EL - HAKIKA (the Truth)
Journal for Social and Human Sciences

Volume :23 / Issue : 04 / (2024), PP:37-48

Online Learning Experience during the COVID-19 Pandemic: EFL Students' Satisfaction and Obstacles

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Received: 26/10/2023, Accepted: 31/10/2024, Publication:30/12/2024

Abstract:

This article aims to determine students' satisfaction level with online learning and highlight the most common obstacles they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. To reach this end, a Google Forms questionnaire was sent to forty EFL Master I students at the University of Tizi-Ouzou. Closed-ended questions were analyzed quantitatively using percentages, and open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively using Thematic Analysis. The results revealed that students were unsatisfied with their online learning experience. Their online learning satisfaction was negatively influenced by the obstacles they encountered. To improve the quality of online learning and increase students' satisfaction, it is imperative to address these obstacles.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; EFL students; obstacles; online learning; satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, the educational sector has witnessed substantial changes due to constant technological developments. The rise and rapid evolution of the internet and computer-based technologies have led to the emergence of a new type of learning called online learning (**Barrot et al., 2021).**

Online learning became the only possible option to carry on lectures and complete the academic year after the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic in December 2019. Indeed, the rapid proliferation of this life-threatening virus led to a sudden shift to online learning. For students, the temporary university shutdown and the unexpected move to online learning have created many difficulties, which affected their satisfaction with online classes. Students' satisfaction is a determining factor for the success of online learning (**Yan-Li et al., 2022**). Many studies have investigated students' satisfaction and problems with

online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, studies on students' online learning satisfaction and obstacles during the COVID-19 pandemic in Algeria are still scarce. Thus, this study attempts to fill this research void. More specifically, this study attempts to reach the following objectives.

1. To determine students' satisfaction level with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To highlight the obstacles students faced while learning remotely during the pandemic period.
3. To suggest ways to improve the quality of online learning and increase students' satisfaction.

Review of the Literature

Online Learning Environments

Online learning is a form of education conducted using the Internet and modern digital technologies and integrates text, audio and video (**Basar et al., 2021**). It can be delivered synchronously or asynchronously. According to Perveen (**2016**), synchronous online learning "refers to learning/teaching that takes place simultaneously via an electronic mode. Synchronous voice or text chat rooms provide an opportunity for teacher-student and student-student interaction." (**p. 22**). Synchronous online learning is similar to traditional face-to-face learning because it includes class attendance, interaction and discussion. Synchronous classes happen in real time via live video lectures, during which students and teachers are online simultaneously. On the contrary, "Asynchronous environments provide students with readily available material in the form of audio/video lectures, handouts, articles and power point presentations." (**Perveen, 2016, p. 22**). In other words, asynchronous virtual classes are delayed, and students can access ready-made lectures in PDF, Word or PowerPoint files or prerecorded audio and videos that they can read, listen to or watch anywhere and anytime.

Both synchronous and asynchronous online learning played a fundamental role during the rise of the global pandemic of COVID-19. This deadly and contagious virus, which emerged in late 2019 and rapidly spread worldwide in early 2020, challenged the educational system. To protect teachers and students from this disease, universities suspended face-to-face classes and moved to online learning. Teachers

and students were quarantined for an unspecified period and forced to rely on online learning to continue educational activities. Algerian universities, for example, continued teaching through virtual platforms like Moodle from mid-March to September 2020.

This abrupt shift from onsite learning to online learning is referred to as "emergency remote teaching" (**Hodges et al., 2020, para. 5**) and "ad hoc digitalisation of teaching" (**Hertrampf et al., 2022, p.2**) because the transition was done overnight with no previous planning and training in using digital technologies. This sudden move to virtual classes can create many challenges for students and influence their satisfaction, especially for those who did take part in any online course before the emergence of the pandemic of COVID-19. Therefore, to improve the quality of online learning and make it a rewarding and positive experience for students, it is necessary to examine their satisfaction level with online learning and determine the obstacles they faced when learning remotely.

