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Students' Perceptions of E-learning in EFL Higher Education: A Case Study of a First-Year Civilization Course at Naama University, Algeria

تصوّرات الطلبة حول فاعلية التعليم الإلكتروني في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في التعليم العالي: دراسة حالة لمقياس الحضارة لطلبة السنة الأولى بجامعة النعامة - الجزائر

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Abstract

This study investigates student perceptions of e-learning in a first-year Civilization course at Naama University, Algeria. It explores three dimensions of the online learning experience: engagement with digital platforms, use of digital resources for language and content learning, and the influence of technological infrastructure on academic progress. A quantitative survey was administered to 43 first-year undergraduate EFL students, and descriptive statistics were used to identify patterns in learning behaviour and media preferences. Findings indicate that students felt linguistically confident in online environments but faced persistent challenges related to internet connectivity and device availability. Images and short videos were preferred to text-based materials. Although students acknowledged some benefits of online learning, many expressed only moderate satisfaction and favoured blended or face-to-face instruction. The findings support the adoption of a structured blended learning model for EFL courses in Algeria.

Keywords: E-learning perceptions; EFL pedagogy; Algerian higher education; Civilization course; Blended learning.

ملخّص

تستقصي هذه الدراسة تصوّرات طلبة السنة الأولى تخصص لغة إنجليزية بجامعة النعامة حول التعليم الإلكتروني في مقياس الحضارة. تناولت الدراسة ثلاثة محاور رئيسة، هي التفاعل مع المنصات الرقمية، وتوظيف الموارد الرقمية في التعلم اللغوي والمعرفي، وأثر البنية التحتية التكنولوجية في التحصيل الأكاديمي. واعتمدت المنهج الكمي من خلال توزيع استبيان على ثلاثة وأربعين طالباً، مع توظيف التحليل الإحصائي الوصفي لاستخلاص أنماط التعلم وتفضيلات الوسائط. أظهرت النتائج تمتع الطلبة بثقة لغوية مرتفعة في البيئات الرقمية، مقابل استمرار مشكلات ضعف الإنترنت ومحدودية الوصول إلى الأجهزة. كما فضّلوا الصور ومقاطع الفيديو القصيرة على المواد النصية التقليدية. ورغم إدراك بعض مزايا التعليم الإلكتروني، عبّر كثير منهم عن رضا جزئي وتفضيل واضح للتعلم المدمج أو الحضوري. وتدعم النتائج اعتماد نموذج تعلم مدمج يتلاءم مع الواقع الرقمي واللغوي للطلبة في الجزائر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تصوّرات التعليم الإلكتروني؛ تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ التعليم العالي في الجزائر؛ مقياس الحضارة؛ التعلم المدمج

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1. Introduction

Digital technologies have transitioned from supplementary tools to structural requirements within contemporary higher education. In Algeria, this transformation accelerated sharply when the 2020 global health crisis compelled institutions such as Naama University to adopt online delivery systems at short notice. For first-year students enrolled in the Civilization course within the Department of English, this shift presented a dual challenge: engaging with dense socio-political and historical content through a foreign language while simultaneously learning to operate unfamiliar digital platforms.

This study investigates how students at a regional Algerian university experienced the tension between institutional digital ambitions and lived learning realities. The existing literature documents the theoretical potential of virtual learning environments, yet empirical studies that focus specifically on EFL instruction integrating content-based teaching with digital delivery within the Algerian context remain limited. The present research addresses this gap by examining how first-year students perceived their ability to manage both academic English requirements and content-related demands through online platforms.

The central research question is as follows: To what extent do first-year EFL students at Naama University perceive online instruction as effective for content mastery and engagement in the Civilization course? The researchers anticipated that online delivery would encounter considerable difficulties in Algeria's digital environment, owing to infrastructure deficiencies and limited instructional interactivity. The primary aim is to produce a data-informed assessment that can guide the development of blended learning strategies suited to the region's sociotechnical constraints.

2. Theoretical Framework and the E-learning Paradigm

2.1 Evolution of the E-learning Paradigm: From Delivery to Ecosystems

Any assessment of digital tools in higher education requires an understanding of how the term 'e-learning' has evolved in contemporary academic discourse. The concept has existed for several decades as an umbrella label for computer-based instructional methods. Sangrà et al. (2012) show that educational discussions have progressively shifted from a focus on hardware to an examination of communication-based learning systems. E-learning is now best understood as a dynamic educational framework that deploys technology to create learning environments connecting teachers and students across physical boundaries.

