

Distance Learning as a Challenge to Succeed to Learn the English Language during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT: *Coronavirus pandemic, as a viral threat to the world, is imposing a lot of changes in the field of education. So this leads to deal with new mechanisms in order to motivate the educational institutions to choose distance learning or the E-learning as an alternative. As a result, the Algerian educational system raised challenges to fight this pandemic by moving from the traditional learning to distance learning. University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, as the other universities has chosen to shut its doors on the face of the pandemic and remote working through E-learning platforms. In this paper, our objective is to investigate problems and issues that faced both teachers and students and which are considered as important episodes in the E-learning process. Although distance learning is effective and beneficial, the students find themselves less motivated to complete their tasks, and get distracted by weak access to the internet. The Students and the teachers dissatisfaction with feedback is also a significant problem. To gain a full understanding of teachers and students E-learning challenges and how they cope with them, in depth qualitative research is required.*

KEYWORDS: Distance Learning, EFL teachers and Learners, Challenges, Coronavirus Pandemic.

المخلص: يعتبر جائحة كورونا كوفيد 19 تهديدا فيروسيا للعلم والذي فرض تغييرات في جميع المجالات منها التعليم. وهذا ما ادى الى البحث على ميكانيزمات اخرى لمواصلة واستمرارية وتحفيز المؤسسات التعليمية على التعليم عن بعد آلية بديلة. و نتيجة لذلك فقد رفعت الجزائر كل التحديات لمواجهة وباء كورونا وذلك بالجوء الى التعليم عن بعد بدلا من التعليم الحضوري. جامعة وهران 2 أ محمد بن احمد كغيرها من الجامعات التي قررت اغلاق أبوابها في

وجه الجائحة و التوجه نحو التعليم عن بعد من خلال منصات التعلم الالكتروني و في هذا العمل هدفنا هو التحقيق في العراقيل التي يواجهها كل من الاستاذ و الطالب اللغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية. بالرغم من أن أهمية و فعالية التعليم عن بعد لكن الطلبة لديهم صعوبة في التحفيز لانجاز ومواصلة دروسهم في ظل تدفق الانترنت. عدم الاقتناع الاساتذة و الطلبة بالتقييم يعد أيضا مشكلا عويصا. ومن أجل الحصول على فهم معمق للمشاكل و العراقيل التي يواجهها كلا من الاساتذة و الطلبة في التعليم عن بعد و كيفية التعامل معها، نتطلب علينا اجراء هذا البحث النوعي المعمق.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعليم عن بعد، الاساتذة و الطلبة، اللغة الإنجليزية، فيروس كورونا، تحديات.

1. Introduction

Over the last twenty years, technology has rapidly changed and expanded in all the fields. Smartphones are now replacing computer devices. We can take pictures, search the internet, and send emails and text messages. While it might seem that the technology of today has reached its limits, it is still actually a big challenge to some people. Education as other fields has changed and it does not rely on the traditional methods to teach and learn but it is shifting to distance learning. Because of technology, schools, teachers, and students increasingly adopt e-learning technologies that allow teachers to deliver instruction interactively, share resources seamlessly, and facilitate student collaboration and interaction (Barrot, 2021).

Distance education has its roots from England, when Isaac Pitman began offering shorthand lessons through the medium of mail in 1840. It was called also correspondence education which appeared after that in Germany, as well, before the first American correspondence study program began in 1873 in Boston (Molenda, 2008). This kind of education that relied on mails grew without bounds, and spread through countries. Nevertheless, the term of distance education is a notably a broad concept. It is too hard to achieve concise definitions. Desman Keegan (1995) says that distance education or training result from the technological separation of the teachers and the learners which frees the student from the necessity of traveling to “a fixed place, at a fixed person, in order to be educated and trained”. So distance learning provides the teachers and the students

opportunities to continue this process even if they do not share the same place and time.

