

Challenges of Distance Education: University Teachers' Perspective

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ملخص:

يُعد التعليم عن بعد نمطاً من أنماط التدريس والتعلم حيث يلتقي الأساتذة والطلاب والأقران في فصول دراسية افتراضية عبر منصات إلكترونية مختلفة مثل: "مودل (Moodle)"، ومنصات التعليم الإلكتروني، و"ساناكو (Sanako)"، و"جوجل ميت (Google Meet)"، و"زوم (Zoom)". وفي الواقع، قبل تفشي فيروس كورونا في عام 2019، نادراً ما كان يتم التطرق إلى التعليم عن بعد في قطاع التعليم العالي في الجزائر؛ غير أن الاهتمام بالتعليم عبر الإنترنت بلغ ذروته خلال فترة الجائحة. وبناءً عليه، أصبح تعزيز التعليم عن بعد من الأولويات المدرجة على أجندة وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي الجزائرية. وقد ذكرت دراسة حديثة (Erarslan, 2021) أن التعليم عبر الإنترنت يواجه تحديات عدة، حيث تُعد رداءة جودة الإنترنت، ونقص الأدوات التعليمية الرقمية، وضعف الإلمام بمهارات تكنولوجيا المعلومات والاتصال، من أبرز التحديات التي تواجه الأساتذة والطلاب في هذا المجال.

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى استقصاء المشكلات التي يواجهها الأساتذة في التعليم عن بعد، ومن ثم تسعى لتقديم مساهمة نظرية عبر مراجعة تعريف التعليم عبر الإنترنت ووسائله وفوائده. كما تطمح الورقة إلى تقديم مساهمة تطبيقية من خلال عكس تجربة أساتذة الجامعات الجزائرية مع التعليم عن بعد. ولتحقيق ذلك، تم اعتماد منهج البحث النوعي، حيث أُجريت مقابلة

شبه منظمة مع تسعة أساتذة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها بجامعة "باجي مختار" بعنابة. وقد كشفت النتائج أن أساتذة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) يعانون من رداءة تدفق الإنترنت، ونقص دافعية الطلاب، ونقص المعرفة بأساليب التدريس والتقييم عبر الإنترنت، وهي من بين القضايا التي تعيق فعالية التعليم عن بعد. وفي هذا الصدد، تقدم الورقة في جزئها الختامي جملة من التوصيات للتغلب على تحديات التعليم عن بعد.

كلمات مفتاحية: التعليم عن بعد، المنصات الرقمية، جائحة كورونا، التعليم الجامعي، تكنولوجيا الاتصال.

Abstract:

Distance learning is a modern educational model based on electronic media. It aims to provide flexible learning opportunities that transcend the constraints of time and place, leveraging advancements in computer and mobile technologies. The COVID-19 pandemic marked a decisive turning point, shifting this mode of education from a mere technological option to an absolute necessity, forcing higher education institutions to activate digital platforms to ensure academic continuity.

Although the foundations of these platforms were established globally through initiatives by MIT and UNESCO since 2002, their actual implementation in developing and Arab countries emerged primarily as a response to the challenges posed by the pandemic. The significance of these platforms lies in their role as effective tools for interactive communication between teachers and learners, facilitating easy access to curricula, the exchange of scientific content, and the promotion of collaborative idea-sharing within an integrated digital environment.

Keywords: Distance Learning, Digital Platforms, COVID-19 Pandemic, Higher Education, Communication Technology.

1 .Introduction :

Distance education is one of the basics of modern societies. In teaching and learning foreign languages such as English, remote education brought various opportunities, challenges, and new techniques for teachers

and learners. This new pedagogical mode involves the use of different technological and digital tools as well as online platforms. Therefore, it is worth to know teachers take on distance education and the different obstacles they face in online classes. Only then can effective measures be taken to enhance remote education, which is meant to foster the future experiences of distance education in Algerian universities.

1. Distance Education

Distance education, also referred to as e-learning (Stauffer, 2022), is associated with online content on the web or the internet (Tsai & Machado, 2002). The internet is crucial in online education (Dumulescu, Pop-Păcurar & Necula, 2021). According to Simonson (2009), distance learning is characterized by the absence of physical interaction and environment, as everything is done through the internet. He further stated that there are four main characteristics of distance learning, including academic learning that is carried out through institutions, geographic separation and bridging the intellectual, cultural, and social differences between students, the necessity of interactions between learners and teachers using technological tools, creating a learning community that is composed of students, a teacher, and instructional resources.