This distinction is especially relevant in the Algerian context. A difference exists between 'intentional digital instruction', which Clark and Mayer (2023) define as a pre-planned, evidence-based pedagogical approach, and the provisional methods adopted during the 2020 health crisis. The concept of 'Emergency Remote Teaching' (ERT), defined by Hodges et al. (2020), describes the rapid transfer of regular classroom lectures to platforms such as Moodle without the design of new

instructional methods. This historical distinction provides a foundation for the present study's investigation of whether online delivery limitations are attributable to technological deficits or to instructional practices that have not advanced beyond their initial emergency configurations.

2.2 Transactional Distance and the Social Presence Construct

A well-documented obstacle in virtual learning environments is the psychological distance that students perceive from their instructors and peers. Moore's (1993) Theory of Transactional Distance frames this distance as a communicative space shaped by the interplay of 'Dialogue' (learner-instructor interaction) and 'Structure' (course design rigidity). The Civilization course, with its content-dense modules requiring engagement with historical timelines and complex sociopolitical systems, establishes high structural constraints. Where dialogue is absent, this structural rigidity becomes a barrier to deep understanding.

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) model extends this perspective by arguing that effective learning in the humanities depends on social interaction rather than solitary resource consumption. Garrison et al. (1999) identify 'Social Presence' as the capacity of learners to project their social and emotional identity within digital environments. When this presence is absent, students who have recently transitioned from teacher-directed secondary education risk disconnecting from their academic community, experiencing themselves as isolated users rather than members of a learning collective.

2.3 Cognitive Load and the Linguistic Ceiling in EFL

Students in a Civilization course taught through a foreign language face multiple simultaneous cognitive demand. Sweller's (1988) concept of Cognitive Overload captures the condition in which working memory becomes saturated by competing processing tasks. In this context, the EFL student must develop academic English, acquire disciplinary historical knowledge, and operate unfamiliar digital tools concurrently. Cummins' (1979) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) clarifies the nature of this challenge. Students who are fluent in everyday digital English still lack the academic register required to analyse constitutional developments or engage with historiographic argumentation. In physical classrooms, instructors can bridge this gap through non-verbal cueing and immediate feedback. In virtual settings, students who encounter a *linguistic ceiling* receive no comparable support, and cognitive resources that should be directed toward content comprehension are instead consumed by linguistic and technical navigation.

2.4 Multimodality: Visuals as Pedagogical Anchors

Mayer's (2014) Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning proposes that richer mental models are constructed when information is presented through a combination of verbal and visual channels rather than text alone. For an EFL learner,

a historical map, an infographic, or a short documentary serves as a direct pedagogical anchor. When the academic English register becomes demanding, visual support provides what Krashen (1985) termed 'Comprehensible Input': a non-linguistic entry point into subject matter. In digital environments characterised by fragmented attention and variable connectivity, multimodal materials allow students to access abstract concepts through concrete visual representations, reducing both linguistic and cognitive load.

2.5 The Hybrid Imperative: Balancing Accessibility and Interaction

The digital learning model contains several inherent tensions. E-learning offers flexible access and equal learning opportunities for students facing geographic and financial constraints, yet it also risks what Moore (2013) describes as transactional isolation. History and Civilization studies depend on dialectical exchange, the kind of collaborative enquiry and critical questioning that develops understanding through open discussion. Digital platforms struggle to support spontaneous, high-quality analytical dialogue, particularly where bandwidth constraints aggravate the problem. Hemaidia and Bouamer's (2025) study of the digital divide in Algeria confirms that connectivity failures generate technical frustration that contributes directly to student disengagement and attrition.

Blended Learning has emerged as the dominant response to this tension in global educational systems (Graham, 2006). This framework combines digital flexibility with the face-to-face contact that sustains social presence. In a Flipped Classroom configuration, students access multimedia content online, leaving campus time available for Socratic discussion and collaborative analysis. Table 1 summarises the comparative strengths and limitations of virtual, traditional, and blended approaches across key pedagogical variables.