In today's international and national crises, the Algerian educational system has changed radically due to COVID-19 crisis. We all know that in the beginning of COVID19 pandemic spread, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of High Education and Scientific Research have taken strict measures as closing all the schools and the universities. In this period of time, students, teachers, and education sector affiliates suffer from Coronavirus pandemic looking for immediate measures to ensure continuity of learning in schools and universities. To meet this purpose, the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research declared, on March, 17th, 2020, that compensation of attending course in presence by online courses in order to ensure communication between the teacher and the student with providing all conditions to be accessible for them across country (Correspondence N°288/Dated on february29th, 2020)

Distance learning as a new trend of education in Algeria opens advantageous portals to teachers and students of higher education concerning different issues and significant attempts to be a successful process. Through the years, the attempts of university of Oran², Mohamed Ben Ahmed, in ICT's implementation within the instructive context reached such an achievement at the level of learning a language and more precisely the English language as an international one. As much as E-learning is beneficial and important that provide students with another learning option to suit their learning style better than the traditional classroom settings , the main objective of this current study is concerned with technical and social challenges that students face during online courses in COVID-19 era. So this work is an attempt at answering the following question:

- What are the biggest challenges that may face EFL teachers and students during online learning in Coronavirus epidemic?

In accordance with the research question the following hypotheses are suggested:

Hypothesis one: EFL students' adaptability to online course has an effect on student's performance compared to the conventional course during a period of COVID-19 pandemic

Hypothesis two: EFL students find themselves unmotivated to engage on online course that influence their performance during COVID-19 pandemic

Hypothesis three: EFL students have a problem with feedback and assessment concerning online courses during COVID-19 pandemic.

Hypothesis Four: EFL students have several problems related to technical issues during COVID-19 pandemic.

2. The Literature Review

2.1 An Overview of COVID-19

Coronavirus is a kind of common virus that causes an infection in person's nose, sinuses, or upper throat. In early 2020, after December 2019 outbreak in China, the World Health Organization identified SARS-CoV-2 as a new type of Coronavirus in China. The outbreak quickly spread around the world. This disease can affect the person's upper respiratory tract such as (sinuses, nose, and throat) or the lower respiratory tract such as (windpipe and lungs) (Neha Pathak, MD, 2021). This virus can spread from an infected person's mouth or nose in small liquid particles when they cough, sneeze, speak, sing or breathe. These particles range from large respiratory droplets to smaller aerosols (World Health Organization, 2021). Studies and researches on this virus have shown that the spread of this virus can be occurred also through surface contamination. In other words, when these droplets land on objects and surfaces around the individuals take these droplets and further touching their eyes, nose, or mouth then these people catch COVID-19 (Parasher, 2020).

In this context, COVID-19 is considered as a dangerous disease that leads to death and this requires prevention to slow down its transmission. The best way is to take preventive measures against viral disease infection. The main measures include practicing social distancing, staying at home, keeping away from public and closed places, avoiding touching surfaces, washing hands frequently, and wearing masks (The World Health Organization, 2020). Whether family, society or, educational institutions

are needed to ensure that everyone fully comprehend the high danger of COVID-19 virus and the significance of its airborne transmission. Despite the availability of the vaccine, it is necessary now more than ever that we are likely responsible to increase transmission of this virus.

2.2 Distance learning

Since the world of technology has shown no limits of slowing down and practically every device available today somehow linked to computer technology, teaching and learning process is no exception. The new teaching-learning methods are becoming more effective and efficient especially when the learner can receive courses from his instructor even if they are at the same room. By the way, in distance learning, students and teachers will find themselves playing different roles than before (traditional ways of teaching). The teacher is no longer the sole source of knowledge but instead becomes a facilitator to support student learning while the student actively participates in what and how knowledge is imparted (Gallusha, 1998). Moreover, distance education is introduced and described as the effort of providing access to learning for those who are geographically distant (Moore et al; 2010). The term distance education is also defined by Guri-Rosenblit (2005) as the physical separation of the learner from the instructor, at least at certain stages of the learning process from kindergarten to higher education.

