

Teaching English during Covid-19 at the University of Adrar

Enseigner la langue anglaise pendant le Covid-19 à l'Université d'Adrar

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic forced Algerian higher education institutions (HEIs) to shift to emergency remote teaching (ERT) whereby face-to-face interactions were dismissed and the home became the new classroom. However, most universities and higher education schools preferred a blended system, where students were taught in class for times and remotely for some other times. The present paper reports on the results of an investigation into how teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the University of Adrar, southern Algeria, reacted to the various issues and challenges encountered during ERT and, particularly to the blended teaching-learning process. A mixed-method approach was the main means of data elicitation. The findings reveal that the teaching staff is still resilient to change. The paper aims at assessing the instructors' commitment to online or face-to-face teaching; whereas, the ultimate aim is to invite the scientific community to discuss future post-Covid challenges to EFL.

Keywords: Higher education-blended teaching-EFL-ERT-Adrar-Algeria.

Résumé

La pandémie de Covid-19 a contraint les établissements d'enseignement supérieur algériens (EES) à passer à l'enseignement à distance d'urgence (ERT), dans lequel les interactions en face-à-face ont été abandonnées et le domicile est devenu la nouvelle salle de classe. Cependant, la plupart des établissements d'enseignement supérieur préféraient un système mixte, dans lequel les étudiants suivaient un enseignement en classe et à distance. L'article présent rend compte des résultats d'une enquête sur la manière dont les enseignants d'anglais langue étrangère (EFL) de l'Université d'Adrar ont réagi aux divers défis rencontrés au cours de l'ERT et, en particulier, à l'enseignement-apprentissage mixte. Une approche mixte a été le principal moyen d'obtention des données. Les résultats révèlent que le personnel enseignant est toujours résilient au changement. L'article vise à évaluer l'engagement des instructeurs envers l'enseignement en ligne; alors que l'objectif ultime est d'inviter la communauté scientifique à discuter des futurs défis post-Covid de l'EFL.

Mots clés : Enseignement supérieur, enseignement mixte, EFL, ERT, Adrar, Algérie.

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Introduction

In the 21st century, world institutions confronted a serious scourge, the Covid-19 worldwide health threat, or Coronavirus. In 2019-2020, that global pandemic drastically affected the social, political, and economic levels on a universal scale, upsetting the lives of billions of people on Earth. Widespread contaminations compelled world institutions to impose partial then full lockdowns to all public spaces like cafés, gyms, markets, stadiums, schools, restaurants, and shops so as to impede the spread of the virus. All social, economic and communal transactions were carried out through virtual means such as online shopping and teleworking. To the educational and higher educational sectors, 2020 was a very challenging year whereby the teaching-learning process got disrupted, teachers and learners had to quickly convert to unknown methods and to completely new teaching-learning environments. Besides coping with the effect of Covid-19 on their own lives, the teachers had to develop new competencies to promote the virtual learning process.

Many educators joined online communities on Facebook, Twitter and other social networks to exchange professional experience between themselves. They encouraged each other during the pandemic not only professionally, but also emotionally (Ito, 2023), affectively, cognitively, and socially. Since all teachers were working from home within similar environments and circumstances, and many had limited abilities to provide support to students through technology-based language teaching-learning (Wang, 2021; Mudenda, Daka & Fadare, 2023), joining social media (SM) spaces was the best move so as to steer the conversion to remote teaching (Trust et al., 2020).

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA region), research has shown that in 2020 more than 103 million learners suffered from the pandemic full lockdown because they were advised, then obliged to stay at home (Audah et al., 2020). Several governments took prompt measures to compete against this challenge. Some central authorities promoted open education channels and online portals for dispensing lectures (Algeria, Jordan), or through services provided by online learning institutes like iCademy Middle East of the UAE, or through developing e-learning programs to aid learners continue their learning in Saudi Arabia. The Sultanate of Oman encouraged the use of online platforms like Google Classrooms, Schoology, Seesaw, Blackboard, and Moodle enabling students and teachers to maintain the teaching-learning process from home.

Online learning has positive arguments in its favour; accessibility, affordability, and flexibility. In matter of accessibility, online learning is available to learners even in remote areas. Affordability lies in its cost which, for many, is not expensive particularly if it is offered by the higher education institution. Flexibility stands out as its most exciting feature for it allows learners to control their learning pace and to complete their homework and assignments online in due time from home.

In Algeria, the policy-makers enforced regional shutdowns that were soon followed by large-scale closures. After the increase in numbers of contaminations, preventive actions (Persada et al., 2022) were taken; the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS) imposed social distancing protocols, face masks, and protective hydro-alcoholic gels to all higher education institutions (HEIs). Scientific meetings and manifestations were annulled, face-to-face (FTF) interactions and in-person teachings were cancelled.

To cope with this *new normal*, national HEIs chose alternative ways to FTF teaching, such as blended learning through *Moodle*, *Blackboard*, and *Teams*, or through audio-video apps like

Google Meet, Google Classroom, and Zoom. Others like emails, *Facebook* groups, and *Google forms* were also utilized. Yet, the main issue was not with ERT or blended learning, rather it was a problem with the use of the various technological tools by the teaching staffs who, for the majority, were neither prepared nor trained.