2. Means of Online Education

Different digital and technological tools can be used for distance education. Luo and Lei (2012) classified the types of Information Communication Tools (ICTs) in remote learning into four main categories: educational networking, web-based learning, mobile learning, and classroom equipment. Educational networking represents online platforms that are functionally based on communication and link users together to share, connect, chat, and discuss (Dakon, 2011). They are free from contextual advertising and avoid distractions to be more suitable for a learning context (Vicki, 2008). They include Edmodo, Ning, and Sanako. Web-based learning tools are the means used in learning that utilizes the Internet as an instructional delivery tool to carry out various activities. They foster the individualization of learning, facilitating instructional methods, overcoming physical distance, and saving time (Gómez, 2008). They include social bookmarking and blogs. Mobile learning uses mobile and computing devices, such as smartphones, computers, and laptops (Traxler, 2005). Classroom equipment tools are digital classroom elements, such as computers, headphones, projectors, and printers.

3. Benefits of Distance Education

According to UNESCO (2011), ICTs play a considerable role in enhancing the way of learning foreign languages. In this regard, the World Wide Web provides learners multiple platforms and authentic sources, in addition to expanding their familiarity with the foreign language. In the same vein, Ghasemi and Hashemi (2011) noted that the use of ICTs like blogs and video conferencing facilitates the FL learners' interaction and communication with native speakers, which enables them to use the target language for real purposes and in authentic contexts. Besides, such technologies will make the learner more interested, active, and responsible, as they will boost their creativity by experiencing new ways of learning. In the same vein, Educational Networking enhances curiosity and motivation, educators' involvement in their education, collaboration and creativity, facilitates information sharing and checking, and saves time (Hargadon, n.d.).

4. Challenges of Online Education

Studies by Yunus, Lubis and Lin (2009), Gómez (2008), Bnemansour (2019), and Dedja (2015) were conducted to examine the challenges of online education. The findings revealed that not all the platforms accessible are free, as UNESCO (2011) agreed that limited accessibility and network connection could be considered the key challenges in remote education. Another challenge is the limited availability of materials in institutions and the lack of technological literacy (Habibu, Al-Mamun & Clement, 2012). Therefore, teachers and learners struggle to adapt, deal with, and be updated with new technologies. Reliability and credibility are other issues in distance education. Some digital educational resources lack reliable communication networks, and learners are likely to depend totally on online resources, which may lead to plagiarism. Moreover, the study conducted by Rababah (2020) that aimed to examine the online education challenges in EFL during the COVID-19 era revealed that lack of adequate training on using online educational tools or platforms, inconsistent teaching styles of instructors, and bad internet connection to be the main issues faced in distance education.

5. Methodology and Population

The present paper also seeks to provide a practical contribution by reflecting on university teachers' experience with distance education. Therefore, employing a qualitative research method, a semi-structured interview was conducted with nine teachers at the department of the English language and letters at Badji Mokhtar University- Annaba. The interview

aims to gather data concerning teachers' perceptions of and experiences with distance education. It also seeks to unveil the challenges of distance education. This interview contained seven questions (see appendix) and was conducted with teachers of different modules (oral expression, written expression, grammar, linguistics and literature). They have an experience with distance education during the Covid-19 era.

6. Results

Results of the interview revealed that teachers had divergent opinions on the effect of remote education on students' language learning. While some teachers perceive online education positively impacting EFL students learning, others think it negatively influences language learning. This is because five teachers view distance education helped students overcome their psychological obstacles (anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and confidence) as they did not hesitate to participate orally in the online sessions. They also believe that the distance mode of education made students more comfortable, motivated, and creative in doing the required tasks. However, four other teachers think online education has a double-faced impact on students' language learning. They shared the same ideas as the previous teachers regarding positive influence. In contrast, for the negative impact, they stated that some students were unmotivated and unwilling to participate and attend online classes, which affected their language learning ability.

Besides, two significant views can be noticed concerning the success of online education during the COVID-19 era. First, the great majority of teachers (i.e. eight teachers) consider the experience successful only to a certain extent for many reasons. First, only some students benefited, as they took advantage of distance learning and overcame their fear of participation, while others refrained from engaging in participation and discussion.

Participants went further to add that motivating students, managing online classes as well as participation, evaluating students' works, tracing their progress, poor internet quality, and lack of technological literacy as well as devices (not all students had smartphones and computers) were the main challenges of distance education.

When answering the question related to the effect of distance education on students' and teachers' roles, a great majority of the participants asserted the change of both parties' positions. Teachers maintain that online classrooms positively and negatively affect students' roles. With more precision, six teachers report that students became more

autonomous, independent, and responsible for their learning and showed progress in creativity and productivity. On the other hand, three other teachers claimed that students' role was negatively influenced as they developed an attitude of irresponsibility and indiscipline. A teacher clarifies by saying, "... learners, unfortunately, became more neglecting, irresponsible and not professional including the way they send informal emails, not respecting the deadlines and the instructions, and cheating as they became more passive...."