Furthermore, studies also show that distance education is a method that involves e-learning teacher and e-learners who are separated geographically and must rely on one or more methods of long distance communication (Bargellini&Bordoni, 2001). Similarly, Keegan (1995) defined distance learning as:

As the 21st century approaches, the provision of education to citizens around the world is enriched by the availability of conventional face-to-face teaching in schools, colleges, and universities, complemented by correspondence, audio, video and computer technologies from correspondence schools and open universities throughout the world.

Both are enriched by the availability of virtual systems in which the face-to-face interpersonal communication of conventional education can be achieved at distance.

(Keegan, 1995:14)

In addition, Deborah and Willis (1987) defined this kind of education as the most innovative approaches to teach the twenty-first century student. They identified four characteristics which are mainly related to the student. These characteristics are providing occasional interaction with faculty, providing for student independence and individualized study, it is delivering through courses both on or off campus, and finally it is based on student needs (Deborah and Willis, 1987). Moreover, the process whereby the teacher and the student are separated works on and within network and needs new communication system such as AVC (audio/video communication), electronic mail, local area networks (LAN), and the Internet both enable and encourage creation of learning circles (Bargellini&Bordoni, 2001). In fact, there are many advantages of distance learning in which students can get opting for online course. However, there are also different challenges which are faced by students while trying to study in an online course.

2.3 Distance learning challenges

It is very easy for students to take their courses via internet. They take their courses even if they are not present in the classroom, so they do everything from home using technology. Teachers and students find themselves comfortable and free to interact during the online course rather than the traditional classroom. However, many of them encounter serious challenges that prevent them from completing their courses successfully. In this way, the continuous of e-learning from the real environment will undoubtedly cause problems in the identity and personality of the learners (Sarevestani.M.S et al; 2019). In this kind of environment, adaptability to online course is one of the main constraints of the students. Indeed, adaptability has been identified as an important capacity for students' academic and personal development, including their motivation, engagement, achievement, and social-emotional wellbeing (Martin et al.,

2021). So, it is very interesting and important to meet students' needs while adapting a traditional course to an online one by some teachers. Concerning this challenge, the most striking one appears to be the velocity with which teachers, students, and institutes have had to adapt to the situation (Pandit& Agrawal, 2021).

It is crucial that teachers foster their students' motivation especially when they share the same room because the teacher attention is very important. In this respect, Williams and Burden (1997) believe that teachers have a powerful, long lasting influence on their students. They directly affect how the students learn, how much they learn, and the way they interact with one another and the world around them. Among the difficulties students are very likely to face at some points is lack of motivation. This latter leads to laziness for many students in which they lose their energy to do their assignments and tasks at home. However, some researchers find that technology itself is a motivating factor because it provides number of qualities that are recognized as important in the fostering of intrinsic motivation, namely challenge, curiosity, novelty, and fantasy (Lepper& Malone, 1987; cited in Hartnett, 2016:12). So, lack of motivations seems to be the most complex and challenging issues faced by the students in online learning process.

There is another factor related to learning distance and which can also influence the engagement and the success of students: feedback and assessment. Giving feedback and assessing learners are the most influential steps that can improve learning performance and achievement. The way the teachers assess their students' works has a positive impact that can make adjustment to make better and further knowledge and skills. How we assess our students has a profound effect on both what they learn, and on the ways in which they learn (Race, Brown, and Smith, 2005:XI). In a virtual classroom context, feedback seems to be a tricky thing to provide since the teachers and the learners are separated. So, the large size of student cohort in online learning environment can make it challenging for the instructor to provide useful and sufficient feedback to students (Cavalcanti et al; 2021). In other words, the thing that should be taken into consideration is that besides being an assessor, the EFL teacher should stand as good observer. They feel enthusiastic in online classroom far from cheating. Because Bloxham& Boyd (2007) declare that while computers

afford the opportunity for online assessment, immediate feedback and computer-marked assignment, they also provide the breeding ground for the increase in plagiarism.