The ministry of higher education imposed obligatory pedagogical and information communication and technology (ICT) trainings to all new higher education recruits starting from 2013. A few years later, it required permanent teachers to attend computer classes to learn how to upload lectures on Moodle and to prepare for online formative and summative tests as well as written and oral exams. Thus, the shift towards online teaching was already a priority to the central authorities well before the pandemic took place.

Many Algerian university teachers did not attend ICT and computer classes. When Covid-19 was declared a pandemic, the Algerian decision-makers decided to shift first to blended learning whereby lectures were delivered equally in-class and off-class (online), then to emergency remote teaching (ERT) where all classes were strictly online. The shift to ERT and the lack of preparation thereof proved to be challenging issues to Algerian higher education teachers.

In-person teaching and FTF interactions are fundamental principles to language teaching, for they inspire learners' motivation and achievement (Ghounane, 2022). Yet, and subsequently to the pandemic, direct student-teacher interaction was not allowed, and in-person (FTF) learning environments switched to online remote virtual ones (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021). The shift was problematic to EFL teachers at the university of Adrar, who did not have any professional trainings where technology stamps the whole curriculum (Hubbard, 2021).

Purpose of the Study

The present research investigates how Adrar University EFL teachers perceived and coped with obstacles faced while delivering online lectures during the 2019-2021 coronavirus breakdown. Their assessments, attitudes, feedbacks and "willingness to integrate technology effectively in their teachings" (Khan et al. 2022, p:35) prove to be critical for the success or failure of online pedagogies; their perception of the usefulness of technology in education deeply impacts their educational patterns. Teachers' experience, motivation, and pedagogical considerations are central to their teaching practices (Boukhechba & Djaid, 2023).

Yet, many language teachers were too resilient and never used technology in class. As Wang (2021) states: "Regarding values and efforts of using technology in teaching, some teachers look to technology to solve their current pedagogical problems; however, some teachers are reluctant to use technology" (p:46). Ghounane (2022), however, argues that online learning is absent in the Algerian educational context. She says: "What is posted on some educational platforms is not online learning. In implementing online learning, the teacher should create a virtual classroom to promote face-to-face learning in virtual settings. Teachers tend to post just handouts and videos for students while interaction is absent." (p:493) This affirmation denounces the diversity of problems faced by developing countries like Algeria where online e-learning was, and is still at its infancy.

Ineffectiveness to use Moodle and the development of negative attitudes (Ghounane & Rabahi, 2023) were major impediments to the students during their online learning. Next to those issues, social and educational inequalities (Bouhania, 2022) because of students' families' low economic capital, were also heavy impediments to the learners. These circumstances widened the social gap between learners with dissimilar demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Later, unequal learning opportunities impacted profoundly their skills, achievement of knowledge, and academic accomplishment; thus, constituting a “major threat” (Khan et al., 2022) to developing countries such as Algeria.

Focus on EFL teachers sprang from the fact that actual researchers were part of the same teaching staff and, hence, could have an easy access to their colleagues either through emails or in face-to-face interaction. Teaching fellows from other departments were not involved in the research since this last was a small-scale study investigating the problems encountered by EFL teachers only. The study provides qualitative and quantitative data about synchronous/asynchronous teaching at the level of the department of English, Faculty of Arts and Languages, particularly after the move from on-site instruction to online ERT.

Significance of the Study

The research is significant to the educational community, for it studies the effects and challenges of Covid-19 shutdown as actually perceived by the teaching staff. It not only investigates teachers’ attitudes towards the rapid implementation of online teaching, but it also unveils the problems they faced while learning hurriedly how to use technology in class (Trust et al., 2020).

The findings illustrate that the Algerian ELT professionals’ experience of teaching during the coronavirus pandemic is an asset of paramount importance to the administrative and decision-making centres since the teachers have a first-hand experience with the *overnight* transition to online teaching during ERT. More than that, the results enable to confirm and consolidate the findings of previous studies within the Arab world in general, and Algeria in particular.

The conclusions of the study make the picture clearer about the readiness, *or not*, of the teaching staff to move from old to new methods of language teaching. Accordingly, an utmost importance is devoted to the educational authorities which contribute directly to the failure or to the success of the whole enterprise. They are accountable for forcing teachers to change quickly and adapt their teaching styles.

The administration is responsible for the implementation of the technological tools and also for the conversion to the *new* virtual language classes with little or no preparation and training of teachers. Hence, the higher education management added a lot of stress and problems to the teachers during the implementation of online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Research Questions

The main questions for this research are:

RQ1: How did the teachers react to the ERT during the pandemic?

RQ2: What were the main teachers’ problems encountered during the lockdown?

RQ3: What are the EFL teachers’ evaluations of blended teaching?

RQ4: Which program did they prefer in the teaching process?

RQ5: Is the university ready to implement the new method of teaching?