Table 1: A Functional Comparison of Learning Frameworks

Variable	**Virtual (Fully Online)**	**Traditional (On-Site)**	**Blended (Hybrid)**
Classroom Environment	Isolated / Self-paced	Social / Synchronous	Integrated / Flexible
Cognitive Effort	High (Technical stress)	Moderate (Instructor-led)	Optimised (Multimedia)
Linguistic Focus	Literacy / Reading-heavy	Oral / Spontaneous	Multimodal / Integrated
Key Advantage	Accessibility	Immediate Feedback	Balanced Pedagogy
Primary Risk	Isolation / Attrition	Rigid Scheduling	Complexity of Design

Source: Adapted from Sangrà et al. (2012), Clark & Mayer (2023), and Graham (2006)

3. Methodology and Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative, survey-based research design to investigate how first-year EFL students experienced online learning in the Civilization course at Naama University. The quantitative design was well suited to mapping patterns in technology use and perceived learning experiences across a student cohort. The focus on English-medium instruction is deliberate: The Civilization course is knowledge-dense, requires sustained engagement with complex historical material, and is delivered through a single-module format, making it particularly sensitive to the disruptions introduced by full online migration.

3.1 Participants and Sampling

The target population comprised first-year undergraduates enrolled in the Civilization course at the Department of English, Naama University. Recruitment was conducted through voluntary response sampling via official academic social media groups. A total of 43 complete and valid responses were returned (n = 43), representing an estimated response rate of 60-70% of the active cohort. This sample is adequate for a small-scale, exploratory case study focused on a single course and institution; however, the voluntary response procedure means that findings should be treated as preliminary and context-specific rather than statistically representative of broader student populations. Table 2 presents a demographic breakdown of participants.

Table 2: Participant Demographics

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	18	41.9
	Female	25	58.1
Prior Online Experience	Yes	32	74.4
	No	11	25.6
English Proficiency (Self-Reported)	Intermediate	27	62.8
	Advanced	16	37.2

3.2 Instrument Development and Validation

The primary data collection tool was a 14-item researcher-designed questionnaire hosted on Google Forms. The instrument combined Likert-scale items, multiple-choice questions, and one open-ended item, allowing for both quantitative pattern identification and brief qualitative insight. Item development drew on established frameworks from EFL e-learning research (Bhatti & Alzahrani, 2024; Guemide, 2025). The full instrument is provided in Appendix A.

Validation proceeded in two stages. In the first stage, two senior faculty members reviewed the instrument for content relevance and academic appropriateness. In the second stage, a pilot test was conducted with five students

outside the main cohort to identify linguistic ambiguities and ensure accessibility for first-year undergraduates. Necessary revisions were made before final deployment.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure and Ethical Considerations

The survey remained open for three weeks. Participation was strictly voluntary, and all responses were anonymised to ensure that no personal identifiers could be linked to academic performance records. This measure was intended to encourage candid reporting of technical and linguistic difficulties without risk to participants.

3.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics formed the primary analytical method. Frequencies and percentages were computed for all closed-ended items to establish baseline patterns. A cross-variable review was also conducted to examine whether reported technical difficulties corresponded with lower engagement levels. Open-ended responses were reviewed thematically to complement the quantitative findings. Given the small sample and the descriptive nature of the analysis, no inferential statistics were applied, and no causal claims are advanced on the basis of the data.

4. Results & Discussion

Analysis of the 43 responses produced a detailed profile of the first-year online learning experience at Naama University. The following sections pair descriptive statistics with interpretive observations informed by the theoretical framework presented above.