The fact that moving from traditional learning to online learning is a complex process that may lead to technical difficulties. Many studies have been highlighted by researchers to investigate this problem. As Barrot (2021) study who finds that students faced many obstacles in a home learning environment, such as lack of mastery of technology, high Internet cost, and limited interaction/ socialization between and among students. On the other hand, Azio et. al (2021) declare that one of the biggest challenges to address the problem regarding learning is the availability of technological gadgets and Internet connectivity. In this context, “internet connection is both an issue and challenge not only for the students but also for the teachers and the institution”. (Azio et al., 2021). Furthermore, having technological devices and high internet connection are being essential conditions that the most students look for especially in higher education. However, not all students can benefit from these resources since they live in rural and isolated regions. EFL students are perceived by many views of their teachers, EFL teachers claim that students are unable to follow their courses because of their insufficient or unstable internet connection, inadequate resources such as laptops that bug all the time, or impossibility to find a calm environment to study.

2.4 Distance learning experience in Algeria during COVID-19 era

The E-learning initiative in Algeria is a national initiative. It occurred when the Ministry of Education creates a public company called ONEFD (the National Office of Education and Distance Learning) that offers students the opportunities to prepare their homework for the final examination and to ensure additional or special training (Weber and Hamlaoui ,2018:9). In this period, E-learning has been significantly developed in such companies and institutions looking for providing high quality in educational and training services for both students and employees (Zermane&Aitouche, 2020). In this context, Algeria has placed considerable emphasis on the importance of distance learning in its educational sector, especially by creating a digital space-open to citizens-that integrates unified communication, information exchange and

participatory action among all actors (Ben Herzallah, 2021). In this concern, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research established a new platform called MOODLE that has been launched in 2010. Guemide and Maouche (2020) point out that Algerian universities has set up MOODLE electronic systems to start on-line education so as to complete studies, and link between teachers and students online. Moodle is one of the more popular learning management systems that can be defined as:

*Moodle is an online learning platform for creating learner communities around content and educational activities. To a content management system (CMS), Moodle adds pedagogical or communicative functions to create an online learning environment: it is an application to create through the network interactions between pedagogues, learners and educational resources*¹

In Algeria, distance learning due to the COVID19 pandemic is directly implemented. Since March 2020, according to the orders imposed by the Algerian government, all the schools; either private or public, have closed suddenly. It is worth emphasizing that this lockdown focused not only on schools but also on the higher education institutions which closed their doors on their students and teachers as well. The universities lockdown in Algeria in the first pandemic stages were considered to be unexpected, worrying, and chaotic. In this case, the Algerian minister of higher education and scientific research called for the universities to ensure continuity of teaching and learning remotely under the umbrella of pedagogical initiative classified as a precautionary measure due to the outbreak of the Coronavirus (Guemide and Maouche 2020).

¹ Moodle: LCMS platform, for online courses and distance learning, Cerist, June 22, 2016, Available at: <http://cerinux.cerist.dz/?p=223>, Retrieved on 02.01.2019.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Data collection

An online questionnaire, along with the study information paper and in word format, was sent to the selected participants in the faculty of foreign languages in Mohamed Ben Ahmed University. Participants were informed that replying to this questionnaire is facultative and not obligatory and that they could withdraw from this study any time without consequence. Send a questionnaire through email and facebook this online questionnaire is the main instrument to data collection and develop the research question, in order to examine the challenges of learning in distance in COVID-19 period.

3.2 The Research Sample

3.2.1 Student's Profile

The targeted participants for this study are student of Master 1 in the department of the English language at the University of Oran², Mohamed Ben Ahmed. These students are 7 seven males and thirteen females. In the table below, there is a description of the participants of this study.

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	7	35%
Female	13	65%
Total	20	100%

Table1: Students' Profile

3.2.2 Teachers' Profile

In relation to the current study, the researcher purposively selected a group of teachers who are teaching at the department of the English language at University of Oran², Mohamed Ben Ahmed in order to be responded to the research questionnaire. In more details, the researcher selects ten (10) teachers who are both males and females with different ages.

3.3 Data Analyses

3.3.1 Students' Questionnaire

Perception	Answer counting	Answer percentage
Poor	15	75%
Average	03	15%
Good	02	10%
total	20	100%

Table 2: Students' Opinions about Distance Learning

According to the table above, we notice that fifteen students considered that distance learning as “poor” in learning the English language, whereas three students claimed as average. However, we found that only two students responded to this question as good.