Research Objectives

The chief objective of this research is exploring the difficulties encountered by Adrar university EFL teachers during the Covid-19 epidemic, mainly through the shift from onset/in-class/FTF interface to online/virtual ERT. Furthermore, the study investigates the drawbacks and handicaps that the teachers confronted during the ERT process and the negative impacts it had on them.

Another focal questioning is whether ERT steered any *just-in-time* professional development (Trust et al., 2020) of teachers through the mastery of technological methods of teaching, and through the development of their personal digital literacy (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021) and distance pedagogy. As Erdogan and Yazici (2022) put it, teachers must be ready to change, collaborate with peers, flexible, continuously developing their profession and most importantly tech-savvy. They must “continuously advance their professional knowledge and skills throughout their careers” (Ito, 2023).

Last but not least, the research aims at clarifying whether, according to Adrar university EFL teachers, the Algerian higher education institutions are ready to move to a full online teaching-learning process or not.

1. Literature Review

Class closures raised crucial challenges to teachers and policy-makers who had to adapt quickly to online techniques and forget about paper-based in-class assessments, tests, and exams. More than that, they had to set innovative organizational and cognitive strategies to cope with the new methods of teaching and learning. Shifting from old FTF classes to modern remote digital ones has become an unavoidable option.

1.1 E-Learning

Horton (2006, in Benadla and Hadji 2020) states that e-learning uses computers and information technology to generate “learning experiences” (p.1). Although the above-mentioned definition focuses on improving the quality of learning since it is central to the process, Mikidache (2021) features that e-learning may not only focus on quality improvement, but also on its provision of new skills and on its organizational capacity. A simple definition might be: e-learning uses electronic devices, computers, laptops, tablets, smartphones and associated technologies to provide learners with synchronous or asynchronous lectures through the Internet. Ultimately, e-learning aims at designing and managing efficient pedagogical systems, curricula, and programmes (Zermane and Aitouche, 2020).

In 2006, Algerian HEIs launched e-learning systems with the assistance of famous foreign companies like “Thomson” and “Microsoft” (Benadla and Hadji, 2020). Their application was carried out through Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), and all national HEIs were advised to spread the use of these facilitating pedagogical means. Thereafter, Algerian universities shifted towards a wider use of modern tools of communication and networking with both staff and learners. However, implementing ICT in higher education brought to the surface various difficulties for teachers and learners (Guemide and Benachaiba, 2012).

1.2 Emergency Remote Teaching

Throughout the world, the socio-educational landscape experienced profound metamorphoses once school institutions switched to online emergency remote teaching (ERT). Subsequently to the epidemic outbreak, ERT was the only alternative to FTF education. In the words of Hodges et al. (2020) emergency-remote teaching was a “*stop-gap delivery*” (in Khan et al. 2022, p:34) which rationale was preserving the flow of education and maintaining the wheel of education rolling despite the pandemic (Subekti, 2020). ERT, though, provides learners with momentary teaching that, oftentimes, consists of unplanned instruction designs due to the rapid shift to the new methods of online teaching. In other words, ERT is a temporary method of teaching imposed by “*unforeseen circumstances such as natural disasters or war*” (Hodges et al., 2020; in Moorhouse and Kohnke, 2021, p:360).

In the actual paper, ERT describes the emergency process of language teaching used in Algeria during the Covid-19 pandemic. Algerian university-dismissed classes were programmed through Moodle, Zoom and Google Meet or Google Classroom. Partial online classes took place, and online lectures were delivered through the net for some time, while others were held offline in class for another time in equal proportion to online sessions (Ghounane, 2022). This was mainly due to the type of material, that is; formal lectures could be delivered online; whereas, practical sessions necessitated learners' physical presence on-site.

Moodle and Teams were the most favoured means of asynchronous teaching for their accessibility, availability, flexibility, suppleness, and learner-centeredness in Algerian universities (Ghounane and Rabahi, 2023). Through Moodle, the lectures were uploaded in Pdf format and PowerPoint (PPT) slides, or through lecture videos that could be watched synchronously or asynchronously at will.

Synchronous type of teaching-learning is quite recent as a method of online education. It is a pedagogical means thanks to which instructors and students interact through video-conferences in real-time (cf. Subekti, 2020); they can debate and exchange ideas simultaneously although geographically separated. Synchronous teaching-learning, or "*Video-based synchronous computer-mediated communication (VSCMC)*" (Liu and Bangou, 2022) is grounded on applications like Google Meet, Skype and Zoom and other means like smart phones, computer programmes, cameras and instant messages.

Asynchronous mode of delivery, however, is characterized by no direct teacher-learner exchanges. The teachers post courses on online platforms like Moodle and Google Classroom, and grant free access to students at any time (Rasmitadila et al., 2020), or within an accommodating time limitation. It allows students to learn at their own pace from their homes or else without any physical obligation to attend classes and conferences. Asynchronous educational material can be transmitted to learners via a variety of tools such as emails, chat forums, and social media platforms like Facebook (Ito, 2023). Blogs and internet websites (Google.com, youtube.com, and Facebook.com, etc.) are also part of the learning management systems (LMSs) (Erdogan and Yazici, 2022; Lee et al., 2022).