4.1 Linguistic Comfort and the Technical Divide

Figure (1): Comfort Using English in Online Civilization Learning

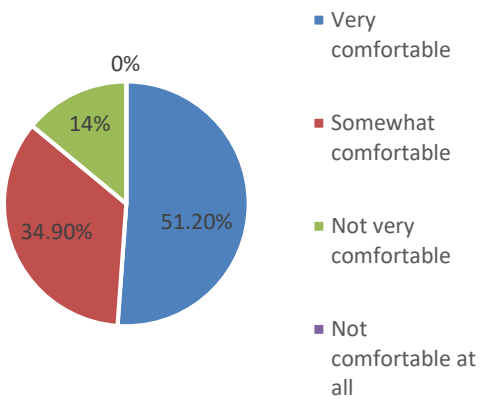
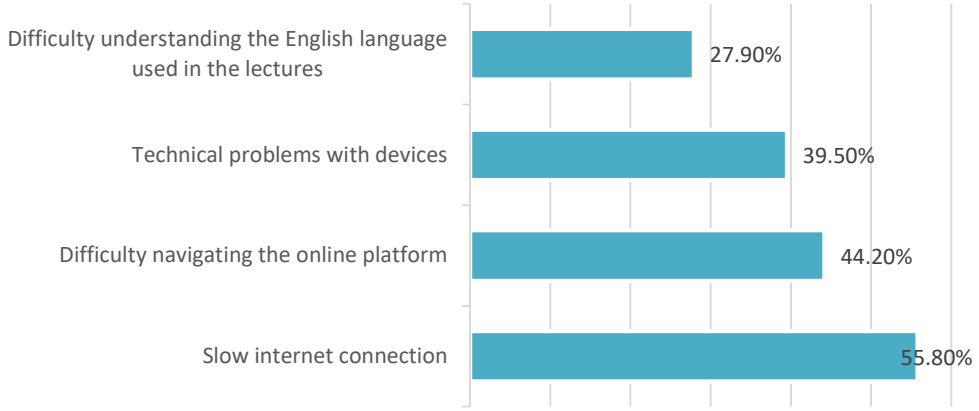


Figure 1 records a notable degree of reported linguistic confidence within the digital classroom: 51.2% of participants described themselves as ‘very comfortable’ using English online, with a further 34.9% ‘somewhat comfortable’. No participant reported active discomfort. This apparent ease, however, most likely reflects Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) rather than the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) required for the Civilization course (Cummins, 1979). Students who communicate fluently through social media in English may still encounter real difficulty with the analytical register demanded by historical coursework, a distinction the self-report data cannot capture with precision.

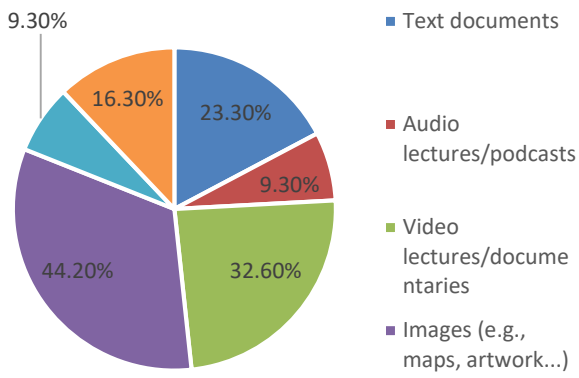
Figure (2): Difficulties Encountered with Online Materials



Slow internet connectivity was cited as the primary barrier by 55.8% of participants, followed by platform navigation difficulties (44.2%) and hardware constraints (39.5%). A further 27.9% identified the academic language of course materials as a specific obstacle, indicating that linguistic difficulty amplifies rather than replaces the technical burden. The co-occurrence of these barriers has direct consequences for course design: addressing only connectivity without attending to academic language support would leave a substantial proportion of students under-served.

4.2 Media Preferences and Visual Scaffolding

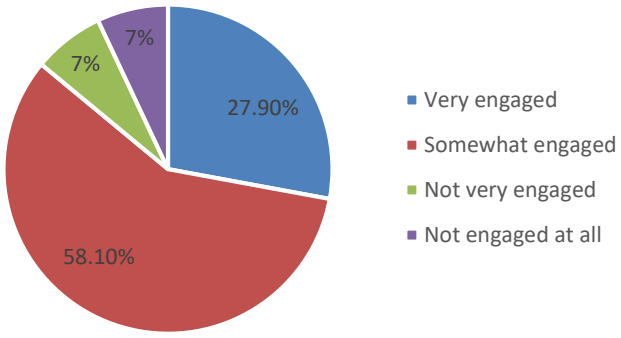
Figure (3): Media Used for Accessing Learning Materials



Static images were the preferred format for 44.2% of participants, while videos and documentaries served 32.6%. Text-based documents attracted the lowest uptake at 23.3%. The finding aligns with Mayer's (2014) Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning: when disciplinary language demands are high and connectivity is unstable, visual materials offer an accessible entry point that reduces overall cognitive load. Images and short videos provide what Krashen (1985) termed 'Comprehensible Input' through non-linguistic channels, allowing students to build conceptual understanding despite concurrent linguistic and technical pressures.