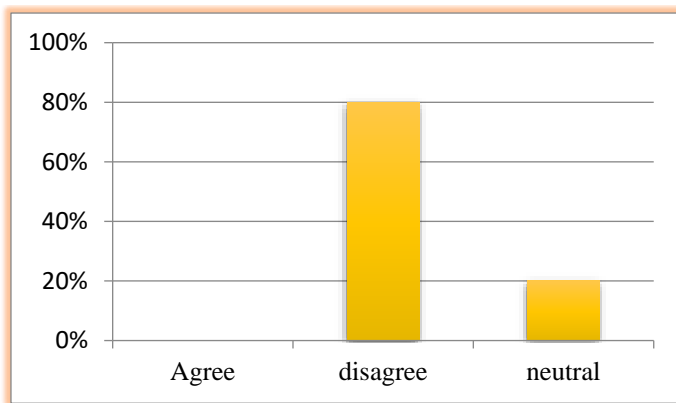


Figure1: Students' Dissatisfaction with Learning Outside the Class

If we look at the opinions of the students in this question, it can be seen that the majority of them (80%) strongly disagree that learning English requires online courses rather than in the class that is outside the classroom, while 20% of them just opted for “neutral”. However, none of them agree with this idea.

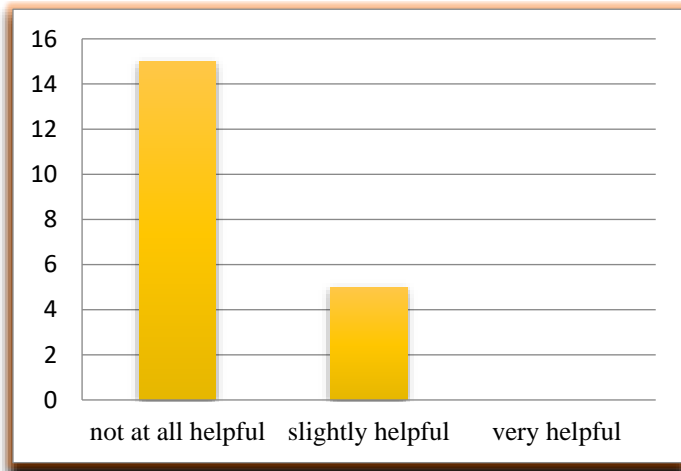


Figure2: Students' Opinions about their Teachers' Help

The present question enables students to identify whether the teacher motivates and helps them to surmount obstacles English language outside the class. The results of this figure show that fifteen (15) of the students claim that he is “not helpful at all“. This indicates that they don't rely on the teacher who never help student in and out the classroom to skip the obstacles, and five (05) of them believe that they see their teachers can slightly helpful to overcome their difficulties, while no students see their teachers very helpful

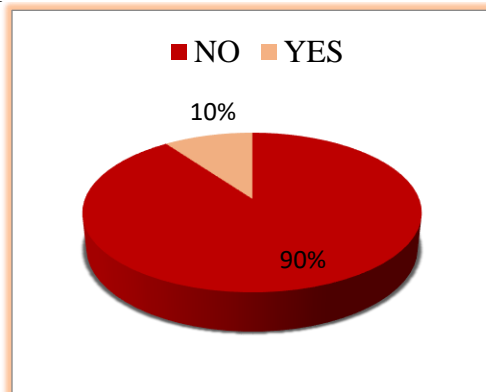


Figure 3: Students Perspectives about Receiving Teacher' Feedback

When we asked students whether or not they receiving feedback from their teachers during online courses to participate in classroom learning activities. The participants of this study answered “yes” at rate 20% and “no” at 80% .It is clear that the majority of students consider the effective role of the teacher’ feedback who supports and help them to ensure their successful performance.