Synchronous and asynchronous modes of delivery had their respective advantages and disadvantages which affected the efficiency and effectiveness of online teaching; their impacts were well felt by the students (Persada et al., 2022). Both methods were, nevertheless, the preferred means of knowledge dispensing at higher educational level during the Covid-19 pandemic. This statement is substantiated in Moorhouse's (2020) study of Hong-Kong teachers and learners.

Unexpectedly, the transition to distance e-learning brought to the fore several challenges such as Internet expenses, irregularity of material used to upload and deliver lectures, and access to students' personal information (Murphy, 2020; UNESCO, 2020; Bouhania, 2022). More than that, dissimilar accessibility to technological means, absence of motivation on the part of learners, lack of verbal interactions between teachers and students, nonexistence of teacher-student and student-student social connections during the teaching-learning process (Subekti, 2020), and inefficient use of technology by instructors were handicaps to the success of the modern method.

1.3 The Internet and Education

Internet teaching was not flawless, and many obstacles had to be confronted not only by the teachers but also by the administrative authorities such as departments, faculties, universities,

and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS). The most famous impediments were online assessments, preventing cheating, and avoiding academic dishonesty when the learners were in virtual learning environments (VLE) (Sa'di et al., 2021).

Online teaching requested priming the teachers to use the technological software effectively and adequately, composing online downloadable lectures along exams and evaluations, mastering videoconferencing, and managing classes at a distance. Teachers needed to adapt to the new methods; they had also to adjust their skills and acquire new competencies to face those challenges.

Teachers' positive or negative attitudes towards integrating this modern technology into education, particularly in foreign language teaching, was an issue *per se*. They had not only to handle extrinsic but also intrinsic impediments. The extrinsic issues were mainly due to the unstable internet connection, expensive technological software, mediocre or inadequate training, minimal or inexistent institutional support, software programmes, tests and online assessment tools, and last (but not least) students' absenteeism and lack of "*self-discipline, patience and sincerity during the learning process of the learners*" (Biswas and Dey, 2020, p. 4). The intrinsic hinderances, on the other hand, were due to the teachers' own stance, attitudes and beliefs (cf. Khan, 2022) towards the use of technology in higher education, in general, and language teaching, in particular.

The teachers have become "*task designers, motivational promoters, technical supporters, consultants, progress monitors, learner trainers, decision-makers, and self-taught developers...*" (Wang, 2021, p:46) which, in other words, added new responsibilities to their burden. Since they applied new methods in the field, their role and appreciation (Freihat, 2020) must be acknowledged; more than that, their beliefs regarding the feasibility of online (synchronous/asynchronous) teaching is of supreme importance to the decision-makers at the macro- (MESRS), meso- (academies, faculties, universities), and micro- (teachers, instructors) levels.

Changes in the curriculum, methods, and approaches to language affect teaching practices, particularly that, under the coronavirus lockdowns, the use of technology has become the only reasonable solution to "*keep the wheels of education rolling*" (Etedali, 2021) without any risk. The next sections give an overview of research on e-learning in Algeria.

1.4 Distance Education in Algeria

In Algeria, online learning and blended learning are the main means of technology-enhanced learning. They are also known as digital teaching-learning through computers and the Internet. By definition, online learning is an educational model that combines between various learning systems and a community of learners (Persada et al., 2022). Its main characteristics are its synchronous and asynchronous modes of delivery through a multiplicity of devices like smartphones and laptops. It also enables students to learn from home, or anywhere, and to interact with their teachers and classmates at a distance.

It is important to note that, as a concept and key word in technology enhanced teaching-learning, online learning received a variety of definitions which, oftentimes, were confounding. During the last two decades, the concept was described differently depending on authors and researchers; their definitions were largely different, and most of the time contradictory (see Hubbard, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic induced Algerian universities to shift towards a more digital pedagogy and an online mode of teaching to enable the educational actors to carry on remotely and safely their roles through distance online platforms like Moodle, and Teams (Ghounane, 2020),

through social media (SM) tools like Facebook and YouTube, or through applications like Google Meet, Zoom, Jitsi Meet (Ghounane and Rabahi, 2023). However, the implementation of that inevitable and challenging remote online teaching-learning practice was done hurriedly in some universities. Benadla and Hadji (2021) confirm this argument and concur that national HEIs were ordered to hastily implement the new methods of teaching, and to switch to online education to maintain the health of teachers, learners and the administrative staff and personnel because of the coronavirus threat.

