

Online and Distance Learning First Experience: Mandatory Changes in Teacher's Adaptability and Professional Identity

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Abstract

The unprecedented outbreak of the COVID-19, which has caught off guard worldwide teachers, in general, and the Algerian ones, in particular, has wreaked havoc and caused the largest disruption of education in history. Consequently, it has imposed new typologies of instruction and assessment, whereby the teaching/learning process is carried out remotely and via digital platforms, especially Moodle. This prompt and dramatic shift from face-to-face to distance one has influenced significantly the whole formerly used educational system. The current study purports itself to investigate the way the new instructional typology has been dealt with on the part of the two partners, viz., teachers and learners. To carry out this survey, two instruments were used, a questionnaire directed to twenty Master 2 students and a semi-structured interview conducted with five full-time teachers. The gleaned data showed that the majority of the teachers- and students- reported that the first experience was tinged with many crucial technical and know-how problems, for a high-quality online course could not be constructed overnight and access to the online environment affordances was also a daunting task for those unaccustomed to or unequipped with both technological software and hardware. The samples also claimed that though being kept under drastic sanitary conditions and remote teaching/learning, the proactive mastery of training in how to teach and learn online was more important than ever. Teachers and students are in need of the perception of the empirically-based pedagogy to scaffold and direct them whenever they are compelled to teach and learn online.

Keywords: CoViD-19; digital platforms; digital divide; Online teaching;

Introduction

The 2019-20 academic year was characterized by the growing corona virus pandemic which has forced policy-makers and executives worldwide to lockdown at a large scale of schools and universities, for the sake of containing and eschewing the deadly epidemic proliferation. Following this unpredictable sanitary intrusion, all face-to-face courses have been substituted by online, distance, and blended learning, zoom conferencing, etc., to keep instruction ongoing. Differently couched, the pandemic has remodelled and transformed the educational field into a digital learning hub. Thus, educators across the world were tasked with a swift transition to these types of online teaching that require appropriate digital infrastructures, software, methodology and trained teachers and learners; few countries had them at hand initially. Undoubtedly, the new teaching paradigms, being completely different from the traditional ones, require a

prior/proactive specific know-how, skills and expertise. Thus, the adaptation of the conventional educational content to cater for online is another thorny issue to cope with, especially if ill-prepared. Indubitably, the digital literacy improvement, ensuring the generation of an insightful understanding of the digitalized environment, becomes a compulsory skill to be able to intuitively adapt to new contexts and respond innovatively and co-creatively to others. Contemporary teachers' training must target professional learning that is acknowledged to be a key policy lever for educators' flexibility as well as their welfare, collaboration and learning leadership. The 21st century rapid societal and technological changes have imposed on teachers the development of an ever broader and more complex set of skills in their students while continuously updating their own competencies. (Révai, 2020; Viac & Fraser, 2020). Hence, it is critical at this stage to address the following research questions:

1/ To what extent are Algerian teachers and students ready to contend with the new teaching typology and environment?

2/ What lessons can be drawn from the first experience?

The current survey aims first at analysing the educational situation during the COVID-19 pandemic era and highlighting constraints that have precluded the appropriate implementation of distance learning allowing the achievement of the pre-set pedagogical objectives. Second, it targets the investigation of the new necessary changes on the teachers' professional identity, which have imposed themselves on 21st century teachers. The noted shortcomings during one-year experience allow for a review of the teaching methodology to ensure an online quality education in unusual situations as the present sanitary one.

1. Literature review

The upcoming section will be devoted to the genesis and definition of the concept of distance learning and its integration in the educational field for the first time. Besides, digital literacy prime necessity for contemporary teachers so as to cope with the requirements of the technological inventions hegemony is thoroughly explained and justified. The new professional identity is also portrayed to increase teachers' awareness of the imperative changes imposed by the new era.