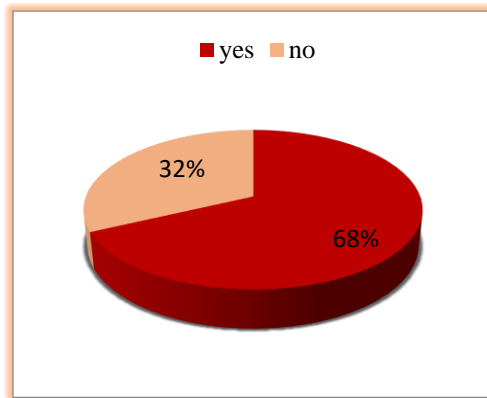


Figure 4: Students’ Perspectives about the Influence of the Teacher’ Feedback on their Performance

This figure shows the opinions of the participants as to whether teachers’ feedback affect learning performance. Sixty-eight percent of students agreed that providing feedback to learn English language is one of their challenges that face on daily basis. Specifically, Kerr (2020) states that feedback purposes in ELT learning is improving the fluency, accuracy or complexity of learners’ speaking and writing, motivating learners and developing learner autonomy. However, thirty-two percent of the students disagreed with this question in such points. They said that some teachers need to change their feedback style to make it more effective especially as students are still adapting to online learning and looking for more guidance on their performance.

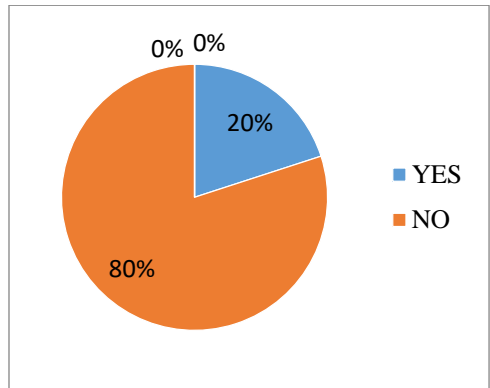


Figure 5: Students' Access to Computer and the Internet

To shift to learn through internet is somehow difficult for some students especially when the story is related to internet access. The researcher asked this question to EFL students in which 16 from them reported that they recounted the challenges of distance learning, from struggling to understand courses and getting easily distracted to not having reliable internet. In this case, many students might lose out learning opportunities due to the unavailability of digital tools, no internet connections, and iffy Wi-Fi connections. However, the rest of the students don't find any problem and they have home internet access for their participation in distance learning.

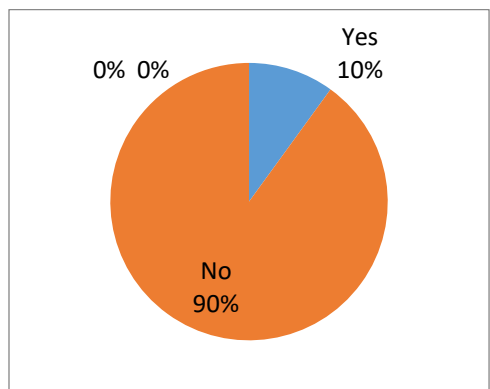


Figure 6: Students' Perspectives about Navigating Web Pages

When asked if they know how to use web pages and sending and receiving e-mail, two (2) students agreed. They shared a common belief that it would be easier, quicker, and organized in online situation when they take their courses. In addition, they feel free and comfortable to use their laptops rather than the classical method. On the contrary, eighteen (18) participants were against that idea. They reclaimed their little knowledge and skills in which they do not know how to operate basic programs like PowerPoint, Microsoft's Office, and even use remote learning platform that has been provided. They found themselves in front of a lot of lectures that should be done in a limited time and this is a big challenge for some students due to a poor knowledge of manipulating their computers.