Ghounane and Rabahi (2023) validate Benadla and Hadji's assertion, and state:

"The sudden shift sheds light on many problems that affected the use of these platforms during the pandemic. Teachers' *technostress* and *technophobia*, students' lack of motivation and ICT knowledge, technical problems, and lack of training are among these issues. They affect students' attitudes toward online learning."
(p:18)

Many negative aspects followed the rush in implementing e-learning. These were, for instance, the lack of any standards of pedagogical quality among universities and faculties, teachers' limited knowledge and experience with technology in class (Subekti, 2020), and the lack of control of content delivery, evaluations, and exams (Affouneh, Salha, and Khlaif, 2020). In a few words, the new method of teaching was executed in such a haste that it gave birth to detrimental outcomes leading HEIs to a trial-and-error era (Naqvi and Zehra, 2020).

Implementing technology-enhanced learning (TEL) to all HEIs at the same time and in the same manner proved to be catastrophic, for Algerian HEIs did not have the same human and technological potential. Many lacked adequate and necessary infrastructures and resources. The best way would have been applying TEL taking into consideration the particular characteristics of each department, school, and faculty. Then again, the central and administrative authorities had to deal with substantial issues related to the application of online learning, like the equipment and its maintenance, training the teaching and administrative staff to use it appropriately, and insuring qualitative online content and delivery. More than ever, Algeria needed a successful and competitive higher education system to convey knowledge effectively, efficiently, and fairly through the Internet to all students.

At another level, the MESRS confronted serious problems related to Internet use for teaching and learning. Among these, one can cite Internet connection which, in some remote areas like mountains, countryside, and Ksour (old village-oases in the Sahara), was not always available. Computer devices like PCs and laptops were not accessible to everyone, students in particular, which made access to lectures restricted rather than far-reaching (Bouhania, 2022). Last of all, the Ministry had to cope with inadequate and mediocre training (Benadla and Hadji, 2020) of the teaching staff, which led to dissatisfaction on the part of the learners.

1.5 E-learning at the Local Level

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the difficulties encountered were both academic, human and technical in nature. Their influence on EFL teaching in Algeria impacted also the communication skills of teachers and learners. It is worth mentioning that even though online learning was not new to Algerian instructors, it has become more than necessary and imperative during the coronavirus pandemic (Ghounane, 2022). However, sheer necessity does not account for the teachers' low efficiency in adopting and adapting to the new mode of education.

Interest in e-learning in Algerian HEIs is triggered by its importance in shifting from conventional traditional methods of teaching to blended ones. Many researchers stress the usefulness of online language education. For instance, Nesba (2021) declares that, at the University of El-Oued, teachers and learners are generally satisfied with the new method of language teaching.

Sarnou and Sarnou (2021), explored how the shift to Moodle during the Covid-19 pandemic affected Algerian EFL teachers and students from Mostaganem University. The obstacles encountered by the teachers using Moodle were various; among these is downloading/uploading lectures to/from Moodle which was neither beneficial nor effective. They informed about the frustration students feel because of no interaction with teachers to discuss the lectures and their contents. Nonetheless, one positive conclusion they registered regarding the use of Google Meet and Facebook closed groups is that they were successful since they allowed teachers and learners to interact verbally and exchange ideas.

This research, hence, aimed at investigating 'if' e-learning and ERT were catastrophic during the pandemic in southern Algeria? And 'how' to confront these, or else, in case of other unforeseeable menaces? The definitive aim of this study is to provide the teaching community with a theoretical background regarding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the teaching-learning process in Algeria, since research on this matter is still rare and scant.

2. Research Methodology

This study sought to investigate EFL teachers' attitudes toward the use of technology and the Internet during the coronavirus pandemic. The research focused on challenges regarding the implementation of this innovative method of teaching. A mixed-methods approach was used with the teachers of the department of English, University of Adrar, to cross-validate both qualitative and quantitative data and to strengthen its findings (Lo and Chen, 2021). An online survey elicited quantitative data, while semi-structured interviews obtained qualitative information accounting for each individual teacher's attitudes and behaviours.

In this research, the quantitative conditions were not completely met, for the respondents were not numerous (n=12 out of 18). Yet, the researchers used the available staff members as part of a non-random selection. To obtain quantitative data for this study, the electronic online-survey was the ideal tool since the teachers were confined to their homes during the pandemic. Moreover, online surveys allow respondents to take time to answer the questions, particularly that some of them engaged their professional integrity while answering the questions.

The questionnaire subdivides into three main sections. The first section enquired about teachers' personal reactions to Internet-based EFL teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic and whether any groundwork/training was done to cope with it. The second part asked questions about the main issues and needs encountered by the teachers during the whole ERT process, and whether there were any optimistic or adverse impacts on the teaching-learning method. The last section examined the teachers' evaluation of blended teaching, and which program they preferred using.

As far as qualitative data are concerned, the researchers opted for semi-structured interviews to allow the respondents express themselves freely. It is well known that during interviews, participants may disclose unknown facts to the interviewers. The importance of semi-structured interviews is well grounded, since they enable both interviewer and interviewee to develop the subject in different directions, and opening up new research vistas. The researcher can modify the structure of the interview at will depending on the direction that the interviewee is taking

(Robson and McCartan, 2016). In face-to-face interviews, which is the case in this study, the interviewer can notice the respondents' verbal and non-verbal responses, make the questions clearer, and build a rapport of trust with the interviewees.