Previous Related Studies

Research on students' online learning satisfaction during the pandemic of COVID-19 revealed mixed results. For instance, Basuony et al. (2021) delved into the factors affecting Egyptian undergraduate students' satisfaction with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results revealed that many students thought online learning had positive aspects, like saving time and classroom flexibility. However, some students found their online learning experience unpleasant mainly due to the lack of interaction and conversation with the teacher and classmates and internet failure while attending Zoom lectures or submitting coursework.

In another study, Avsheniuk et al. (2021) examined the levels of ESP students' satisfaction with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ukraine using a descriptive statistical method. The results revealed that students were satisfied with ESP online courses and facilities provided by the teacher. The authors concluded that the nature and outline of course content, students' interaction with their teacher and access to learning resources are the key factors that make ESP online university courses effective and successful.

Taher et al.'s (2022) study investigated students' online learning satisfaction and barriers during the COVID-19 pandemic. To collect data, an online survey was sent to students studying through an online platform in two Iraqi universities. The results revealed that students' level of satisfaction was poor, with 64.8% dissatisfied with their online learning experience. Barriers to online learning included slow internet connection, power interruption and lack of face-to-face interaction.

In the Algerian context, Ghounane and Rabahi (2023) explored students' attitudes toward Moodle during COVID-19. A test, observation and questionnaire were used to collect data from 170 EFL Master students at Saida University. The results revealed that students faced many difficulties when using Moodle, such as network issues and lack of knowledge, which led them to develop negative attitudes towards the platform.

The present study is a continuation of research conducted by Berbar (2020), who explored EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences with the Moodle platform during the COVID-19 pandemic, taking the University of Tizi-Ouzou as a case in point. The results revealed that teachers viewed their teaching through the Moodle platform as negative and unsatisfactory. Their negative perception and dissatisfaction were caused by the lack of interaction with students, lack of training, students' difficulty accessing Moodle and slow internet connection. The current study aims to enrich the previously published results by investigating online learning satisfaction and obstacles during the COVID-19 pandemic among EFL students at the University of Tizi-Ouzou.

Participants and Method

The present study was conducted in the Department of English at Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi-Ouzou. It involved forty Master one-level students studying Language and Communication. Among the forty participants, thirty-seven (92.5%) were females, and only three students (7.5%) were males. To collect data from these participants, an online questionnaire was designed using Google Forms and the link was sent to the group email created by the students. The data obtained from the closed-ended questions of the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively in terms of percentages. The data collected from the open-ended questions were analyzed thematically. More specifically, the obtained results were coded and grouped into key themes.

Results and Discussion

Students' Satisfaction with Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

To determine students' satisfaction with online learning, they were first asked if they had any experience with this type of learning before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of the students answered this question negatively. Indeed, 87.5% of the participants were unfamiliar with online learning, and only 12.5% had previous experiences with remote learning. In addition, the students were asked about their familiarity with the online educational platform used by the University of Tizi-Ouzou. The results of the second question revealed that 82.5% of the participants were not familiar with the Moodle platform, and 17.5% had already used Moodle to learn remotely. Unlike Ghounane & Rabahi's (2023) informants, who reported a good mastery of the Moodle platform with a percentage of 63.45%, the participants of the present study did not know Moodle's main features. Lack of experience with online learning and unfamiliarity with the Moodle platform can lead to students' demotivation and dissatisfaction with online learning.

To verify this, the third question asked the students about their interest and motivation in learning remotely during the pandemic. The findings indicated that 75.0% of the students were not motivated to learn remotely, and 25.0% were enthusiastic about this new learning experience. In addition, when asked to rate their satisfaction level with online learning, 20.0% of the students were highly dissatisfied, 37.5% were dissatisfied, 17.5% were satisfied, and 25.0% were neutral. The findings implied that more than half of the study participants were unsatisfied with their online learning experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding is in line with Taher et al.'s (2022) study.

Online Learning Obstacles during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Students' disinterest and dissatisfaction with online learning can be explained by the various obstacles they encounter (**Bismala & Manurung, 2021**). Indeed, when asked whether they have faced any online learning obstacles, the totality of the students (100%) answered the question positively. When asked to report the hurdles to online

learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the students recounted five main obstacles.