3.3.2 Teachers' Questionnaire

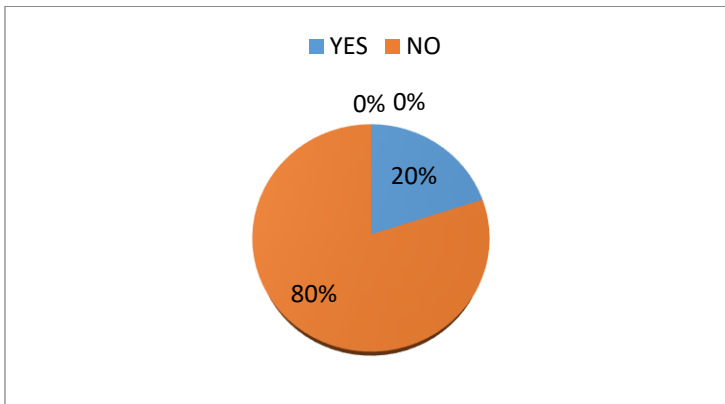


Figure 7: Teachers' Perspectives about Adaptability of Teaching in Distance

The chart illustrates the number of teachers who have already worked with MOODLE platform in E-learning courses. In fact, 2 of the 10 teachers answered "yes", which represents 20% of the respondents. However, 80% of the respondents answered "No" in which they considered that this kind of learning and courses need more time to be well applied especially when the story of pandemic has a bad impact on both teachers and students.

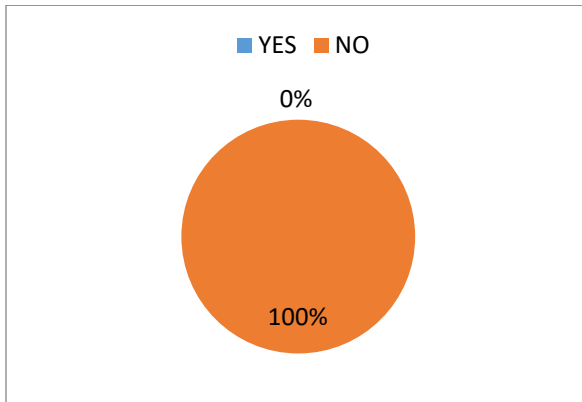


Figure 8: Teachers' Perspectives about Lack of Motivation of Students during Online Courses

As it is obviously evident from the chart, all the teachers agree that on the fact that the most students have a lack of motivation and engagement in online learning. Indeed, this types of teaching makes a distance between the teacher and the student so the find themselves missed such contact and communication. Additionally, motivation to succeed is related to the way the teacher communication with his student in class so can raise his knowledge and ability to learn.

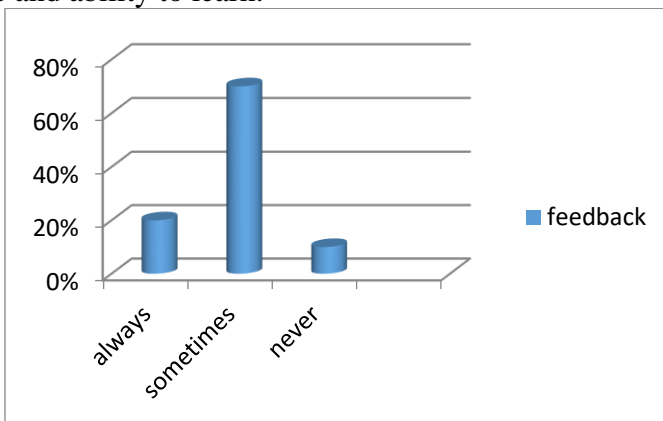


Figure9: Teachers' Feedback

The teachers in this study were asked about providing feedback and assessment, their participation is varied from one to another. As it can be shown in figure (9), twenty percent of pupils (20%) opted for “always”

and seventy percent of them (70%) have chosen the suggestion “sometimes”. We noticed also only ten percent (10%) said “never”.