2.1 Participants

Eighteen (n=18) teachers represent the whole population of EFL instructors at the Department of English, Adrar University. However, due to various circumstances, the sample of study was 12, and the actual researchers were not involved in the research. The participants had different academic statuses ranging from professor (8.30%) to associate professor (50%), to assistant professor (16.7), and finally lecturer (25%). The teaching experiences ranged between 10 to 25 years, and the specialties varied between civilization, didactics, literature, and linguistics.

2.2 Data Collection Procedures

An online survey was sent to the EFL teachers of the Department of English, University of Adrar Ahmed Draia. It comprised three main sections split into 23 questions. Yet, for practical reasons, this paper reports on the results of eight questions, only. The latter addressed the teachers' experience with tech use, e-learning platforms, and online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic and school lockdown. The first part consisted of two main questions that focused on how the teachers reacted to online-based teaching during the pandemic and their pre-Covid-19 personal and professional preparation to delve into this new method of teaching.

The next two questions composed the second part and tackled the teachers' problems and needs while using technology in teaching, and the optimistic or adverse impacts of the new method of teaching. The two next queries made up the third section and inquired about the EFL teachers' evaluation of blended teaching, and what were their preferred programs. And finally, the two last questions concerned online teaching, whether it enhanced or impeded the whole process, and investigated the university's readiness to implement the new method.

The semi-structured interviews took place during (coffee) breaks in the teachers' room. Most of the discussions were friendly, and the educators were asked to express themselves freely since there were no recordings, but just note-taking. The questions were straight, dealing with the topic at hand, i.e.: ERT teaching, the staff, and the university.

2.3 Findings

Since the switch to blended learning followed protocols imposed by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS), online support had to be accessible to the teachers in order to assist them with their classes. During the lockdown, all the courses were moved online to the University's e-Learning platform. Accounts were established for teachers and students alike. The former posted their lectures, which could be accessed by students freely and at all times; the teachers were also available to clarify the lectures or to answer any given queries. The teachers also used Flipgrid, Google meet, Google classroom, and Zoom. The results of both the survey and the interviews are presented in the following lines:

Part one:

-Teachers' reaction to online-based teaching during the pandemic and their pre-pandemic readiness to delve into this new method of teaching:

The EFL teachers reacted differently to the switch. While some had positive reactions, others had negative ones. In the interviews, one participant commented that "*there were some difficulties as far as the students were concerned*". Another replied that the shift did not go smoothly; consequently, they had to repeat their lessons, rework their lesson plans, and adapt them to the new method. Only one participant admitted to still finding the switch difficult.

Asked about the use of technology in class before Covid-19, two teachers admitted that they did not use any while two others were already using Moodle. These last received technical and pedagogical training during their first year of enrolment at the university of Adrar.

Count of Did the switch become easier with time?

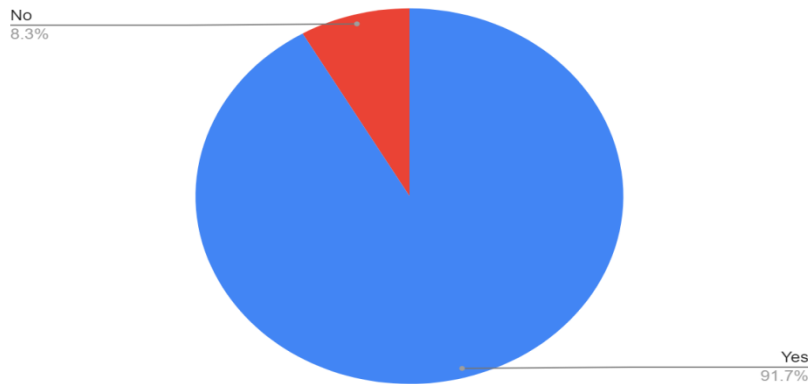


Figure1: Participants' feeling towards the switch

When asked about what they needed to cope with the new online teaching method, one participant commented that the teachers have to be well-trained beforehand and that they are required to be well-informed about online communication and technology use, for it is totally different from FTF interaction. One participant suggested launching 'peer teaching' to allow both students and teachers to play a vital role in the teaching-learning process.

Part two:

-Teachers' problems and needs while using the new technology, and its impacts on the methods of teaching-learning.

One of the participants asserted that "sometimes the problems were mainly technical, such as weak internet flow or cut off. Other times, it was the students' high absenteeism rate and weak (or lack of) interaction during online lectures".

Students' absences to online lectures and practical sessions (TDs) had adverse effects on the whole process. One could not verify that the students were present during the lectures since switching on their cameras was not required and proved to be relatively embarrassing to some students and teachers as well. Hence, participation in the discussions was rather insignificant, and, accordingly, results and marks were too low and too discouraging.

The teachers stated that their main problem was the internet connection. The net was the number one issue in online teaching in ERT.

Part three:

The EFL teachers' evaluation of blended teaching, and what is their preferred program.