4.3 The Divergence of Student Engagement

Figure (4): Engagement During Online Learning Sessions

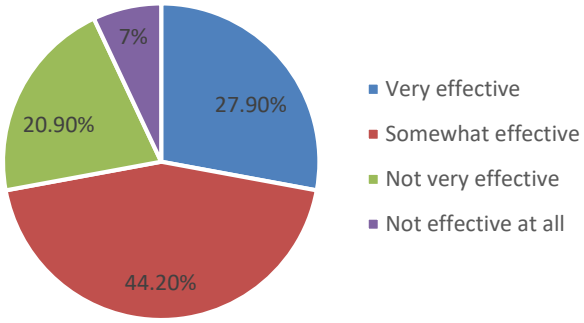


The majority of participants maintained some degree of engagement: 58.1% reported feeling 'somewhat' engaged and 27.9% 'very' engaged, leaving 14% who reported complete detachment from online sessions. While the broad engagement figures are encouraging, this minority deserves closer examination. Students who reported full disengagement are in all probability those most severely affected by ongoing infrastructure failures, for whom technical fatigue has become functionally

indistinguishable from academic withdrawal. The result is consistent with Moore's (2013) Theory of Transactional Distance: where structural rigidity is high and dialogue is limited, the psychological distance between learner and content becomes acute.

4.4 Perceived Instructional Effectiveness

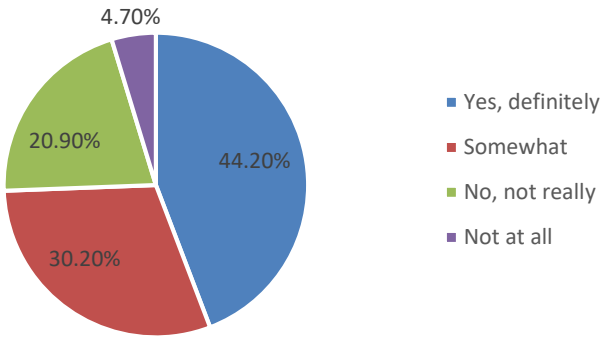
Figure (5): Effectiveness of E-Learning Activities



Perceptions of effectiveness remain cautious. A plurality of students (44.2%) rated online activities as only 'somewhat effective', while 28% considered them 'ineffective'. These figures reflect the inherent difficulty of delivering a discussion-intensive subject through a medium that constrains spontaneous interaction and immediate feedback. The results should be read as student perceptions rather than objective performance measures, which the present study did not collect.

4.5 The Digital vs. Traditional Classroom Conflict

Figure (6): Perception of Online Learning vs. Traditional Classroom

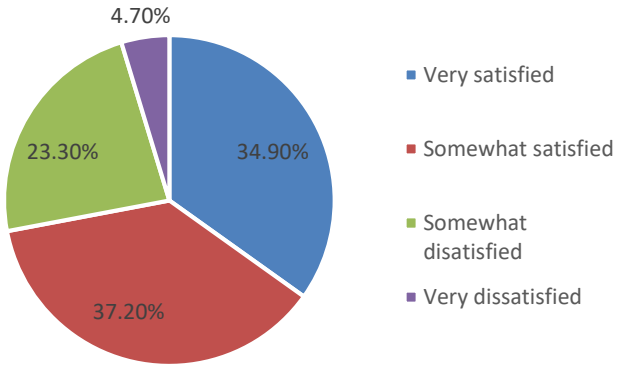


When comparing the two mediums, 44.2% of participants expressed a positive view of the online transition. However, 30.2% remained neutral, and 25.6% explicitly disagreed that the online format could replace the classroom. These results

emphasize that, for first-year students, the social and physical presence of the university campus is a vital component of their academic experience.

4.6 Satisfaction with Lecture Delivery

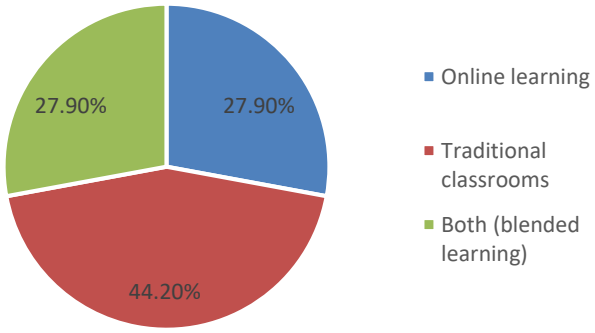
Figure (7): Satisfaction with Online Lectures



Overall satisfaction levels were moderately high, with 72.1% of participants reporting being "satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied". The 28% who expressed dissatisfaction are not a marginal figure; that proportion points to the structural limits of one-way lecture delivery and the need for bandwidth-efficient formats that allow genuine two-way communication.