1.1. Online learning: Genesis and definition

As the prevalence of learning technology continues to evolve, teachers and researchers have to agree on mutual terminology and definitions (Lowenthal & Wilson, 2010; Volery & Lord, 2000). In fact, different terms are used interchangeably. Online teaching/learning may be defined as a type of teaching/learning that takes place via Internet. It took several labels such as e-learning, distance learning, online learning, and so on. It combines both asynchronous and synchronous modes. Yet, whatsoever the appellation and the tools are, the objective behind such teaching/learning typology is to make the classes more accessible and flexible for students. It is acknowledged that this type of teaching and learning that is gaining field all around the world is making things easy for general public to get benefit from education without moving out and avoiding the hassle of transport and the costs that go with. ICTs are providing various typologies of online teaching/learning that are becoming a pressing need of the current moment. In fact, the usage of internet and laptops for teaching/learning purposes has increased vividly (Cole et al., 2017; Halverson & Smith, 2010; Kontos, 2015; Sela, 2005; Tynan, Ryan, & Lamont-Mills, 2015).

1.2. Teachers' compulsory digital literacy improvement in the era of the pandemic

The exponential technological developments have caused major upheavals/changes in teaching/learning, approaches and assessments typologies.

One of the most significant changes in the educational field is the new forms of learning; distance, online, and e-learning, which shifted from experimental novelties to nearly ubiquitous/pervasive teaching tools. Stepping into the digital world and adjusting to the latest information and communication technological applications remain the sole key solution to cope with the current pandemic situation. Indeed, the embracing of such modern technologies and their accompanying applications by Algerian teachers is a must nowadays, so as to act as resilient educators. It is quite certain that these forms of learning typology and environment will bring about/provoke a certain destabilization on online students and their teachers, who, for the first time, are constrained to adapt to a different learning environment to that of the traditional classroom.

It is worthy to highlight that unfortunately the new forms of teaching have not been associated with teachers' and students' training in how to teach and learn online, its specific learning pedagogy, learning outcomes improvement, and the overall quality of this learning experience (Duffy & Kirkley, 2001; Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Up-to-date, researches in the field have been strenuously directed mainly to students and instructional strategies. Yet, teachers and students remain in the blur/fuzzy because of lacking the understanding of how online teaching could be delivered efficiently. For Algerian teachers who have never experienced online teaching, the new typology of teaching/learning deprived of face-to-face interactivity is a paramount source of contention. For the sake of a successful adjustment to online classroom as a unique alternative, teachers are compelled to reconsider principal professional beliefs and values in connection with teacher's theoretical and practical viewpoints. The adoption of the new topology of dispensing online courses requires the deconstruction of well-anchored practices to be substituted by a new model of teaching/learning heavily based on new technologies.

1.3. The online teacher's new professional identity

Though providing valuable opportunities for learning, digitalization imposes new requirements on both teachers and learners. Not only are teachers supposed to be skilful operators of ICTs, but also to be firmly involved in digital environment designing. The digitalization velocity seems to be a constant challenge that affects people's way of living, working and learning. Following this digitalized transformation in education, the focus shifted to the development of the teacher's digital competence (Mishra and Koehler 2006; Redecker, 2017; Starkey, 2020). It is commonly acknowledged that such digitalization can boost the educational quality by strengthening the professionalism, increasing learner's activity, improving the quality of students' digital skills, and, *latosensu*, the quality of their instruction, and therefore their lives in general. Crucially, teachers' and students' potential future teaching/learning success could be relentlessly jeopardised due to the lack of digital proficiency. To eschew such undesirable fate, teachers are required to ensure effective remote teaching. The teacher's professional identity (TPI) is no longer limited to subject matter expertise, didactic and pedagogical knowledge, yet new parameters are imposing themselves and modifying teachers' perception of their professional identity (Beijaard et al., 2000). Teachers are compelled to nurture their PI not only based on their own teaching experience, but also deriving from everyday experiences, even if not tightly related to teaching. Nowadays teachers should seek a PI which would help them cope with the prompt professional changes, contributing to decreasing students' dropout and teachers' burnout (Alsup, 2006). The reconfiguration of the PI is a necessity for world teachers to be able to overcome prompt and disruptive situations similar to the current one caused by COVID-19 pandemic. In this vein, the Dialogical Self Theory (DST) proposed by Hermans (2001) provides a definition of identity particularly useful for educational contexts: a flexible

configuration of identity positions, relatively autonomous, dynamic and never stable, in perennial dialogue among themselves.