Students' ultimate challenge was the lack of contact, interaction and communication with their teachers. Students found it challenging to study online because they had few or no opportunities to interact with the teacher. This lack of student-teacher interaction prevented the students from asking questions and further clarifications about the lectures posted online, which, in turn, negatively influenced their online learning satisfaction. For example, one of the students declared, "The absence of contact with my teachers even virtually made online learning difficult for me. There was no live lecture or even chats or forums where we can ask our questions". Another student stated:

> When I don't understand any part of a course, it is hard to get a fast explanation from the teacher. Some lectures cannot be done online but face-to-face. This lack of contact with my teachers made understanding difficult and learning online problematic. That's why I don't like online learning.

From the students' answers, it can be deduced that the teachers relied on the asynchronous teaching mode. One of the disadvantages of asynchronous teaching is the limited access to the teacher, which leaves students to learn without guidance or assistance. This lack of interaction negatively influenced students' online learning satisfaction. This supports Taher et al.'s (2022) finding.

The second problem was related to internet issues. Not all students have good internet connectivity. Some suffered from network problems, which hindered their online learning experience. For instance, one of the students said, "During the lockdown, the mediocre internet connectivity that has always been a problem in our country made it impossible to learn remotely. Internet connection was very slow since everyone was home using it. I wasn't happy about learning online". Students can also experience a shortage of internet access due to their geographic location; as one student explained, "The internet was a big problem. I live in a remote village unequipped with an internet network. So, the unavailability of the internet was a problem for me to study online". This finding supports Taher et al.'s (2022) result. Internet access issues influenced students' satisfaction with online learning negatively. The success of online learning depends on students' ability

to access the internet. To attend online classes, students need to have access to a strong internet connection.

The third hurdle mentioned by the students was their unfamiliarity with the Moodle platform. Since the shift to online learning was abrupt, students had no time to get familiar with this online educational platform. This finding confirms the result obtained from the second question, where most students reported being unfamiliar with Moodle. Here are two examples of students' declarations.

> Lack of digital literacy and knowhow to use this Moodle platform was an obstacle to online learning. I wasn't familiar with the platform used by the university. It was the first time I used it. No information concerning its use was provided. So, I was completely lost at home with no idea how to use it and how to have access to the lectures posted by my teachers.

> The online learning platform used by the University of Tizi-Ouzou is complex for me. I don't know how to use it, how to log in, how to get access to my teachers' courses and download them. For this reason, I didn't study online during the pandemic and wasn't interested in doing so.

The fourth obstacle was related to the Moodle platform. Students complained about the difficulty accessing the university platform. Since the university was unprepared for this unexpected transition to online learning, the plan to teach through Moodle was not well-thought-out, and many teachers and students did not have personal accounts until the pandemic lockdown. Therefore, many students had registration problems, such as getting a username and password. This prevented them from accessing and downloading the different courses posted on the platform. This is better explained in declarations such as:

> The platform provided by the university was inaccessible for some students and accessible for others; thus, the problem lay in the platform that was not well created. As a result, I was unable to access the delivered courses. I didn't get an account on the platform that would have allowed me to download the different lectures.

> The link to the university platform didn't always work. I mean this online study platform was unstable and many students

including myself faced technical problems such problems logging in and accessing personal accounts and the accounts of our teachers to download the lectures.

This finding supports the result obtained by Berbar (2020). In her study, some teachers in the Department of English at the University of Tizi-Ouzou mentioned the problem of students' accessibility to Moodle. One of the teachers stated, "The main obstacles are mess in the organisation of the Moodle platform and the inaccessibility of this platform by the majority of students" (**p. 19**). This factor may negatively influence students' satisfaction in using the Moodle platform. Basuony et al. (2021) similarly found that students were unsatisfied with the university platform. The authors assert that "the platform has a significant and negative effect on the student satisfaction" (**642**).