4.7 Preferred Learning Environments

Figure (8): Preference for Learning Environment



Finally, the data in Figure 8 shows a clear lack of consensus on the way forward. While 44.2% still prefer the traditional classroom, the remaining 55.8% are split equally between exclusive online learning (27.9%) and a blended (hybrid) approach (27.9%). This indicates a growing openness toward hybridity, provided the technical hurdles are adequately addressed.

4.8 Cross-Variable Analysis: Technical Friction and Engagement

A cross-variable review of the responses showed that students who cited slow internet connectivity as their primary technical barrier consistently reported lower or more passive engagement levels than those who did not raise connectivity concerns. While the sample size and the descriptive nature of the analysis preclude formal statistical inference, the distribution suggests that infrastructure limitations function as a notable driver of academic disengagement. The cognitive resources required to manage recurrent connection failures appear to compete directly with those needed for historical analysis and language processing, producing what can be characterised as technical fatigue.

4.9 Discussion

The transition toward e-learning within Algerian higher education, particularly in lecture-intensive modules such as Civilization, represents a significant departure from traditional transmissive pedagogy. Findings from Naama University indicate that this technology-mediated shift has exposed a fundamental tension between institutional digital ambitions and the practical limitations facing students.

A notable discrepancy emerged between students reported linguistic confidence and their apparent difficulty with the academic demands of the course. Although 86.1% of participants described themselves as comfortable using English online, nearly a third identified the formal language of course materials as a specific barrier. Cummins' (1979) BICS/CALP framework accounts for this gap: students who engage regularly with English-language social media and digital entertainment develop everyday communicative fluency, but the Civilization module requires a qualitatively different register involving the critical analysis of sociopolitical structures and historical arguments. In a face-to-face environment, instructors mediate this gap through non-verbal cueing, immediate clarification, and adaptive oral explanation. In a virtual setting, students must manage materials that presuppose disciplinary language competence without direct instructional support.

The data further confirm that the digital divide in Algeria operates as more than a logistical inconvenience. Over half of the cohort cited connectivity failures as their primary obstacle, which imposed an additional cognitive burden (Sweller, 1988) on top of existing linguistic demands. A student attempting to follow academic content on a limited smartphone screen while managing intermittent connectivity faces a threefold processing challenge: technical navigation, linguistic decoding, and conceptual comprehension. The preference for multimodal materials, with 44.2%

favouring images and 32.6% video content, is a rational response to these accumulating constraints. Visual scaffolding provides the 'Comprehensible Input' (Krashen, 1985) that allows learners to access conceptual content through non-linguistic channels when textual processing becomes too demanding.

The 28% of participants who reported sustained dissatisfaction with online lectures signals a structural limitation of one-way content delivery. The Civilization course is inherently dialogic, requiring the kind of debate, contextualisation, and critical exchange that Garrison et al. (1999) associate with social presence. When complex historical narratives are reduced to static PDFs and recorded video streams, this social dimension disappears, and students risk becoming passive consumers of information rather than active participants in knowledge construction. The 25.6% who preferred the traditional classroom over online formats suggests that this social loss is felt most acutely by students who rely on institutional community for their academic identity.

To move beyond Emergency Remote Teaching (Hodges et al., 2020), Naama University and comparable institutions need to adopt a deliberate blended learning framework. Campus time should be reserved for Socratic debate, collaborative analysis, and targeted CALP development, while digital platforms serve as preparatory and supplementary access tools. Platform design must also account for real-world connectivity constraints in Algeria: compressed audio content, mobile-compatible asynchronous discussion forums, and low-bandwidth task formats are more likely to sustain engagement than high-production video streams. The objective is not simply to migrate existing classroom content online, but to redesign the Civilization module as an integrated learning experience that develops historical thinking, academic English, and digital literacy as complementary rather than competing demands.