1.4. Teachers' and students' first online experience

The usage of Internet and computer technologies for teaching/learning purposes has increased vividly (Cole & al., 2017; Halverson & Smith, 2010; Kontos, 2015; Sela, 2005; Tynan, Ryan, & Lamont-Mills, 2015). This contributed efficiently to online courses design and gave large audience the opportunity to carry on their studies. Yet, teachers' attitudes towards the new typology of teaching/learning are influenced by a set of variables such as gender, professional experience, exposure to and mastery of computers. No matter how advanced and highly performing the used technology is, its effective implementation depends on users having a positive attitude towards it (Liaw, Huang & Chen (2007). Surely, this requires readiness for such learning (Warner & al. 1998). They founded this readiness on three aspects, viz. students' preference for the new way of delivery over the traditional one, the student's confidence in the use of the electronic communication for learning and the ability to engage in autonomous learning. This concept was later on refined by some other researchers among whom McVay (2000, 2001) who developed a 13-item instrument measuring student behaviour and attitude as predictors. The latter can serve for identifying and validating students' for online readiness.

1.5. Teachers' flexibility and adaptability: Salient capacities for success

These two concepts are defined as being salient capacities enabling people, in general, to successful readjustment to all life's inherent changing circumstances. Martin et al. (2012) examined adaptability among high school students and showed that it was positively associated with academic achievement, school enjoyment, satisfaction with life, meaning and purpose in life, and academic buoyancy. Being flexible and adaptable is also decidedly pertinent capacities to teachers given that teaching work involves responding to and managing constant change (Collie and Martin, 2015). Thus, teachers' preparedness to effectively manage the unpredictable changes is a pivotal capacity for Algerian teachers in the era of COVID-19. In fact, they are required to adjust to new roles, accept changes, and have an alternative plan.

2. Empirical Phase

To the best of our knowledge, this study was the first one in connection with such teaching/learning typology in the era of the pandemic. The current section provides a general overview of the target research sample and the procedure implemented. It also deals with the techniques adopted in collecting and analysing the gleaned data.

2.1. Design and sampling

This study utilised a mixed method cross-sectional design, where quantitative and qualitative methods complemented each other. The participants in this study were students enrolled in Master 2 in 2021-22 academic year. They all lived the first experience of the online teaching/learning process. Their viewpoints are of prime importance for researchers to bring informed readjustments. The interviewees are full-time teachers who experienced the new online teaching/learning typology.

2.2. Fieldwork

The study data were collected from different BMD students and teachers at the University of Tiaret. All students (20) have been studying at this university for five years, and all teachers (5) have been among the staff of university teachers for a period of time ranging from two to eight years. Since March 2020, the university

was locked down and courses were shifted to the online process. In a rush, both teachers and learners had to adapt to the teaching and learning form.

3. Findings

3.1. Students' questionnaire and teachers' interview

The questionnaire, directed to the students and the interview conducted with teachers, consists of 8 question-items for the first, including demographic variables, attitudes towards the online teaching/learning problems and suggestions, and five question-items for the second.

Have you ever used online Teaching/learning before the advent of the pandemic?		
Respondents	Yes	No
Teachers	01 (20%)	04 (80%)
Students	01 (5%)	19 (95%)
Total	02 (8%)	23 (92%)

Table 1. Respondents' familiarisation with online teaching and learning

The above statistical data show that the heavy majority of the respondents (95% for students and 80% for the teachers attest that they have never used the ICTs for online teaching/learning purposes before the advent of the pandemic. This is to highlight that they have never taken the initiative to approach new ICTs devoted to remote learning. Though being familiarized with ICTs via a module in the canvas for three years, the students seemed to restrict their achievements to the knows without attempting to shift to the know-how-to-do. Similarly, teachers limited their teaching objectives to the pedagogical and didactical issues, eschewing any change to their practicum. Though Algerian universities selected the Moodle platform for courses, only 20% of the students connected to this platform ^[1].