33.3% of the participants prefer to avoid online teaching because they believe that some EFL modules cannot be taught in this form. One participant prefers FTF synchronous classes because they believe that human contact is important in the learning process, and that it allows more teacher-learner interactions.

More than fifty-eight percent (n=58.3%) of the participants use Google classroom for the reason that it is easy to use by both students and teachers. Live sessions via Meet can be started directly from the classroom and it works perfectly with other platforms such as Flipgrid which is used mainly by teachers of Oral Expression. We can safely assume here that the EFL teachers appreciated the leveling up due to the switch. Not only have they finally joined the world of online education, but also, they learned new methods and techniques of teaching and improved themselves in keeping their classes interesting and their students engaged. When asked if the experience was beneficial to them, all participants approved.

After the adoption of the blended method, the teachers chose among various options to deliver their online classes; hence, 58.3% of the participants used Google classroom. 8.3% favoured the university's platform, whereas, 33.3% relied on Flipgrid and Google meet (cf. Figure2).

Part four:

Did online teaching enhance or impede the whole process, and is the university ready to implement this new method?

The participants' views regarding the effect of distance teaching on the learning process differed. Seven participants believe that it enhanced the process. One commented that the majority of students' intellectual level increased, but others decreased considerably. The rest of the participants believe that it interrupted the learning process and proved less effective than the traditional way.

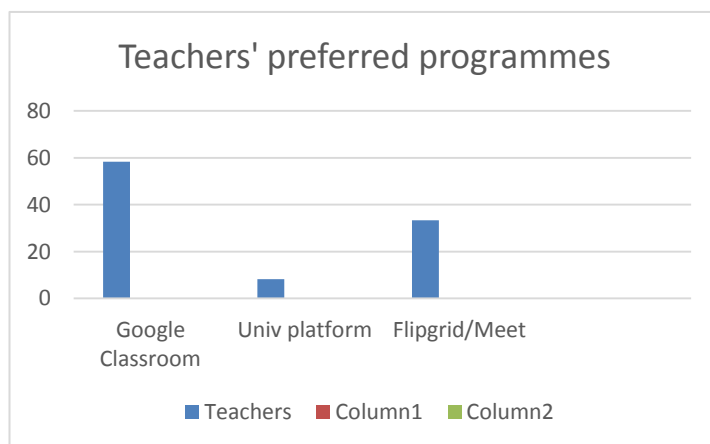


Figure2: Teachers' preferred programmes for teaching

Count of In your opinion, is the University ready to implement EFL teaching/Learning Online?

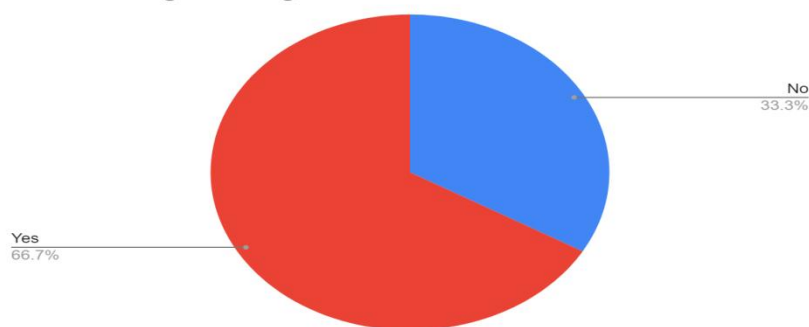


Figure 3: Teachers' opinion regarding the university's readiness to implement online teaching-learning

Concerning the university's readiness to implement the new method of teaching, teachers' opinions diverge. The majority, i.e.: 66.7%, admit that the university can easily undertake this process; it has all the required material and human resources to apply it successfully. However, there are other teachers (33.3%) who do not agree with their optimistic counterparts. They state that the university is not yet ready for the shift towards an online teaching-learning system, and that the blended method is more useful at present.

3. Discussion

In the Algerian Universities, online platforms existed well before the shutdown, but they were rarely used. 66.7% of the participants say that they heard of online platforms but only two of them used them with their students. One might assume that the lack of interest in the platforms before Covid-19 was due to the fact that they were perceived as technological facilitators rather than tools, and that was because of the absence of curiosity from the teachers and lack of enforcement from the administrators.

When the teachers were questioned about the main problems encountered online, two main answers stood out: lack of interest and/or absence of students and internet issues. Participants admitted that the lack of interest of students did have an effect on their productivity as teachers. When the teachers were rushed to drastically change their methods, adapt their lessons to the new technologies, and learn how to use them to catch up with the rest, it was quite demanding for them.

Teachers had to accustom themselves to online evaluation. Online tests generated unrest to both teachers and students. While the latter had issues with access because of unstable internet connections, the former struggled with cheating and academic dishonesty on the part of the learners. The age gap between the two generations played also a role in the balance in that it advantaged students more than the instructors.