5. Limitations

Several limitations bear on the interpretation of these findings. First, the sample is small (n = 43) and drawn from a single department at one university, restricting the generalisability of the results to other Algerian institutions, disciplines, or student populations. Second, all data are self-reported, introducing the risk of response bias and limiting the precision of proficiency and satisfaction assessments. Third, the study does not include direct measures of academic achievement such as examination scores or course grades; consequently, all claims about learning effectiveness rest on student perceptions rather than demonstrated outcomes. Fourth, the voluntary sampling procedure may have attracted respondents with particularly strong views about online learning, whether positive or negative, introducing a potential selection bias. Fifth, the faculty perspective on digital course delivery has not been examined, leaving a meaningful analytical dimension unexplored.

6. Conclusion

The data from this study suggest that e-learning, as currently implemented in the Civilization course at Naama University, functions primarily as a content delivery mechanism rather than as a genuinely interactive pedagogical environment. Online course delivery preserved programme continuity during the post-pandemic period, but it did not reproduce the cognitive and social conditions associated with effective face-to-face instruction in a conceptually demanding, language-mediated discipline. Students who are technically proficient in digital environments still encountered academic difficulties when coursework required advanced language use alongside historical reasoning. First-year undergraduates appear particularly vulnerable to technical fatigue: recurrent connectivity failures and limited device access were reported as barriers to engagement with the deeper analytical tasks the course is designed to develop. These findings point to the need for a formal blended learning policy that reserves physical campus time for discussion-based and language-focused activities requiring face-to-face interaction, while using digital platforms for preparatory tasks and resource access that do not depend on stable high-speed connectivity. Any such policy should also address the BICS/CALP gap directly by providing students with structured academic language support within the online environment. This study is limited to one module at one institution, and its findings cannot be extended to the Algerian higher education system as a whole. The most productive direction for future research is longitudinal, tracking whether technical and linguistic barriers diminish over time as students gain digital experience, or persist as structural constraints on academic achievement. Collecting faculty perceptions of digital transformation would provide a complementary perspective that the present study has not been able to address.

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Appendix A : Questionnaire Instrument

EFL Student E-learning Experience Survey

Thank you for participating in this survey. We are interested in understanding your experiences with e-learning materials used in your Civilization course at Naama University. Please answer all questions to the best of your ability. There are no right or wrong answers. Your responses will be kept confidential.

Section 1: General Information

1. Gender: □ Male □ Female
2. How comfortable are you using English to learn about other cultures? □ Very comfortable □ Somewhat comfortable □ Not very comfortable □ Not comfortable at all
3. Have you had any prior experience with online learning before this course? □ Yes □ No
4. How would you rate your English language proficiency? □ Intermediate □ Advanced

Section 2: E-learning Materials and Media

5. What types of media do you use to access your learning materials? (Select all that apply) □ Text documents (e.g., articles, readings) □ Audio lectures or podcasts □ Video lectures or documentaries □ Images (e.g., maps, artwork) □ Interactive exercises or quizzes □ Social media platforms (e.g., discussion forums)

6. Please select all difficulties you encounter when accessing or using online materials and media: □ Slow internet connection □ Difficulty navigating the online platform (Moodle) □ Technical problems with audio or video files (e.g., not loading, buffering) □ Materials not clear or well-organised □ Difficulty understanding the English language used in the lectures □ Other: _____

7. Which type(s) of media do you find most helpful for learning the Civilization course? (Select all that apply) □ Text documents (e.g., articles, readings) □ Audio lectures or podcasts □ Video lectures or documentaries □ Images (e.g., maps, artwork) □ Interactive exercises or quizzes □ Social media platforms (e.g., discussion forums) □ Other: _____

Section 3: Engagement and Learning

8. How engaged do you feel during your online learning sessions for the Civilization course? □ Very engaged □ Somewhat engaged □ Not very engaged □ Not engaged at all

9. Do you find the e-learning activities in the Civilization course effective? □ Very effective □ Somewhat effective □ Not very effective □ Not effective at all

10. Do you feel that online sessions allow you to learn about the Civilization course as effectively as a traditional classroom setting? □ Yes, definitely □ Somewhat □ No, not really □ Not at all

11. Please explain any challenges you face in learning about the Civilization course online.

_____
_____
_____

Section 4: Overall Experience

12. Overall, how satisfied are you with your online lectures of the Civilization course? □ Very satisfied □ Somewhat satisfied □ Somewhat dissatisfied □ Very dissatisfied

13. Why?

_____
_____
_____

14. In general, what do you prefer? □ Online learning □ Traditional classrooms (on-site) □ Both (blended learning)

Thank you for your time and participation!