Concerning the effect of distance education on teachers' roles, participants mentioned that the change is significant as the teachers lost their controlling role over their students' behavior. Teachers added that distance education is time and energy-consuming as teachers have been making more effort in lesson preparation, checking and evaluation, and contacting the students through digital tools. Participants think the teachers' role in virtual classes is merely a guide.

Moving to types of assessment teachers refer to in distance education, participants report that they use online live conversations (via Zoom, Messenger, and Google Meet) and video/audio records of students to assess their speaking skills through which they examine features like grammar, performance, fluency, accuracy, body language and confidence in orally using the English language. To assess their students' writing skills, teachers avowed that they gave students writing assignments to be accomplished and submitted by email or Messenger. As for teachers of other modules requiring reflection on information discussed in the lesson, they admit that they assess students' comprehension of the lessons by asking them questions or by asking them to summarize the lesson.

Finally, teachers were asked about what could be done to foster distance education at university. Most participants (i.e. five teachers) agreed on the necessity of training teachers on using ICTs and digital educational tools. Participants also suggest that more online educational platforms should be designed according to the needs of each module, especially oral expression and written expression.

7. Discussion

Multiple results have been collected from teachers' interviews. Most teachers used Messengers, Facebook, and Email platforms for distance education during the COVID-19 confinement. Most referred to video/audio recordings, composition writing, and summarizing as a means of evaluation. In addition, most teachers have noted that their role in distance

education shifted to less controlling, as they had to make extra efforts to contact the students and organise the sessions. Nevertheless, there were two contradictory opinions concerning the learners' role in online education; for some, students became more autonomous, serious, and independent, while others became less responsible and disciplined.

Consequently, teachers had a positive take on remote education and believed it was successful to a certain extent because it significantly impacted students' language development. First, a positive influence regarding overcoming psychological fears and difficulties in, as students became more comfortable when participating, in addition to good progress noticed in their creativity. However, teachers argue that distance education negatively influenced students' as they noticed de-motivation and lack of participation on the part of some students.

Besides, the multiple obstacles that have been faced in remote education are technical problems like poor internet quality and lack of accessibility, lack of devices, the low rate of the students' unwillingness to participate and their misbehavior, the teachers' low technological literacy, and the nature of the platforms used. Additionally, most teachers consider distance education less effective because online platforms do not allow vivid meetings and evaluating students' progress is challenging in online classes. Furthermore, teachers have suggested several solutions to enhance distance education. The majority proposed getting more training on different ICT tools. In contrast, other teachers insisted on the correct and well-planned use of such technologies and creating specific platforms that match the nature of each module.

8. Pedagogical Implications

The initial stage of fostering distance education in Algerian universities starts with higher authorities. Collaborative work should happen between the ministry of higher education and scientific research and 'Algerie Telecom' to enhance internet connection quality. The major obstacle faced by teachers in online education was poor internet quality. The other central point at this level is the ICTs and digital educational tools training courses for teachers launched by the ministry of higher education and scientific research. This significant suggestion should be considered for any online platform requiring teachers' particular knowledge to engage effectively in distance education. Several websites offer face-to-face or online training courses, which the Algerian education system may take as an example, such as Erasmus Training Courses, Teacher Academy, and School Online.

The second stage is related to teachers on a personal level, that is to say, to benefit from what ICTs and digital educational tools offer to enhance distance education. Firstly, teachers may create specific class platforms where only the students and the teacher of that class can access it. The creation of online websites is available with easy steps and multi-features such as WordPress. This process may go one step further by creating classroom blogs, where the teacher and students will share their minds about different topics by taking turns in recording either vocals or videos or writing their opinions.

Conclusion

Distance education is the future mode of instruction in Algerian universities. Nevertheless, to foster it, new measures should be taken into consideration. These measures should be tailored to address the challenges faced in remote education by teachers and students. Internet, digital tools, information communication technologies, and online educational platforms are an essential part of remote education and should be ameliorated to enhance the quality of the distance mode of education. Finally, teachers should be trained to use digital educational tools and platforms, manage online classrooms, and design online assessments.

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Appendix

Teachers' Interview Questions

1. Do you think that distance education positively affects EFL students' language learning?
2. To what extent was online education successful during the Covid-19 era?
3. What are the challenges of distance education?
4. What effects did online education have on students' roles?
5. What effects did online education have on teachers' role?
6. What kind of assessment did you employ in remote education?
7. How can distance education be ameliorated?