The last issue with online learning was the contents of the courses uploaded on Moodle, as students complained about their quality. Students indicated that the courses were not well-designed because they were not detailed enough to ensure comprehension. They only found handouts without thorough explanations or additional learning resources like videos. For example, one student declared, "I think the problem is that the lectures in Moodle were not well-designed. All we can find are PDF, Word, or PowerPoint files that were really brief. No further explanations in videos for example". This raises the question of whether teachers know how to incorporate online learning or how to design and structure online courses. This finding is in line with the study of Ghounane and Rabahi (2023), where 79.11% of the students believed that the lectures posted on Moodle were not well-designed. The authors stressed the need to train teachers to prepare the content of an online course.

Given the obstacles mentioned above, it is no wonder that the majority of the students expressed dissatisfaction and disappointment with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. From these findings, it can be concluded that online learning needs to be improved. To improve online learning and raise students' satisfaction levels, it is vital to find solutions to these problems.

Students' Recommendations to Improve Online Learning and their Satisfaction Level

Increasing students' satisfaction is crucial for the success of online learning. To improve the quality of online learning and increase the level of satisfaction, students suggested four strategies.

The first suggestion was to encourage interaction and discussion among teachers and students. Students stressed the importance of virtual interaction with teachers in chats, discussion forums and live lectures. For example, one student stated, "It is important to create online chats and forums in which we can interact with our teachers and discuss the different courses and activities. This will allow us to ask questions and have a good understanding of the lectures". Another said, "What I recommend is to use chats or live lectures. This can allow us to interact with our teachers and ask them questions when we don't understand something". Interacting in online chats and discussion forums or conducting live online lectures can reduce the transactional distance between teachers and students. To be receptive to students' inquiries, teachers should show their presence by actively participating in live sessions and discussions.

The second recommendation was to fix internet connectivity problems. For a successful application of online learning, the availability of adequate *internet access* is a requirement. One of the students suggested, "Personally, I would recommend to fix the issue of the internet and provide affordable and good internet services for teachers and students. This can widen online learning and develop my satisfaction". To improve students' online learning satisfaction, higher educational institutions should focus on providing internet access for both teachers and students.

The third suggestion was to fix the problem of accessibility to the Moodle platform. Students need to have personal accounts on Moodle with user names and passwords. This can increase students' accessibility to online learning. In addition, the university should design an online learning platform that is easily accessible to ensure that students can effortlessly navigate the course materials and access the different learning resources and activities. The following declaration illustrates this point:

> The university should develop the Moodle platform and make it easy to access and use. I recommend fixing the issue in the platform and testing it before introducing it to the students to avoid any technical problems. Instead of Moodle, we can also use other platforms like Zoom and Google Meet. I think they are easier to use than Moodle.

The fourth recommendation was to train students and teachers in online learning. To help students learn successfully online, universities and educational institutions should provide them with extensive training sessions. It is also necessary to train teachers to incorporate online learning and design effective, engaging and rich course content. This suggestion was highlighted in statements like "I think it is important to show to the students how the platform works. I mean we need lectures on the Moodle platform and online learning in general." and "For successful online learning, students need to be equipped with the necessary knowledge on how to study online during special tutorials. Teachers need also to learn how to create good online courses, not just word files and PDFs".

If these suggestions are considered, students could have a more engaging, interactive, supportive and fulfilling online learning experience. This could eventually improve their overall satisfaction with online learning.

CONCLUSION

The present study investigated students' satisfaction with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and the encountered obstacles. From the findings, it can be inferred that students' satisfaction with online learning during this period was low due to the five obstacles they faced. To make online learning a fruitful experience for students and increase their satisfaction level, it is necessary to address these problems in case a new threat strikes and forces educational institutions to rely exclusively on online learning again.

This study has limitations, among them the problem of the generalizability of the findings due to the small sample size. Therefore, to understand the issue better, upcoming research should replicate the study and involve students from other Algerian universities. In addition, the study focused mainly on students' online learning satisfaction and obstacles during the COVID-19 pandemic. Future researchers should

investigate the topic in the post-pandemic period, mainly since the subjects in the transversal unit are being taught exclusively online.

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