online courses for you:

Easier to assimilate Harder to assimilate