What prevented you from accessing to the Moodle platform?		
Interviewees/ Respondents	Teachers	Students
Hardware issues	1.Lack of adequate materials	1.Lack of personal computers
Software issues	1. Lack of the mastery 2. Lack of training	2.Lack of training
Others	1.Time and efforts consuming 2.Dropped internet connection 3.Faulty and imperfect platform	1.Lack of internet connection at home 2.Inaccessibility of the platform

Table 2. The hurdles precluding their access to the Moodle platform

When asked about the hurdles that preclude their access to Moodle platform, they listed a set of lacks vis-à-vis hardware, software and Internet unavailability for most of them. They also state that online teaching is too much time and efforts demanding. It also seems that Moodle platform imperfection and inaccessibility were causing failure. The 'digital divide' could have significant impacts on teachers and students at the same extent of degree. In fact, the remote

[¹] Statistics of IbnKhaldoun University of Tiaret for the year 2020-21

teaching/learning challenged teachers and exacerbated digital inequalities among students.

To overcome these hurdles, what do you suggestion?		
Interviewees & Respondents	Teachers	Students
Suggestions	1.Regular Training/ Updating 2.Hardware availability 3.Internet flux improvement and regular availability	1.Training 2.Hardware availability 3.Internet flux improvement and regular availability 4.Internet price revision 5.Handouts availability and face-to-face teaching

Table 3. Interviewees' and students' suggestions to overcome these hurdles

To overcome these difficulties, most of teachers and students emphasized regular training, hardware availability for all, the improvement and regular Internet flux. Some students required Internet price so as to be at the reach of everyone. Some others suggested the provision of handouts and the return to face-to-face teaching/learning. For them this teaching/learning is surer and more beneficial for multifarious facets; interactivity, immediate feedback, time gaining, etc.

Admittedly, this first experience of online teaching was flawed for the various reasons mentioned, but that does not mean this choice is to be abandoned. It is the public authorities duty to provide universities with modern means of communications (equipment - budget - training, etc.), as it is imperative for teachers and students to admittedly adhere to this new type of education. Indeed, the major issues in digital divide are mainly related to a lack of interest in technology use as well as the lack of access to it. The shrinking of the digital divide gap requires affordability increase, users' empowering, and improvement of online content relevance. Thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, the flaws of the digital divide in education have been revealed in education. Thus, both teachers and students remain out of the loop because they lack sufficient technological and digital skills. On the contrary, this increases the lack of knowledge by limiting access to it. It is worth-mentioning that none of the screened sample suggested adaptability or flexibility as a pertinent solution, engaging both teachers and students in adjusting and modifying thoughts and behaviours.

Conclusion

It is crystal-clear that the teaching/learning typology requires a proactive mastery of the new technologies and teachers/learners' deconstruction of previous conceptions as regards teaching/learning to embrace new ones. Teacher training should embrace new pedagogical practices that are authentic and meaningful digital literacy toward digital competence and finally to reach digital professional identity. Foster students' understanding of the sort of competencies required to function productively, safely and ethically in diversely and increasingly digitally-mediated environments. ICTs should be included practically along tertiary education levels. Online teaching has to be an integral complementary teaching material in our schools and not only in exceptional crises.

With the fast growing of technology and its integration in EFL contexts notably the different online platforms and language programs, the unexpected exigencies like COVID-19, and the shift of focus considering language as a tool to learn technology to an efficient tool to learn a language, it seems that teachers

worldwide are facing a ferocious rivalry imposed by digitalization. Thus to be in harmony with 21st Century requirements, it is high time they developed a digitalized profile, a new professional identity and accordingly, otherwise all attempts would be in vain.

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