Teaching or learning online implies a pre-existing knowledge of technology and communication. It is then expected that both teachers and students have this knowledge. However, we do know based on early feedback, at the beginning of the shutdown, that a lot of students do not have access to computers, not all of them own a smartphone, and even teachers have access to a bad network in a lot of areas (Bouhania, 2022). Needless to say, the challenges met in accessing the information or providing it plus the lack of mastery of tech tools made the

experience very challenging and unbearable for many. For the teachers, mastering the tools and finding the best ways to deliver good content to the students were the main problems.

The teachers faced challenges regarding video conferencing, how to record a session and share it with the class, how to give assignments, and how to grade them. We can safely say that the participants from the department of English of Ahmed Draia University reached a stage where they chose what works best for them, their modules and their students.

The findings show that, for the majority of teachers, self-efficacy in using technology is the most notorious challenge they have to face during the Covid-19 epidemic. The use of technology in EFL enables them to confront various pandemic-related issues. Thanks to the novel methods of DE, they innovated their practice of language teaching and brought new techniques to their online classes.

The teachers of the department of English at Adrar university gained a lot of experience in the use of technology in EFL. Thus, many positive points can be considered, such as:

- gaining considerable positive experience in teaching online,
- using innovative techniques in language teaching,
- enhancing language teaching through technology-based programs,
- being up-to-date with technology in foreign language teaching,
- training in the use of online programs and tools,
- improving the use of online programs with regard to local students' standards,
- appreciating online sessions for preventing risks of contamination, and finally
- valuing online sessions for their convenience, flexibility, and accessibility.

However, e-learning does not have positive sides only; many negative ones are reported by the teachers. The most important are:

- e-learning cannot supplement FTF classes,
- e-learning limits and hinders teacher-learner interaction,
- e-learning reduces students' intake, comprehension, and acquisition,
- e-learning increases students' educational inequalities (Bouhania, 2022),
- e-learning impedes students' formative and summative assessments,
- e-learning encourages academic dishonesty as no software can prevent it,
- e-learning calls for training and preparation, and finally
- e-learning cannot be applied without any strategy.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the academic years 2019-2020-2021 have seen tremendous changes in higher education due to lockdowns imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Shifting from FTF to (VLE) online classes has left deep impacts on the educational spheres, teaching staff, and learners. The administrations were surprised by the rapid spread of the epidemics, and to block it and slow down its pace, they had to close all teaching facilities and shift to online procedures.

The move to VLEs has brought to the fore unpredicted educational inequalities between both teachers and learners. For the former, the lack of training in the use of internet tools and programmes was the most prominent hindrance; while for the latter, the challenges were tightly linked to economic and technical factors such as lack of technological devices and bad internet connections. All those facts have adversely impacted the distance, electronic, and virtual

teaching-learning process in an irreversible way. Their negative effects are reflected in the students' bad scores and grades.

The results of the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews lead to several conclusions. Generally, EFL teachers at the department of English of the University of Adrar Ahmed Draia are positive towards the use of technology in language teaching as it is the only alternative to avoid Covid-19 contamination. It compelled teachers to adapt themselves to the virtual classrooms, to be ready to work in both synchronous and asynchronous classes, and to be up-to-date with any new online teaching techniques.

Some of them, however, complain about the quick implementation of asynchronous classes, which forced them to take training sessions to master these technological tools and programmes. They believe that the way is still long to go with regard to (1) problems of academic dishonesty such as cheating on online assessments; (2) difficulty to check and control students' attendance, motivation, and interest in online lectures; and finally (3) the impossibility to examine the learners and assess their progress and comprehension.

As change is inescapable, teachers have different views regarding online teaching; most of them are still sceptical. Many of them admit that their scepticism results from the idea that nothing can replace face-to-face teaching. While this can be the case for scientific fields of study that require the student's presence in the lab, we cannot say for sure that EFL students have to be present in class to be able to grasp the content. Some participants noticed that the experience did enhance the learning process. We notice also that the participants who have been having a positive view of the process are the ones who have been exploring the web and experimenting with the different applications with their learners. We believe that teachers' attitudes towards online learning stem from their attitudes towards the use of the Internet and technology in general.

The above-mentioned inferences confirm those reported in other researches and studies within the Arab world and outside it. They must be taken into consideration by not only the ministries of education or higher education, but also by syllabus designers and strategy planners for any future lockdowns and pandemics, particularly that the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that learning is ubiquitous, but that it could take different forms in the future such as "autonomous learning" (Lo and Chen, 2021).

Some researchers believe that universities need to have an "exigency strategy" which must include, among other things, *"intensive e-teaching and e-testing training for faculty, high-tech invigilation and plagiarism software, reliable e-learning platforms with sufficient Internet bandwidth, and setting up an e-assessment council at the university level"* (Sa'di et al., 2021, p:37).

It is important that both teaching and learning communities accept the shift to VLEs and forget about the traditional ways, particularly that the pandemic is still around. It is also quite important that the higher education authorities design future strategies to confront any other possibilities of lockdowns; they must find alternatives to traditional FTF teaching-learning which would be more agreeable to both teachers and learners. One last word is that on-site learning will not be replaced by digital or virtual online learning in the short-term; but being prepared for any unforeseen phenomena proves to be quite valuable and necessary.

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