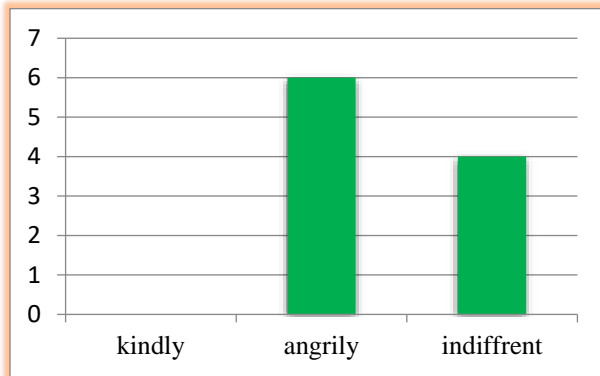


Figure10: Teachers’ Dissatisfaction toward the Technology and Software Used for Online Learning

This figure shows the different behavior and reactions of the teachers when they use different technological devices. We found that six teachers (6) reacted angrily while only four stayed indifferent. This question helps us to know whether they have difficulties to the adoption and usage of technology. So it obviously shown that all the respondents faced many obstacles with their computers and manipulating its software, and even weak access to internet.

5. Discussion

With the coming of Covid-19 pandemic, the process of teaching and learning turns its path from the offline classroom to online classroom. This unexpected turning point leads to arising challenges for the student and the teacher. Based on the findings of the study, the challenges dealt with adaptability, motivation, feedback, and technical issues.

Regarding adaptability, the findings from the students’ questionnaire reveal that these students couldn’t adjust easily to remote learning because they accustomed to direct interaction with the teacher in the classroom. Indeed, students find themselves disrupt and confused because adaptability is a personal attribute that is highly relevant through times of online remote learning in COVID-19 and other future periods (Martin et al., 2021). In

relation to adaptability, motivation is also found a significant trouble for students where they feel incapable to perform well concerning doing their online tasks. Changing the way of learning leads to ultimate psychological change in students' behavior such as stress and anxiety to learn far from the classroom. In such learning environment, it is shown also from the questionnaire that feedback and assessment considered a big challenge in which students need to improve their language skills. This improvement comes with the corrections of the mistakes and errors they can do so they can do well and be successful learners. However, long distance between teachers and students cuts the bridge of communication that is important for feedback and assessment positive or negative to be. Additionally, students suffer a lot due to the COVID-19 period in the context of slow access to internet and poor knowledge of manipulating their laptops because they just accustomed to their Smartphones. Living outside in rural regions makes learning online impossible for most of the students due to unavailability to such Wi-Fi connection and technological devices.

Regarding the impact of COVID-19 on teachers' online learning experience, the findings reveal that even teachers have numerous distractions in this situation. According to the results of the teachers' questionnaire, they have experienced problems as adaptability, motivation, feedback, and technical issues. For the first challenge, we found that teachers reported being less able to adjust to new methods of teaching as before because teachers who get high adapt online to a greater extent than those with low level, can easily deal and understand their students' emotions even they are separated (Raducu and Stanculescu, 2021). Concerning the second point, when the teachers ever have trouble with assignments, or activities about their lecture in online that it is totally different in a traditional class and this can cause lack of motivation for the students. In this case, bad conditions of distance learning are considered as external factors that influenced teachers' motivation especially in this Pandemic era. For the third trouble, feedback and assessment by the teachers were not valid sometimes because they emphasized just on giving courses and tasks given online and forgetting assessing students' work. Finally, as students, teachers suffer also from low quality of the internet and lack of computer knowledge as it is stated by Makoe (2012) that "instructors being accustomed to the former teaching methods and their

lack of teaching design specialty for new methods and lack of technological knowledge and skills were barriers to their technological integration”.

5. Conclusions

The COVID-19 experience pushed at least tentatively the possibility for all the students to learn from home if necessary, under bad conditions to continue this essential process. Since the shift to learning and teaching only from home is mainly impossible for the Algerian students in general and EFL students in the classroom at University of Oran Mohamed Ben Ahmed in Oran in particular. The difference between teaching with special flexibility and teaching which requires physical attendance is likely to impose difficult challenges in sense of adaptability, motivation, feedback and assessment, and technical issues. Regarding this study, these challenges highlighted that the teachers had negative experiences with their students due to lack of interaction and motivation, students would be uncomfortable during the online experience, affecting their academic performance. At the end, crisis and epidemics as COVID-19 can create a lot of chaos and tensions; therefore, there is an important need to develop and ameliorate distance learning methods for better educational outcomes.

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